

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

The Christianization of Secularity or the Secularization of Christianity

Roger D. Haight

Philippine Studies vol. 14, no. 3 (1966): 486–498

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Review Articles

The Christianization of Secularity, or the Secularization of Christianity?

IS Cox's book, *The Secular City* a book about the city and the world, or a book about God? Is it sociology or theology? It is important from the beginning to realize that it is impossible to distinguish between the two in his study: the book is a study of the process of history and man's role in it and at the same time a study of the work of God. For Cox, as will be seen, the data for theology and sociology are identical.

The purpose of the following pages is simply to analyse the salvific work of God for man in social change as Cox presents it, to highlight its valid insights and to suggest that on Cox's own terms it contains some deficiencies.

THE PROBLEM OF THE WORD 'GOD'

The man of today, technological man, secular man, has no use for God. Cox maintains that, "the word God means almost nothing to modern secular man. His mental world and his way of using language is such that he can neither understand nor use the word *God* meaningfully."¹ The age of the secular city is an age of no religion at all. With this as a given sociological fact, Cox insists that, "We must learn, as Bonhoeffer said, to speak of God in a secular fashion and

¹ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), p. 241. This will be cited hereafter as simply S.C.

find a nonreligious interpretation of biblical concepts. It will do no good to cling to our religious and metaphysical versions of Christianity in the hope that one day religion and metaphysics will once again be back."² This then is the problem of the book, how to speak of God in a secular fashion for today's man, and although this is taken up explicitly only in the last chapter, it is obvious that it is the crux of Cox's message, a fundamental theological message. "...if man cannot speak of God in the secular city, then all we have said about secularization as the work of God for man is nonsense and the whole thesis of this book is erroneous."³

TOWARD A SOLUTION

Cox's solution to this problem involves three steps: First, he shows that Biblical faith is a kind of knowledge of God acceptable to the modern secular man; secondly, he establishes the fact from the Bible that God is at work for man in history or politics and social change, and thirdly, he insists that man must find God there and give Him a different name if necessary, in terms of this history which is God's action.

The pragmatic way of knowing is knowing in terms of function. Man has passed out of the age when an ontological or metaphysical knowledge was meaningful into a period when only what is related to us is real. Things do not exist in themselves but they exist in and for the sake of what they have to do with us and us with them. Cox feels that Biblical faith can be reconciled with this pragmatic attitude. The Bible calls for a faith that accepts the truth of God and the truth of God is His fidelity. The faithful performance of God is the measure of His truth. Jesus asks men to *do* the truth and judges them truthful by what they do. Such a

² S.C., p. 4. According to Daniel Jenkins, in *Beyond Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), Bonhoeffer gives four characteristics to the religion he objects to: (1) individualistic and preoccupied with the self; (2) metaphysical in such wise that God is brought in only to complement a man-centered view of reality; (3) departmentalized or restricted to one area of life; and (4) God is looked upon as a problem solver, a *deus-ex-machina*, *Op. cit.* p. 34.

³ S.C., p. 241

criterion for truth is reconcilable with the pragmatic idea of truth in today's functional society.⁴

Secondly, then, the Bible tells us that God is active in history. Yahweh is the God of history disclosing Himself in political and social events; in both victory and defeat God spoke through the events of social change. If Jesus is the Lord of history, He must be found in history, or better, politics, which is present history.⁵

But God does not work alone in history. He works, rather, with man as His partner. This is not to be understood in such a way that would assign a part to God and a separate part to man. No, the work of God and man is a partnership in which the work of man is the work of God; God is working through the agency of man. This too is the message of the Bible. The naming that man does in the Genesis 2 creation account signifies that man has an integral part to play in the creation of the world. Naming here means giving or assigning a thing its meaning and significance. Creation comes to man unfinished and he is assigned the responsibility to put it in order. In this Cox sees man as the special agent cooperating in the creative work of God that continues through the social relationships, patterns and values that man originates for himself.⁶

Cox also emphasizes that the God of the Bible, the God who works for man, is also the hidden God. God in the Bible always discloses Himself as one who is at once different from man, unconditionally for man, and entirely unavailable for coercion and manipulation by man. It is His utter hiddenness which distinguishes the God of the Bible from all others. Even in Jesus the godness of God did not 'appear.' "He does not 'appear' but shows man that He acts, in His hiddenness, in human history."⁷

Thirdly, given the fact that God does rule and direct history with man as His partner, and given the fact that He

⁴ S.C., pp. 64-7, 70

⁵ S.C., pp. 56-7. Cf. also pp. 110-2, 123, and 241-268.

⁶ S.C., pp. 73-5, 83.

⁷ S.C., p. 258.

is an invisible God, and man is pragmatic and empirical, theology should be a question of locating God in history, pointing to Him and confessing Him in His work. The problem as Cox sees it is simply that we are living today with a static, metaphysical theology of a past epoch in an age of accelerating change and social revolution. What is needed is a theology which explicates how God is acting for man and with man in history and revolutionary social change. Moreover, since God has chosen man as His partner, then although the basic initiative of history is God's, much more emphasis should be given to the "derivative initiatives" of man; the working out by man of secular and political institutions should find a larger place in theology and life.⁸ Speaking of God meaningfully to secular man means speaking of Him politically, which means speaking of the world and its social progress. "Secular talk of God occurs only . . . when we are participants in that political action by which He restores men to each other in mutual concern and responsibility . . . where we recognize man as His partner, as the one charged with the task of bestowing meaning and order in human history."⁹

SECULARIZATION

Secularization is a sociological fact; it is the historical process of today's world. Cox describes secularization as a deliverance of man from religious and metaphysical control over his reason and language, a realization that man and the world are not controlled by the object of myths. The world is man's and under his control so that he looks no longer for the traces of God or to worlds beyond. It marks a break with the sacred or sacral outlook which looked for symbols and representations of God in this world. Secularization means that man has come of age; he is on his own, independent of God in his running of the world.¹⁰

If secularization is what is happening today, urbanization is how it is happening—the form or the shape of this secularization of society. Urbanization, far from being a merely

⁸ S.C., pp. 82-3.

⁹ S.C., p. 256.

¹⁰ S.C., p. 2.

quantitative term, indicates a structure of social life marked by the following qualities: a diversity of views, the disintegration of traditions, a high degree of impersonal and functional relationships among people, the moral imperative of tolerance replacing moral sanctions and anonymity replacing long-term acquaintanceship.¹¹

Following other sociologists, Cox stratifies the evolutionary pattern leading up to the "technopolis" into three epochs: the tribal society, town society, and finally the secular city. These epochs are defined in terms of their characteristic social forms of life and consequent mentalities. The secular epoch he characterizes "technopolis" because the two basic forces from which secularity in the form of urbanization stems are technological and political.¹²

Two qualities mark the style of the secular city because they are the qualities of the secular man. The first is his pragmatism which was mentioned above in connection with knowledge of God. Pragmatism means that man today is not concerned with mysteries or with speculation and dreams; he wants to know whether or not something will work. He judges all things in terms of action and results. The second quality is his 'profanity'—a basic this-worldliness which orientates man away from concerns about other worlds, the supernatural and towards his own terrestrial horizon of activity. Today's man is simply not religious.¹³

SECULAR SALVATION

Secularization is the liberating work of God. "Rather than oppose it, the task of Christians should be to support

¹¹ S.C., p. 4. Cox describes the difference between the phenomenon of secularization and secularism but in doing so he uses most general and vague terms. Secularization is an historical process, *i.e.*, one that comes about through the movements of time almost inevitably, whereas secularism is an ideology which forces itself upon the world like a new, closed world view. Secularization is a liberating force; secularism is confining and totalitarian. Secularization rids man of religion and metaphysical world views: secularism *is* a religion and a world view. S.C., pp. 20-1.

¹² S.C., pp. 5-13.

¹³ S.C., pp. 60-1.

and nourish it" because "secularization represents an authentic consequence of biblical faith."¹⁴ This is Cox's response to secularization. He welcomes it and urges Christians to do so by showing that, first, the Bible encourages and teaches secularization, second, God is working for us in secularization by fashioning His kingdom, and third, this work of God is a liberating of man, what can be called a secular salvation.

The Bible and secularization. First, then, the Bible recommends secularization. In fact, Cox says, secularization cannot be understood without taking into account that its original impetus came from the Bible. To show this he isolates three forces which ushered in secularization: the rise of natural science, the rise of democratic political institutions and the rise of cultural pluralism, all of which have their sources in the Bible.¹⁵

The rise of natural science can be traced to a disenchantment with nature which is the message of the creation account. Nature was not alive for the Hebrew; it was not controlled by magic, nor was man bound to it by kinship ties. The creation story preached the absence of God from nature against a conception that He was immanent to it. Yahweh was a being outside the processes of nature and He had given nature into man's hands whose responsibility it was to subdue it. This attitude was a precondition for the development of the natural sciences leading to the technopolis.¹⁶ Similarly, the rise of democratic political institutions flows from the message of the Exodus event which "symbolized the deliverance of man out of a sacral-political order and into history and social change..."¹⁷ The sacral outlook on society imagined that a ruler exercised some divine authority, that through a definite social structure the will and authority of the divinity was being exercised. The Exodus signified a deliverance over to *any* human political leadership which had the power to accomplish specific social objectives. Religion,

¹⁴ S.C., p. 18.

¹⁵ S.C., p. 17.

¹⁶ S.C., pp. 21-4.

¹⁷ S.C., p. 26.

as respect for the authority of God, and citizenship, as the respect for political authority, became two separate spheres.¹⁸ And lastly, the rise of cultural pluralism can be traced to a deconsecration of values which, Cox says, is the meaning of the prohibition of worshipping graven images or idols at Sinai. Nothing could replace Yahweh as the absolute; nothing made with human hands could be a replication of His absolute Holiness; anything finite which would be raised to the dignity of the infinite should be broken. This signifies for Cox the transitoriness, the relativity, of all value systems that pretend to be absolute, and the ground work for a constructive relativism; not an anarchic nihilism, but a realization that all values and concepts are culturally determined, historical and therefore finite and relative even though they may be valid, *i.e.*, partial insights into or expressions of some universal.¹⁹

The secular city and the Kingdom of God. Having established that the Bible recommends secularization, Cox goes on to show how God is working in the secularizing process of history. We have already pointed out that Cox feels that this is the work of God; now, how is this so?

To answer this Cox makes an identification of the secular city, of secularized society, with the Kingdom of God of the New Testament. To justify this identification he answers three objections to it by translating the Biblical language describing the Kingdom into contemporary sociological language. Thus, to the question as to whether this fashioning of the Kingdom of God is the work of God or the work of man he responds that in the New Testament the Kingdom is often identified with the person of Jesus who is both God and man, and therefore the act of God for man and man's full response to God simultaneously. Secularization which is in the fullest sense the work of both God and man is in keeping with this. Secularization, as partnership with God, is a continuation of Christ with whom the Kingdom is identified and who is the fullest possible disclosure of the partnership of God

¹⁸ S.C., pp. 25-30.

¹⁹ S.C., pp. 30-3.

and man in history.²⁰ But does this Kingdom require repentance and renunciation? Yes, responds Cox, but in sociological terms. It demands renunciation, not in the moralistic sense, but rather in breaking with the old, with past traditions; it means laying aside past values and loyalties just as the Jewish convert had to do to enter into a new reality. To the eschatological question as to whether the Kingdom of the New Testament is realized or is to be realized in the end time, Cox applies the current notion of a Kingdom that is in process of realizing itself which, of course, fits his thesis of social change perfectly.²¹

Secular salvation. This work of God for us in fashioning His Kingdom through the agency of men in the secular city is a liberating work of God. If grace and salvation come to man, they must come through the world. And where exactly in the world does God meet us? He is in history and politics; He is present in the situation and forces of social change without being identified with them; present there liberating man, freeing slaves and summoning men to maturity.²² Urbanization is God's work freeing us from what was once 'principalities and powers' and which are now "all the forces in a culture which cripple and corrupt human freedom."²³ "The Exodus is the event which sets forth 'what God is doing in history.' He is seen to be liberating people from bondage, releasing them from political, cultural, economic captivity, providing them with the occasion to forge in the wilderness a new symbol system, a new set of values, a new national identity."²⁴

One concrete example of how urbanization creates freedom can be seen in the possibilities for exercising self determination and in the anonymity that come with life in the secular city. In general, urbanization opens up wide horizons of possibility for choice and along with this a consequent

²⁰ S.C., pp. 110-2.

²¹ S.C., pp. 112-3.

²² S.C., p. 261.

²³ S.C., p. 128. Cf. also pp. 129-30.

²⁴ S.C., p. 132

freedom and necessity to exercise choice and responsibility in almost every area of human life, from schools and recreation even to the choice of friends. It provides functional relations with men and the possibility to choose one's intimate friends on the basis of common interest and not simply because of proximity. Similarly, anonymity gives freedom in private life and preserves it from the dehumanizing effect of public life's intrusion. God is working through anonymity by providing the conditions necessary for man to have a face of his own and a name for others. Expressed in the categories of the Bible, anonymity corresponds to Gospel over against Law. Law in this alternative means the forces of culture which drive men to conformity with the expectations of culture and which unnoticeably, determine and make choices for him. Gospel is the summons to freedom from this and anonymity is the condition necessary to answer this summons for it provides a situation in which one is free from the past for the future.²⁵

Cox speaks of reconciliation but refers it explicitly to the reconciliation of man with man on the horizontal level. The Church is the agent of this reconciliation, an agent of proclamation. "The Church has no purpose other than to make known to the world what God has done and is doing in history to break down the hostilities between peoples and to reconcile men to each other."²⁶ The relativism spoken of earlier, the realization that values, political structures and ethical norms are the works of men and therefore finite, is a force towards this reconciliation.²⁷

This then is Cox's view of what can be called secular salvation. It is God's working to make men free from their past, and self-actualized for their neighbor and for the future. God's secular redemption is the making of men more human, and "it is the task of Christians to discern where God's reconciliation is breaking in and to identify themselves with it. This means locating and participating in social change."²⁸

²⁵ S.C., pp. 40-7.

²⁶ S.C., p. 227.

²⁷ S.C., pp. 34-5.

²⁸ S.C., p. 231.

Johannine tradition of the New Testament. Sin is basically a turning from God toward the self, a selfishness held over against God. John represents this sin as a force, and sees the world in the grips of its power. The world hated Jesus, the world would hate His disciples, because the world was turned inward on itself. Christ's person and His work means salvation for men because He freed them from this power of hatred for God and other men, from the closed self, and opened the hearts of men enabling them to love. Present Christian salvation is most characteristically represented by freedom for the other. In this way the freedom and autonomy given by the secular city can be an occasion and a means of the working out of Christian salvation.

Cox's picture of Christianity and its secular salvation for men have more significance today in an age where action has more influence than an idea, and where polemics is a thing of the past. Perhaps we do need a new language today, not because the old is invalid, but because like Old English today's theological language is simply not understood as meaningful by large portions of humanity. To communicate, what is needed are signs of action—work for man in the secular city. The sign of Christian discipleship must be love for one another, for all men, for the world. Through their work, in partnership with God's work, for man. Christians offer the signs of salvation, of a secular salvation which is but the beginning of eschatological salvation.

DANGERS IN COX'S THESIS

A Biblical theme that is given little attention in Cox's presentation and which is related to the Kingdom, is the idea of the remnant, the few faithful ones amid infidelity to the covenant. This theme which runs through both Testaments indicates that there are those who should be but are not yet part of God's Kingdom. There are forces which far from being indifferent to the Kingdom, work against it and which should be identified with the 'world' of St. John. There are those who have not been touched by God's grace or who are not working in partnership with God, perhaps because of

ignorance, perhaps because of disdain. This seems to be an instance where Cox has reinterpreted a Biblical notion into sociological terms, *i.e.*, by "discerning the secular city the same eschatological reality once expressed by the idea of the Kingdom of God,"³⁰ and in so doing he has distorted its meaning. By overextending God's Kingdom Cox has made it an amorphous non-entity. The Kingdom cannot be simply identified with secular society; this would be to secularize Christianity instead of Christianizing secularity.

If the Kingdom of God is identified in the New Testament with Christ's person, it is also identified with His Church, the Body of Christ which is His Church, a Church is *in* the secular city but not *of* it, not identical with it just as His disciples were to be in the world but not of it. Moreover the Kingdom of God is characterized by such images as "the mustard seed" and "leaven" growing within society in an attempt to penetrate it fully and become co-extensive with it. But it is hard to believe that this has been accomplished.

In the light of the New Testament the Christian must look upon the world as being different in A.D. than it was B.C. That difference consists in the new work which was done by God in the world through Christ and which is being done by His Spirit. The Church as a society within a society is not the only, but it is the special *locus* of that work of Christ and His Spirit, a new salvific and redemptive work over and above the partnership of the covenant, as Cox admits in one place, a "new reality."³¹ By secularizing God's work for man, Cox has not recognized that the Church not only witnesses to the unique salvific work of Christ and His Spirit, but also mediates it. If God's work in secularization provides the occasion for salvation, this salvation must be mediated by Christ, His Kingdom, His Church.

Again, Cox has rightly identified the Kingdom of God with the person of Jesus, Jesus who Chalcedon says was fully God and fully man. He uses this to show that the

³⁰ S.C., p. 83.

³¹ S.C., p. 113.

work of this Kingdom represents both the work of God for man and the response of man to God. Another point, not made by Cox, is that if this Kingdom is identified with the person of the God-man, it will also be an institution which is both human and divine. It is nothing more than ecclesiological Docetism to be embarrassed at the fact that divine salvific action should be harnessed to a human organization with human authorities and human laws. It is ecclesiological Nestorianism to separate the invisible Church of Grace from the institutional structure of human activity which is the sign and *locus* of this Grace. In practice there must be two cities even though their memberships must never be considered exclusive. The Kingdom must take its place not along side of the secular city, but in it and separate from it, in order to modulate and use its liberating forces and inform them with the power of salvation. In doing this, the Kingdom as Church will be both visible and human besides being invisible and divine. As one critic points out, it seems that in Cox bureaucracy and organization are all good in society but an evil in the Church.³²

Lastly, in Cox's suspension of naming God because of His present hiddenness, there seems to be a dangerous confusion between the evidence or experience of God and the source and object of Christian faith. The God of Christianity is a hidden God; no one has ever seen His face and lived. Christ, fully God and fully man, is God's revelation but even in Jesus God was hidden, that is, to the man without faith. But God's hiddenness does not prevent the man chosen to faith, one who believes that in Christ's humanity God is revealed, from speaking of God. There are innumerable Christians who use the word God meaningfully because they use it referringly of the Father, of Christ and of His Spirit. After faith, or in faith, these believers recognize God

³² David Little, "The Social Gospel Revisited" *Christianity and Crisis* XXV (July 12, 1965), 153. Cox admits that the idea of Church in his book needs reworking. "I agree, in any case, that my view of order in the Church and its relation to organization needs considerable strengthening." Harvey Cox, "Cox on His Critics," *Christianity and Crisis* XXV (Dec. 13, 1965), 274.

as hidden even in His contemporary signs, in His Church and in its work. Perhaps the unbeliever cannot speak of God, but the man of faith can, because he does, and is understood by other believers.

Lastly, God does work through the forces of the history of His people in social change. But he also works in the souls of individuals. Cox was exceptionally hard on theological existentialism and it may be supposed that he was appealing to those who do not meet God on an individual basis. It may also be supposed that he was referring to this when he referred to the "tragedy, depth, judgment and mystery" which did not get altogether fair treatment in his book.³³

ROGER D. HAIGHT, S.J.

*Gilda Cordero's Wartime Humor**

IN the last issue of this Quarterly, we discussed two recent novels which dealt with one of the Heroic Ages of Philippine history: the years of suffering under Japanese occupation. Suffering can often be ennobling, but it is seldom humorous, and it is not ordinarily expected that wartime horrors should be depicted with rollicking fun.

Yet this is precisely what Gilda Cordero has done: she has depicted wartime horror humorously. This she does in a short story entitled "People in the War," which is one of the thirteen stories which she has collected into the little volume with the somewhat infelicitous title of *The Butcher, the Baker, the Candlestick Maker*.

If the title is infelicitous, the stories are not. This story in particular is among the most brilliant that Gilda Cordero

³³ *Ibid.*

* *THE BUTCHER, THE BAKER, THE CANDLE-STICK MAKER*. Thirteen stories by Gilda Cordero Fernando. With an Introduction by N. V. M. Gonzalez. Manila. Benipayo Press. 1962. Pp. x, 196.