

## CHAPTER 1

---

### THE BIBLICAL SOURCES OF SECULARIZATION

We have defined secularization as the liberation of man from religious and metaphysical tutelage, the turning of his attention away from other worlds and toward this one. But how did this emancipation begin? What are its sources?

Secularization, as the German theologian Friedrich Gogarten once remarked, is the legitimate consequence of the impact of biblical faith on history.<sup>1</sup> This is why it is no mere accident that secularization arose first within the culture of the so-called Christian West, in the history within which the biblical religions have made their most telling impact. The rise of natural science, of democratic political institutions, and of cultural pluralism—all developments we normally associate with Western culture—can scarcely be understood without the original impetus of the Bible. Even though the conscious connection has long since been lost sight of, the relationships are still there. Cultural impulses continue to work long after their sources have been forgotten.

In this chapter we wish to uncover these biblical sources of secularization once more. We do so not to elicit either gratitude or rebuke for the Bible, depending on one's attitude toward secularization, but rather to strengthen our capacity to deal

with secularization today by showing where it came from. We shall do this by showing how three pivotal elements in the biblical faith have each given rise to one aspect of secularization.

Thus the *disenchantment of nature* begins with the Creation; the *desacralization of politics* with the Exodus; and the *deconsecration of values* with the Sinai Covenant, especially with its prohibition of idols. The discussion is designed to make amply clear that, far from being something Christians should be against, secularization represents an authentic consequence of biblical faith. Rather than oppose it, the task of Christians should be to support and nourish it. But before we deal with these matters let us look briefly at the word *secularization* itself.

## SECULARIZATION VS. SECULARISM

The English word *secular* derives from the Latin word *saeculum*, meaning “this age.” The history of this word’s career in Western thought is itself a parable of the degree to which the biblical message has been misunderstood and misappropriated over the years. Basically *saeculum* is one of the two Latin words denoting “world” (the other is *mundus*). The very existence of two different Latin words for “world” foreshadowed serious theological problems since it betrayed a certain dualism very foreign to the Bible. The relationship between the two words is a complex one. *Saeculum* is a time-word, used frequently to translate the Greek word *aeon*, which also means age or epoch. *Mundus*, on the other hand, is a space-word, used most frequently to translate the Greek word *cosmos*, meaning the universe or the created order. The ambiguity in the Latin reveals a deeper theological problem. It traces back to the crucial

difference between the Greek spatial view of reality and the Hebrew time view. For the Greeks, the world was a place, a location. Happenings of interest could occur *within* the world, but nothing significant ever happened *to* the world. There was no such thing as world history. For the Hebrews, on the other hand, the world was *essentially* history, a series of events beginning with Creation and heading toward a Consummation. Thus the Greeks perceived existence spatially; the Hebrews perceived it temporally. The tension between the two has plagued Christian theology since its outset.

The impact of Hebrew faith on the Hellenistic world, mediated through the early Christians, was to “temporalize” the dominant perception of reality. The world *became* history. *Cosmos* became *aeon*; *mundus* became *saeculum*. But the victory was not complete. The whole history of Christian theology from the apologists of the second century onward can be understood in part as a continuing attempt to resist and dilute the radical Hebrew impulse, to absorb historical into spatial categories. There have always been counter-pressures and counter-tendencies. But only in our own time, thanks largely to the massive rediscovery of the Hebrew contribution through renewed Old Testament studies, have theologians begun to notice the basic mistake they had been making. Only recently has the task of restoring the historical and temporal tenor to theology begun in earnest. The word *secular* was an early victim of the Greek unwillingness to accept the full brunt of Hebrew historicity.

From the very beginning of its usage, secular denoted something vaguely inferior. It meant “this world” of change as opposed to the eternal “religious world.” This usage already signifies an ominous departure from biblical categories. It implies that the true religious world is timeless, changeless, and thus

superior to the “secular” world which was passing and transient. Thus the vocation of a “secular priest,” one who served in the “world,” though technically on the same level, was actually thought of as somehow less blessed than that of the “religious” priest who lived his life in the cloister, contemplating the changeless order of holy truth.

The medieval synthesis resolved the tension between Greek and Hebrew by making the spatial world the higher or religious one and the changing world of history the lower or “secular” one. The biblical assertion that under God all of life is drawn into history, that the cosmos is secularized, was temporarily lost sight of. In its first widespread usage, our word *secularization* had a very narrow and specialized meaning. It designated the process by which a “religious” priest was transferred to a parish responsibility. He was secularized. Gradually the meaning of the term was widened. When the separation of pope and emperor became a fact of life in Christendom, the division between the spiritual and the secular assumed institutional embodiment. Soon, the passing of certain responsibilities from ecclesiastical to political authorities was designated “secularization.” This usage continued through the period of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and obtains even today in countries with a Catholic cultural heritage. Consequently, for example, when a school or hospital passes from ecclesiastical to public administration, the procedure is called secularization.

More recently, secularization has been used to describe a process on the cultural level which is parallel to the political one. It denotes the disappearance of religious determination of the symbols of cultural integration. Cultural secularization is an inevitable concomitant of a political and social secularization. Sometimes the one precedes the other, depending on the

historical circumstances, but a wide imbalance between social and cultural secularization will not persist very long. In the United States there has been a considerable degree of political secularization for many years. The public schools are officially secular in the sense of being free from church control. At the same time, the cultural secularization of America has come about more slowly. The Supreme Court decisions in the early 1960s outlawing required prayers pointed up a disparity which had continued for some years. In Eastern Europe, on the other hand, the historical process has been just the opposite. A radically secular culture has been imposed very quickly in Czechoslovakia and Poland, but religious practices Americans would find strikingly unconstitutional still obtain. In Czechoslovakia, for example, all priests and ministers are paid by the state. In Poland, in some instances religious instruction is still permitted in public schools. These discontinuities are due in part to the disparate pace with which social and cultural secularization occur, a subject to which we shall return in a later chapter.

In any case, secularization as a descriptive term has a wide and inclusive significance. It appears in many different guises, depending on the religious and political history of the area concerned. But wherever it appears, it should be carefully distinguished from *secularism*. Secularization implies a historical process, almost certainly irreversible, in which society and culture are delivered from tutelage to religious control and closed metaphysical world-views. We have argued that it is basically a liberating development. Secularism, on the other hand, is the name for an ideology, a new closed world-view which functions very much like a new religion. While secularization finds its roots in the biblical faith itself and is to some extent an authentic outcome of the impact of biblical faith on Western history, this is not the case with secularism. Like any other ism,

it menaces the openness and freedom secularization has produced; it must therefore be watched carefully to prevent its becoming the ideology of a new establishment. It must be especially checked where it pretends not to be a world-view but nonetheless seeks to impose its ideology through the organs of the state.

Secularization arises in large measure from the formative influence of biblical faith on the world, an influence mediated first by the Christian church and later by movements deriving partly from it. What, then, are the elemental components of secularization and how did they originate?

## DIMENSIONS OF SECULARIZATION

### *Creation as the Disenchantment of Nature*

Presecular man lives in an enchanted forest. Its glens and groves swarm with spirits. Its rocks and streams are alive with friendly or fiendish demons. Reality is charged with a magical power that erupts here and there to threaten or benefit man. Properly managed and utilized, this invisible energy can be supplicated, warded off, or channeled. If real skill and esoteric knowledge are called into play, the energies of the unseen world can be used against a family foe or an enemy of the tribe.

Anthropologists now concede that magic is not simply one aspect of primitive life. It is a world-view. "Everything is alive," reported a Pit Indian to his scholarly interrogator; "that's what we Indians believe. White people think everything is dead." Magic constitutes the style of presecular, tribal man. Furthermore, the bushes and beasts are his brothers. He perceives the

world as an inclusive cosmological system in which his own kinship groups extend out to encompass every phenomenon in one way or another. Totemism, as the great anthropologist A. F. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955) understood it, is a vast network of kinship ties by which the creatures of the natural world are incorporated into the basically familial organization of the tribe.<sup>2</sup>

Many historians of religion believe that this magical worldview, although developed and organized in a very sophisticated way, was never really broken through until the advent of biblical faith. The Sumerian, Egyptian, and Babylonian religious systems, despite their fantastically complicated theologies and their enormously refined symbol systems, remained a form of high magic, relying for their cohesion on the integral relation between man and the cosmos. Thus the annual flooding of the Nile, the predictable revolution of the stars, and the commanding presence of the sun and moon provided the framework by which the society was held together. Sun gods, river goddesses, and astral deities abounded. History was subsumed under cosmology, society under nature, time under space. Both god and man were part of nature.

This is why the Hebrew view of Creation signals such a marked departure. It separates nature from God and distinguishes man from nature. This is the beginning of the disenchantment process. True, the Hebrews freely borrowed the material of the Creation story from their mythologically oriented neighbors of the ancient Near East. The themes and motifs are in no sense original. But what the Hebrews did with these myths, how they modified them, is the important thing to notice. Whereas in the Babylonian accounts, the sun, moon, and stars are semidivine beings, partaking the divinity of the gods themselves, their religious status is totally rejected by the

Hebrews. In Genesis, the sun and moon become creations of Yahweh, hung in the sky to light the world for man; they are neither gods nor semidivine beings. The stars have no control over man's life. They too are made by Yahweh. None of the heavenly bodies can claim any right to religious awe or worship.

The Genesis account of Creation is really a form of "atheistic propaganda." It is designed to teach the Hebrews that the magical vision, by which nature is seen as a semidivine force, has no basis in fact. Yahweh, the Creator, whose being is centered outside the natural process, who calls it into existence and names its parts, allows man to perceive nature itself in a matter-of-fact way. It is true, as some modern writers have pointed out, that modern man's attitude toward disenchanting nature has sometimes shown elements of vindictiveness. Like a child suddenly released from parental constraints, he takes savage pride in smashing nature and brutalizing it. This is perhaps a kind of revenge pressed by a former prisoner against his captor, but it is essentially childish and is unquestionably a passing phase. The mature secular man neither reverences nor ravages nature. His task is to tend it and make use of it, to assume the responsibility assigned to The Man, Adam.

Nor is man tied to nature by kinship ties. The lines of kinship in the Bible are temporal, not spatial. Instead of reaching out to encompass kangaroos and totem shrubs, they reach back to the sagas of the fathers and forward to the fortunes of the children's children. The structure of Hebrew kinship is linear; it is historical, not cosmological. The Bible, with one or two quaint exceptions (Eve's serpent and Balaam's ass), is devoid of the animal fables which abound in the legends and myths of magical peoples. Just after his creation man is given the crucial responsibility of naming the animals. He is their master and

commander. It is his task to subdue the earth. Nature is neither his brother nor his god. As such it offers him no salvation. When he looks up to the hills, Hebrew man turns from them and asks where he can gain strength. The answer is: Not from the hills, but from Yahweh, who *made* heaven and earth. For the Bible, neither man nor God is defined by his relationship to nature. This not only frees both of them for history, it also makes nature itself available for man's use.

Max Weber has called this freeing of nature from its religious overtones "disenchantment." The word is intended to connote not disillusionment but matter-of-factness. Man becomes in effect a subject facing nature. He can still enjoy it and delight in it, perhaps even more so since its terrors have been reduced for him. But man is not a mere expression of nature, and nature is not a divine entity.

This disenchantment of the natural world provides an absolute precondition for the development of natural science. Since we have already shown that technopolis, today's technical city, would not have been possible without modern science, disenchantment is also an essential precondition for modern urbanization. Science is basically a point of view. However highly developed a culture's powers of observation, however refined its equipment for measuring, no real scientific breakthrough is possible until man can face the natural world unafraid. Wherever nature is perceived as an extension of himself or his group, or as the embodiment of the divine, science as we know it is precluded. This is evident in Assyrian culture, where an uncanny accuracy in astronomical observation developed, but in which the heavenly bodies were still experienced as the determinants of human destiny; hence no real scientific astronomy emerged.

It remains true in so-called underdeveloped cultures today that the mere introduction of modern technological devices

and procedures will never suffice to produce a scientific culture. Somehow nature must be disenchanted, which means the destruction of many traditional religions. This destruction took place in the past century mainly under the auspices of Christian missions. More recently it occurred as a result of the spread of Communist ideology. In this instance, Christianity and communism, despite their differences, played nearly identical roles in the removal of traditional religious restraints to scientific and technological change. Both are historically oriented ways of perceiving natural reality. Both exorcise the magical demons and open nature for science. More recently still, less precise socialistic ideologies of a vague planned welfare state have had the same influence. The disenchantment of nature is one of the essential components of secularization.

*The Exodus as the Desacralization of Politics*

No one rules by divine right in secular society. In presecular society, everyone does. Just as nature is perceived by tribal man both as a part of his family and as the locus of religious energy, so the political power structure is accepted as an extension of familial authority and as the unequivocal will of the gods. The identification of the political with the religious order, whether in a primitive tribe where the chief is also the sorcerer, or in the Roman Empire where the emperor is both political ruler and pontifex maximus, betrays the same sacral legitimization of political power.

A “pure” sacral-political identification is difficult to find. All societies begin early to differentiate roles and responsibilities; whether this separation of powers can be carried through to a

successful conclusion depends entirely on whether the basic symbol system of the culture allows for such differentiation.

Needless to say, significant political and social change is almost impossible in societies in which the ruling regime is directly legitimated by religious symbols, in which the ruler is believed to be divine or a direct expression of the divine intention. Political change depends on a previous desacralization of politics. The process is closely related to the disenchantment of nature. Since nature always repeats itself, while history never does, the emergence of history rather than nature as the locus of God's action opens a whole new world of possibilities for political and social change.

In tracing the desacralization of politics to its biblical roots, the Exodus must be the focal point of study. For the Hebrews Yahweh had spoken decisively not in a natural phenomenon, such as a thunderclap or an earthquake, but through a historical event, the deliverance from Egypt. It is particularly significant that this was an event of social change, a massive act of what we might today call "civil disobedience." It was an act of insurrection against a duly constituted monarch, a pharaoh whose relationship to the sun-god Re constituted his claim to political sovereignty. There had no doubt been similar escapes before, but the Exodus of the Hebrews became more than a minor event which happened to an unimportant people. It became the central event around which the Hebrews organized their whole perception of reality. As such, it symbolized the deliverance of man out of a sacral-political order and into history and social change, out of religiously legitimated monarchs and into a world where political leadership would be based on power gained by the capacity to accomplish specific social objectives.

The Exodus delivered the Jews from Egypt, yet there was a persistent temptation to return to sacral politics, especially during the period of the monarchy. But the prophetic bands always stood in the way, preventing such a relapse. Since the prophets always had a source of authority separate from the royal favor, the priest-king was never really possible again. The Exodus had made it forever impossible to accept without reservation the sanctions of any monarch. Yahweh could always stage a new Exodus, or work through history to bring down a monarch with delusions of grandeur. No royal house was ever afterward unquestionably secure on its throne.

The contest between pope and emperor in the Middle Ages is a parable of the futility of any attempt to return to simple sacral politics once the secularization process has begun. The emperor would have liked to be the religious as well as the political sovereign of the West—wistful longings for a “Holy Roman Empire” headed by a monarch with sacral functions indicate this desire. Similarly, many of the popes would have liked to wield the sword of empire as well as the Keys of Saint Peter—theological efforts to subsume the temporal under the spiritual realm testify to this incessant hankering. Neither side won. The pope finally lost his temporal power along with the Papal States and the emperor lost everything when the Empire itself dissolved. Since then the spiritual and moral authority of the pope has increased. At the same time, political leaders in the West have by and large accepted the fact that they can make only provisional and limited demands on their citizens. When a political leader makes religious or totalitarian claims, when a Hitler or a Stalin tries once again to assert himself as the pure expression of the *Zeitgeist* or the dialectic, free men recognize this as an affront to their deepest convictions about politics. Our political consciences have all been secularized.

The tension between Judaeo-Christian religion and political absolutism has been a recognized element in the tradition of Western political philosophy since Augustine. In fact, conflict between church and state is really possible only on ground prepared by the biblical faiths. There is no conflict if a faith is antipolitical, as were the mystery cults, or if it merges imperceptibly with the political system, as did the imperial religion of Rome. The mystery cults turned their backs on "this world" and thus gave the political regime an open field to fashion whatever tyrannies it chose. The imperial cult simply identified the establishment with the will of the gods. Only with the Christian church did a real tension become possible, a tension for which Saint Augustine spelled out the basis. Augustine said that the state has its own good, but that this good is not the highest or truest good. The state is an order, but is good order only insofar as man is a sinner. It has no contribution to make to the salvation of man. To grant the state a *provisional* worth strikes a harder blow at tyranny than a total devaluation of the state, which allows the church to withdraw into an enclave.<sup>3</sup>

The early years of the Christian church present a particularly good example of how this desacralization of politics worked out in practice. It was accomplished not by a wholesale rejection of political authority but by a conditional acceptance. The first Christians were willing to pray for the emperor but not to burn incense on his altar. The difference between these two acts is crucial. To pray for the emperor is to grant him the right to exercise authority in a particular, restricted realm, a realm defined not by him but by the one who is praying. To refuse to put incense on his altar is to deny him any sacral-religious authority. The early Christians thus made a telling contribution to the desacralization of politics and were in this sense relentless and consistent secularizers.

In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's term, the early Christians exhibited a kind of "holy worldliness." They rejected the cults of Cybele, Isis, and Mithra because these mystery religions were escapist and the Christians did not wish to abandon a world God had made and to which their Lord, they believed, would soon return in visible triumph. But they also rejected the cult of the emperor because, although worldly, it was not holy enough. It did not cohere with the sharp chasm between the Holy One and the political system which they confessed when they called Jesus the only true *Kyrios*. It did not conform to the desacralized politics which had begun with the Exodus and continued to call into question all religio-political systems. Holding the tension between holiness and worldliness, the Christians thus constituted a threat to the Roman imperial tyranny which resulted in an endless series of persecutions, but finally toppled it.

The conversion of Constantine presented the early Christians a new test. Some theologians tried to rewrite Christianity into an imperial ideology—and almost succeeded for a time. But their attempt to resacralize politics never eliminated the tension between God and the regime which the biblical faith had planted in the consciousness of man. From now on, no political system could ever safely claim a direct and undisputed sacral legitimation, and no sovereign could infringe on that aspect of his subjects' lives which pointed them to an authority beyond him. Indeed, the tension between Christian faith and political authority was so pointed that it has continued to bother Western political thinkers in every generation. Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1529), the Renaissance philosopher and statesman, argued that it was impossible to build a strong state among Christians since the Christian religion elicited universalistic feelings that subverted the required nationalism.<sup>4</sup> Marsilius of Padua (died *ca.* 1342) contended in his *Defensor Pacis*

that it was extremely difficult even to have a state where the church puts forward its customary claims. How can a state defend its citizens, he wanted to know, when there is one group within its borders which claims a kind of supranational loyalty and will grant only conditional allegiance to the earthly monarch?

This line of thought came to a very consistent position in the French philosopher Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), who moved even further in seeking to deal with the same tension. He believed not only that a state of atheists was possible, but also that it was probably even desirable, since an atheistic state would not be tempted to force one particular world-view or metaphysic on any of its citizens. Bayle failed to foresee the rise of a fanatical political atheism just around the corner, a secularistic religion which would prove just as oppressive as the theistic religions of the past. It is worth noting here that Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72), whose work greatly influenced Karl Marx, dedicated his first book to Bayle. Marx himself resolved the tension by suggesting that eventually both religion and the state would disappear. His prediction is not likely to be fulfilled, but it does illustrate the fact that no political thinker can avoid dealing in some way with the inherent limitation of politics that is built into Western culture through the desecralization of political power.

Of course remnants and residues of sacral politics do remain in our modern world. The Archbishop of Canterbury crowns the sovereign of England *Defensor Fidei*, defender of the faith, intoning all the while that he or she is monarch *gratia dei*, by the grace of God. These vestiges of a sacral society amuse Britons vastly and remind them of the history and dignity of the monarchy. But no one takes them the least bit seriously. Sacral politics in Britain has become purely decorative. In fact, even

the British Communist Party has solemnly promised that if it ever wins power it will not abolish the monarchy.

In America, the President is installed with an oath spoken while his hand rests on a Bible. Priests, rabbis, and ministers intone prayers in a kind of ritual investiture. But here too the matter is all effect with no substance. Significantly, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court who holds the Bible presides over a body which, as noted, has ruled that its reading cannot be required in public schools.

Sacral politics have not been completely abolished. Secularization is a process, not a state of affairs. In Spain a quasi-sacral state still obtains, as it does in such small Asian countries as Nepal. Furthermore, the danger of a relapse into a neosacral politics is always present. National Socialism in Germany and Fascism in Italy represented relapses of catastrophic proportions; the Stalinist cult of personality was another. There are indications that the regime of Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana may represent a kind of neotribal politics. But the secularizing counter-forces are nearly omnipresent today and will eventually swing into movement. Communism itself, though it still has semireligious characteristics, may eventually strengthen the tendency toward the desacralization of politics. Communist social theory, as already mentioned, since it teaches that the state apparatus merely expresses the will of the ruling elite, envisages the eventual withering away of the state in the classless society. However improbable this may appear in reality, it does deprive a regime of the kind of ultimate legitimation available in sacral societies. It strengthens the recent Marxist contention that the cult of Stalin, rather than being an expression of the essence of communism, in reality marked a grave departure from it. In any case, the presence today of the desacralizing currents of the biblical faith and of the movements

deriving from it suggests that in the urbanized technological world of tomorrow, no significant reversal of the trend toward secularization can be expected.

*The Sinai Covenant as the Deconsecration of Values*

Both tribal man and secular man see the world from a particular, socially and historically conditioned point of view. But modern secular man knows it, and tribal man did not; therein lies the crucial difference. The awareness that his own point of view is relative and conditioned has become for secular man an inescapable component of that point of view. His consciousness has been relativized. He knows that not only his language, his customs, and his clothing style, but also his science, his values, and his very way of perceiving reality are conditioned by his personal biography and the history of his group. In our time the Copernican revolution has reached out to incorporate everything into its sweep. All things are relative. Everything “depends on how you look at it.”

Paul Tillich once called this age, marked as it is by the disappearance of securely grounded values, the “land of broken symbols”—an apt image. Secular man’s values have been deconsecrated, shorn of any claim to ultimate or final significance. Like nature and politics, they are no longer the direct expression of the divine will. They have become what certain people at a particular time and place hold to be good. They have ceased to be values and have become valuations. Secular man knows that the symbols by which he perceives the world and the values by which he makes his decisions are the products of a particular history. As such they are limited and partial. The man who has moved beyond tribal culture and its town

or bourgeois afterglow knows that he must bear a burden the people of those eras never bore. He must live with the realization that the rules which guide his ethical life will seem just as outmoded to his descendants as some of his ancestors' practices now appear to him. No previous generation has had to live in the glaring light of this realization. Simple ethical certainty, of the sort once available to man, will never be possible again.

How, in such a situation, is it possible to avoid a dizzy descent into pure anarchic relativism? How can secularization, if it results in the deconsecration and consequent relativization of values, lead in the end to anything but nihilism?

In answering this question we must first make a careful distinction between the willingness to concede that one's own values and standpoints are relative and the denial of any reality toward which these standpoints and attitudes are directed. The relativization of values does not have to lead to either individual or group solipsism. It can have a much more constructive result, the recognition that since everyone's perspective is limited and conditioned, no one has the right to inflict his values on anyone else. In political terms, a certain degree of healthy relativism provides the philosophical basis for pluralism.

The relativization of all human values, one of the integral dimensions of secularization, stems in part from the biblical opposition to idolatry. Beginning with the prohibition against "graven images" which is part of the Sinai Covenant, the Old Testament is characterized by an uncompromising refusal to allow any replication of the deity. The enormous relevance of this prohibition is frequently misunderstood by modern readers. Since, for the ancients, gods and value systems were the same thing, this interdiction against idols has real import for the question at hand. It means that the Jews were forbidden to

worship (that is, to take with any real moral seriousness) anything which could be fashioned by man himself. It was not that the Jews feared that by making an idol religious worship might be cheapened or misled. Rather, it was believed that Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel, was by his very nature impossible of replication by human effort. The commandment against idolatry is a clue to Yahweh's essence. Any deity which could be expressed in the form of an idol was *ipso facto* not Yahweh. The gods were thereby demoted. The Bible does not deny the reality of the gods and their values; it merely relativizes them. It accepts them as human projections, as "the work of man's hand," and in this sense is very close to the modern social sciences. It was because they believed in Yahweh that, for the Jews, all human values and their representations were relativized.

The same observation holds for the continuing tradition of iconoclasm in Christian history. Iconoclasm is a form of de-consecration. It represents the extension of the commandment against idols. Biblical iconoclasm, as Gabriel Vahanian puts it, is

. . . a deflation of man's natural inclination to deify himself, or his society, or the State, or his culture . . . a relentless exposing of the manifold, constant proclivity to elevate the finite to the level of the infinite, to give the transitory the status of permanent, and to attribute to man qualities that will deceive him into denying his finitude.<sup>5</sup>

The persistent protest against idols and icons which runs through the history of biblical faith provides the basis for a constructive relativism. It makes possible a stance by which the national, racial, and cultural idolatries of the age can be

40 CHAPTER 1

put in their place. It allows secular man to note the transience and relativity of all cultural creations and of every value system without sinking into an abyss of nihilism. He can confess the subjectivity of his perception while insisting that the object of that perception is nonetheless real. As Richard Niebuhr once wrote,

Relativism does not imply subjectivism or skepticism. It is not evident that the man who is forced to confess that his view of things is conditioned by the standpoint he occupies must doubt the reality of what he sees. It is not apparent that one who knows that his concepts are not universal must also doubt that they are concepts of the universal.<sup>6</sup>

Historical relativism is the end product of secularization. It is the nonreligious expression of what Jews have expressed in their consistent opposition to idols and Christians in their sporadic attacks on icons. Idols of all kinds are expressions of what Émile Durkheim, the great sociologist of religion, once called the “*representation collective*.” They are the symbols and values of a tribe, a clan, a nation, projected into the heavens and given the status of divine beings. Durkheim’s Jewish forebears might well have been proud of his scientific extension of the ruthless exposure of human sources of religious images which is so close to the heart of Israelite faith. Iconoclasm—and therefore a kind of relativism—is the necessary and logical consequence of faith in the Creator. We noted a few pages back that Marxist atheism, despite fundamental differences from Christianity, performs an analagous cultural function by disenchanting nature, while its theory of politics also desacralizes ruling regimes. The same is true in the deconsecration of values. Marx taught that all values were merely the projection

of the economic power interests of a class. This bears a close resemblance to the biblical exposure of idols.

A question might legitimately arise at this point about those myriad modern men who feel the full weight of relativism but have no faith. Must it not be conceded that, for them, Ivan Karamazov is right when he says that if God is dead, then anything is possible?

There is a real danger that a relativization of values can lead to ethical anarchism and metaphysical nihilism. But this need not be the case. Nihilism itself is an ism. It is a value system with its own idols and icons, even if they appear as gargoyles. Nihilism represents the adolescent phase of the relativization of values. It swings back and forth from a giddy celebration of the freedom man has when the gods are dead to a wistful longing after the return of a world of secure and dependable meanings and norms. In psychoanalytic terms, the nihilist displays a deep ambivalence toward the authority figure represented by God and traditional values. Having rejected the father, he still cannot achieve maturity and self-actualization. Nihilism therefore sometimes becomes a kind of diabolism. The nihilist uses his newfound freedom from the tyranny of God not to become a true man but to revel in all the things the dead God once forbade. Nihilism has in effect a new god, the nihil, the negative shadow of the dead God.

Nihilism is the equivalent in the ethical realm of the vengeful onslaught against nature which may follow its disenchantment. Both are essentially adolescent reactions to liberation from previous restraints. In both cases, the mature mastery of this newly won freedom lies in a very different direction.

The relativization of values does cut the ground out from under many people. It melts the paste of traditional social cohesion and things begin to fall apart. Since all societies require

an element of value consensus, it poses the problem of a new form of social cohesion. But despite claims to the contrary, the relativization of values does *not* make impossible human society with its prerequisite of some degree of social consensus. What it *does* do is force man to reconstitute that consensus on a wholly new basis, quite a different matter. How is this to be done?

First of all it requires real maturity. It demands that all men be drawn into the secularization process so that no one clings to the dangerous precritical illusion that his values are ultimate. All idols and icons must be exposed for the relative, conditional things they are. Tribal naïveté must be laid to rest everywhere, and everyone must be made a citizen of the land of broken symbols. In this way the process which has destroyed the old basis for social solidity now provides the basis for a new one. Paradoxically, the mutual discovery by all parties concerned that their various value systems are in fact relative puts them all into the same boat. It supplies a common experience and outlook which can become the basis for a new social consensus. We may even find that the consensus achieved is wider and more significant. Thus it is now possible for the United Nations to develop a Declaration of Human Rights based on a consensus of all the nation-states involved. It does not, like the American founding documents, rest on affirmations concerning the inalienable right by which men are “endowed by their Creator. . . .” Nor is it based on some theory of natural law. It is the expression of a consensus which draws together several cultural and religious traditions including those which believe neither in a Creator nor in any form of natural law.

Man once believed that the state was a changeless expression of divine will. Now he knows it to be a creation of man. Conservatives (for example Edmund Burke) argued that such

a desacralization of politics would be disastrous. They feared that once sacral legitimation had disappeared, no respect for law or political authority would remain. Burke was wrong. Man now works within political institutions he knows to be human artifices. The same can be true for ethics. There is no reason that man must believe the ethical standards he lives by came down from heaven inscribed on golden tablets. He can accept the fact that value systems, like states and civilizations, come and go. They are conditioned by their history and claim no finality. Like models for scientific inquiry and the traditional institutions for exercising political power, they can be altered and modified. But insofar as they represent a consensus and provide a fabric of corporate life, they should not be tampered with frivolously or capriciously. Secularization places the responsibility for the forging of human values, like the fashioning of political systems, in man's own hands. And this demands a maturity neither the nihilist nor the anarchist wishes to assume.

We have described the three central threads of the secularization process and traced them back to sources in the biblical faith itself. Where does that leave us today? Clearly, those whose present orientation to reality is shaped by the biblical faith can hardly in good faith enter the lists as adversaries of secularization. Our task should be to nourish the secularization process, to prevent it from hardening into a rigid world-view, and to clarify as often as necessary its roots in the Bible. Furthermore, we should be constantly on the lookout for movements which attempt to thwart and reverse the liberating irritant of secularization.

This means we should oppose the romantic restoration of the sprites to the forest. It may seem pleasant at first to reinstate the leprechauns, but—as Hitler made all too clear—once

## 44 CHAPTER 1

the Valkyries return, they will seek a bloodthirsty revenge on those who banished them. We should also be wary of any attempt to resacralize politics. Political leaders and movements should never be granted any sacred significance, and all efforts to use the public authority to support traditional religious beliefs or the quasi-religious beliefs of ideological secularists must be resisted.

Perhaps it is in the realm of values and ethics that the nurture of secularization becomes most ambiguous and problematical. Yet even here the broad lines of action are clear. Of course no group can be prevented from claiming that its values are ultimate. But it can be prevented from employing state power or cultural coercion to validate its case. No one can deny a Mississippi café proprietor his right to believe that Negroes suffer the curse of Ham. But he can be prevented from utilizing the property the state protects and regulates for him to humiliate Negroes because of his farfetched religious opinion. A highly disparate conglomerate of value systems can co-exist in a society so long as they all repudiate the privilege of winning the others over by rack and thumbscrew. But even this repudiation demands a huge step for those still ensnared in mythical and metaphysical sureties. Releasing them to maturity is the work of the God of Creation. Exodus, and Sinai. Calling them to maturity is the task of the community of faith.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

1. Friedrich Gogarten, *Verhängnis und Hoffnung der Neuzeit* (Stuttgart: Friedrich Vorwerk Verlag, 1953); *Der Mensch zwischen Gott und Welt* (same publisher, 1956).

THE BIBLICAL SOURCES OF SECULARIZATION 45

2. A. F. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1952; London: Cohen & West).
3. Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, XV/1, XVI/10.
4. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses*, II/2, III/1.
5. Gabriel Vahanian, *Wait Without Idols* (New York: Braziller, 1964), p. 24.
6. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), p. 18.