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Some perplexities in *Light of the World*[*]

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Secularisation and the dictatorship of relativism: Some perplexities in *Light of the World*[†]

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Abstract: This essay is a sympathetic sociological response to the reflections of Pope Benedict XVI on relativism and 'aggressive secularism', which is associated with cultural wars over the place of religion in the public square. The recent emergence of interest in secularisation has surprised sociologists of religion who treat the notion as moribund. There is a second version of secularism, benign, which is more corrosive of religion and more characteristic of modernity, which leads on to the issues generated by post-secularity. This realisation of the persistence of religion makes spaces for the concerns of theology. Because Catholic theology after Vatican II never understood its reference points in modernity, and inadvertently amplified internal forms of secularisation, it is argued that relativism has entered theology in areas bearing on Weber's interests in salvation anxiety. Finally, and strangely, it is Bourdieu who provides sociological antidotes to secularisation in the form of his concerns with reproduction and religious/spiritual capital. Its expenditure depends on a radical contextualisation, one that checkmates the 'dictatorship of relativism' and at the same subverts the imperialising claims of secularisation.

[†] This working draft paper is based on a lecture that was given to the Dominican Province Study Day, Holy Cross Abbey, Leicester, England held on the 15th December 2010. Perhaps the most flourishing of Catholic religious orders in the United Kingdom, 45 Dominican friars and novices were present for this annual meeting of the Province. An earlier version of the lecture was written in late January and has appeared on the Blackfriars website. Subsequently, a much expanded version was written between February and April 2011 for a proposed collection of essays on sociology and theology. This version, for SPAIS, was written in late April and early May 2011 and re-casts the late January paper in the light of insights gained in writing the expanded essay. All three versions attempt to consider the sociological implications of Pope Benedict XVI's recent work, *Light of the World*, in particular chapter 5 (2010a). His writings relate to a paradox which the sociologist, Margaret Archer has noted that 'social theory is sadly in a state of disarray – at precisely the time when Catholic social teaching, particularly Pope Benedict's encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* is drawing more heavily upon it to define what the Common Good is, and what – besides virtue and goodwill – is required to achieve it' (*The Church Times* 6th May 2011). Reflecting back on this paper, it seems a reaction to the irony of this situation which Archer so well encapsulates.

To the perplexity of sociologists of religion, of late, the term 'secular' has come to the fore as a matter of deep controversy. In the English mass media and politics, the term signifies the wish to domesticate religions, notably Islam and Catholicism into the sphere of regulation of a culture of rights. This movement has been complemented by the genius for self-publicity of the 'new atheists' who scorn religion and treat secular values as the ultimate defence of 'reason' and science. From another angle secularisation has been treated as hostile to Catholicism in its aggressive forms which denote efforts to legislate against the exercise of religion in civil society, where believers are deemed not to belong. 'Aggressive secularisation' has been under particular and recent attack from the Vatican and notably in the writings and public addresses of Benedict XVI. This form of secularisation thrives on the notion that religious belief has become pointless, devoid of grip and significance. As a consequence, the new deviants are those in belief, for, as Taylor has well indicated, in *A Secular Age,* unbelief is now normative (2007). Believers are now like exotic birds with wings to fly but who fail to do so. Like dotty birds, they squat stupidly on the fields of modernity as zoological exhibits, significant in their presence but useless in terms of what they signify.

For different reasons, both Catholicism and sociology have been wrong-footed by the resurrection of the notion of secularisation which has come to the centre of much media attention in the United Kingdom. For most in sociology, the term had been discredited, hence the 'surprise' at the rise in its significance in public debate. In Catholicism on the other hand, the emergence of secularisation as a focal point of hostility has generated a need to re-cast the assumptions of Vatican II, that an opening to modernity would 'release' the Good News from the bondage of structures, closures and traditions. As 'aggressive secularisation' comes to fore, that unselective opening to the world is now seen as dangerous. The cultural milieu within which Catholicism in Europe operates has become clouded with uncertainty, not least over how to connect the values of the Gospel to a deeply indifferent and hostile world.

Complicating matters is the general realisation that, contrary to rumours of its near extinction, religion has an uncanny capacity to resurrect itself in the unpropitious cultural circumstances of

modernity. 9/11 shook many out of the belief that religion was safe, marginalised and irrelevant. The rise of Islam in the West and notably in Europe exposed a dangerous gap between the advent of a religion peculiarly resistant to the allures of modernity and a Christianity that was in decline in consequence of its accommodation to these. The return of religion as a topic of concern has unsettled many.

In Catholicism, secularisation is treated in aggressive forms as a form of hostility to the exercise of belief in the public square. The 'new atheists' have done much to label religion, notably Catholicism, as regressive, divisive, and prejudicial to the hegemony of reason in governing the affairs of a civil society. Those in faith feel under siege. Yet, at the same time, the return of religion to the public square, notably in the form of Islam has unsettled the consensus in academic and cultural life that secularisation has 'won'. Somehow, it has not. Wishing to think in categories that can be controlled and regulated, this secular consensus could cope with religion as a variable that qualified assumptions in regard to ethnicity. The difficulty is that Islamic religion seems subversive to such classifications. It is a theology based on Revelation and finds the domestication of faith into the category of religion to be both patronising and untenable. Catholicism too has become caught up in these efforts to domesticate its theology into the category of religion. Because they refuse to accept homosexuals as fit for placement of children, by rule of parliament and law, Catholic adoption agencies have been dismantled. These enforcements are all the more bizarre, given the views of judges that any zealously held belief has rights in law, save those pertaining to a theology. As a consensus emerges that England is a tolerant, pluralist and secular society, Catholicism and Islam stand as the unincluded, as unsocial resisters to a culture of inclusiveness. To follow that great Canadian sociologist, Erving Goffman, they are objects of 'civil inattention'.

This process occurs in the BBC where religion is ghettoised in 'God slots', thus fulfilling the needs of public broadcasting. This sequestration enables a wider assumption to operate that nobody in their right mind is a religious believer. If a believer appears in a drama, it is usually as a token bigot, a smug idiot, or, if a priest, a sexual predator, realising his salvation by abandoning his calling. In short,

in the mass media, religion has an image problem – or rather it has no real image at all. Every year, at the University of Bristol on the course on the sociology of religion, the forty or so students at the start are asked to name a religious character on television, one who made a real impact on their imaginations. Without fail 'Dot Cotton', the sanctimonious elderly shrew in the series 'Eastenders' is nominated.

She wins by default, for the idea of an ordinary practising young Christian appearing in a soap opera seems unimaginable. In these worlds, those afflicted with sanctity have no parts; they spoil the plots built for enactment on religious free zones. The tales told in these zones are about exits from discredited religions. Nobody enters these; nobody prays; nobody habitually goes to Church; nobody believes, for the plot lines permit such no parts. Anyhow, the mass media makes its own versions of religious drama.

Scandals surrounding religion are amplified, not with regard to the truth of affairs, but to manufacture controversies and to feed the notion that all in religion are in some ways venal and corrupt. The mass media thrives less on edification and more on demolition. As a result, the Catholic clergy have been demonised over a small number of ill-managed cases of child abuse, which are only a tiny proportion of the total number of cases in the United Kingdom. Against this background, secularisation has been elevated into a progressive necessity, one that serves to reduce Catholic teaching on sexuality to an apologetic and hesitant stutter. In an unexpected way, the spirit of secularisation is invoked by protagonists in a peculiar form of cultural warfare to legitimise their efforts to keep Catholics dancing around on the left foot.

Secularisation and the cultural wars: no peace for the faithful

In the context of identity politics, anti-Catholicism takes on new hues all the more hypocritical given that the Catholics had invented civil rights in the United Kingdom to redress claims of discrimination which a smug English establishment had long ignored. Ironically, in a stunning exercise in 'aggressive secularisation', the Labour Party hijacked the fruits of this civil rights movement, swept

aside its concerns with religious discrimination and replaced these with the non-negotiable claims of identity politics, notably in areas of sexuality, which were placed *primus inter pares.* Catholics found themselves in the anomalous position of being transformed from being victims of persecution into persecutors picking on vulnerable, oppressed sexual minorities. As a result, the hatred attached to homosexuality was re-channelled in the direction of Catholicism; for some commentators it is the new virus in town.

In England and Scotland, Catholicism has a long career of misrecognition, of treatment as alien, irrelevant and intrusive. 'Aggressive secularisation' is the continuity of an old form of anti-Catholicism under a new label. The tag has a noble inheritance reaching back to the sequestration of Catholic property in the Reformation, when Catholics were treated as treasonable strangers in their own land. Coming from Ireland, one always thought that anti-Catholicism was the unsavoury colonial practice of the English which was brought to bear on the innocent Irish. It was a shock to realise that the English inflicted this practice on themselves, a symbol of which is the Act of Succession which debars a Catholic, by birth or marriage, succeeding to the Throne. By tradition, in English society, for Catholics, 'aggressive secularisation' has always been fact of life. In modernity, it just takes on a different incarnation.

'Aggressive secularisation' is to be found in exemplary forms in *The Observer, The Guardian* and especially in *The Independent*, newspapers supposedly liberal in values in regard to everybody – except Catholics (Jenkins 2003). In the meantime, as if operating in a parallel universe which is bizarrely unknown, English Catholics get on with their faith; large numbers still go to Church and use the sacraments; they still run faith schools which their ancestors founded and funded; and almost subversively, if not invisibly, they get on with their lives, full and safe in the knowledge that these are as unknown in the mass media as the practices of a far flung tribe in New Guinea.

Into this cultural and political morass, stepped Benedict XVI on a state visit to England and Scotland in September 2010. Subject to a vicious press campaign in the above organs and treated with scarcely concealed contempt, the Pope arrived in Scotland and, to even the most hostile commentator,

something changed as he came South. A realisation dawned that he had something say, that this was not a quasi-Nazi, a nasty rottweiler coming to bite the natives, but a kindly sheepdog journeying to round up his flock into pens fit for the nurture of piety. Thousands gathered to hear his speeches, many of which shone as a light in the darkness (Benedict 2010b). A Pope speaking from the depths of a deeply matured theology spoke with a vision and a range in ways that resonated unexpectedly. Yet, after his visit, it might seem that matters have remained unchanged, as English society drifted back to the comfortable hegemony of secularity and the habitual disdain it nurtures of anything pertaining to Christianity. Somehow, secularity had 'won' – again. Yet, the victory was not clear-cut.

In this paper, it is suggested that secularity is infinitely more complex as a process than many realise. The term is riddled with ambiguities and conflicting meanings. Chapter 5 of *Light of the World* would be interesting alone for its recognition of secularisation. But when this process is tied in with a concern with the 'dictatorship of relativism', then sociological alarm bells ring (Benedict 2010a: 50-59). These peals are to be heard with theological interest, for, to sociology, a paradigm shift is signified in this chapter. Hope and proclamation continue to exist, as to be expected, but these are now cast in relation to the need to analyse a world that has become inimical to Catholicism. The vision of Vatican II, notably in *Gaudium et Spes*, of sanctifying the world by reference to existential formulations of hope now no longer seems fit for purpose. The world imagined in the document does not exist (if it ever did). Instead a new world has emerged, not benign and receptive to the message of Christianity as hoped and assumed, but instead is one that is hostile to faith, presenting a terrain dangerous to cross and now one where resistance, not capitulation, is required to ecclesial survival.

Against this background, unexpectedly, sociology emerges as a presumptuous instrument set to save theologians from themselves when their readings of cultural proprieties are misplaced. This is not to establish sociology in some imperial guise, but rather to suggest that the rise of concern with secularity renders application to the discipline inevitable. In so far as modernity is the creature of sociology, secularity is its Siamese twin. They are afflicted with two traits of secularisation: one 'aggressive' and the other 'benign'.

The infant afflicted with ‘aggressive secularisation’ has made the most noise and has also attracted much opprobrium from the Vatican at its squawks. In England, the most zealous of its advocates are a cluster of elderly godlessparents, such as Dawkins, Grayling, Hitchens and Warnock and Toynbee. This trait of the infant attracts few more junior companions for it to play with, such as a young league of atheists. Nevertheless, at a remove are supporters clubs, notably the Secular Society and the British Humanist Association.

Little cognizance seems taken of the fact that the combined membership of these groups is under 20,000. Not surprisingly, the Secular Society is coy about its membership of 7,000. The rally of protest over the Pope’s visit to England in September 2010 attracted less than 3,000 in contrast to the thousands who turned out to welcome the Pontiff. These miniscule numbers should not be a surprise. As the 2001 Census showed, self-declared atheists are pitifully small in number. Recognising the politics of religious statistics, atheists sought to make the ‘no religion’ section of the 2011 Census more definite by launching a campaign to get fellow believers to declare themselves when filling in the forms. It might well be that these atheists who seek to convert the indefinite ironically suffer the same fate as believers, also finding in a climate of indifference that few make a commitments to anything. As matters stand, as based on the 2001 the Census, it would seem that supporters of the Jedi have greater claims to recognition than atheists.

Polemicists of ‘aggressive secularisation’ seem to forget their own history, that in making absolute claims founded on reason, they risk deifying it and converting subservience to it into a form of religion. This was the case with the French Revolution. The state eradication of religion generated the need for Robespierre to found a civil virtual version. He had a remarkable dislike of atheists. The masses needed something to believe in, so that even when ‘aggressive secularisation’ wins the battle and sweeps religion from the field, the empty space needs to be filled with another version. The issue is not of God, but which god is to occupy the space as a central object of veneration. In this way, secularisation is fated to fail, even if it ‘wins’. It is brilliant in leaning against religions such as Catholicism, but when that prop becomes unsafe to lean on and secularisation ‘wins’, this virtual

religion is also scrutinised by the powers of modernity that facilitated its rise. Advocates of secularisation become exposed to unwarranted scrutiny as to what *they* believe in? A curiosity arises over what are they *for*? What emerges from them is oddly platitudinous, seemingly incapable of mobilising hundreds let alone thousands.

The central premise of secularisation, its article of faith is that religion is fated to disappear in the vapours of modernity. This process is deemed just to happen. But such forms of serendipity have no basis in sociology where all institutions in their objective and subjective forms are liable to be treated as social constructions. What pertains to religion applies likewise to secularisation. It has no rights of exemption from the imperialising sociological gaze which too can cast it in the light of disenchantment. Anyhow, 'aggressive secularisation' is unwise as a tactic, for it risks unsettling the indifference it thrives on and in so stirring up the waters risks becoming a recruiting sergeant for religious believers awakened to the need to defend their differences, often in opposition to others.

In seeking to clear the field of religion, secularisation takes on the properties of appeal to the absolute which mirror what it seeks to displace. These powers, in their highest expression can become as intangible, as rhetorical and as incapable of 'proof' as those of any religion. The problem for secularisation in its 'aggressive' form is that as it becomes more militant, more zealous, more concerned to find charismatic leaders, more mindful of the need to have collective gatherings to mobilise and affirm its fellow believers, not only does it take on the traits of the religions it condemns, but it also becomes prone to the forces of secularity that enabled it to gain ascendance in the field of culture. In its conceits, 'aggressive secularisation' overplays its hand and loses it. The trait or form of secularisation attached to the other twin is more subtle, craftier and wiser and in many respects more insidious in the dangers it poses to religion.

This form manages to present itself as progressive, democratic and inclusive in ways fitting for the maturation of modernity. This cultivation of image, which secularisation has come to nurture so assiduously, also derives from the indifference with which religion is viewed. The more religion

can be locked in a sphere of indifference to difference, the more secularisation becomes a beneficiary of this imprisonment. The outcome is not the assassination of religion by decapitation, but rather a death by a thousand cuts, those expressed in petty debilitating forms of legislation and employed in a climate which connives to suggest that the articulation of a religious stance is uncivil, impolite and unacceptable.

Unlike the lunatic form of the first version, this second form of secularisation manages to suggest that it speaks reasonably in the ethos of modernity in all matters pertaining to inclusion and civil decency, even in matters pertaining to religion. As a consequence, it presents itself as an umpire in a multi-faith society whose authority is based on appeal to transcending values of reason, those established for civil governance as expressed in ideals of equality and dignity. In this form, secularity, not religion is designated as signifying the human essence in its ultimate form. But in dealing with religious claims that stand in contradiction to other rights, this form of secularisation finds its own nemesis.

By giving primacy to sexual rights over the conflicting claims of religion, this form of secularity discloses prejudices seemingly at odds with claims of disinterest and reason. What 'is' becomes replaced by a concern with 'ought', so that what is disinterested becomes decidedly interested and in this sense, both versions of secularisation merge into a common sense of purpose, to treat religion as endemically 'unreasonable' when its speaks against values a civil society wishes to affirm and defend. This second version 'wins' because it flatters society into believing that by deferring to secularity it can preserve the comforts of its endless expansion of sexualisation and its standards of decency, where all are included, where dignity is awarded to all over and above all difference and where, by some divine incantation, tolerance is bestowed as a blessing on all citizens in ways devoid of moral ranking or judgement.

As this form of secularity discounts theological differences, it invents a category of religion that will cover all forms of faith. This is the resource of appeal for the Charity Commissioners, in law and in employment tribunals who have to arbitrate on matters of discrimination. 'Benign

secularisation' presides over the construction of this category and forms the ultimate court of appeal as to what is included or excluded in the definition. The primary accomplishment of this form is to detach religion from its subservient status within a theology and to give it autonomy as a category fit for domestication in a civil order governed by secularising principles.

But in so establishing a category of religion, problems are encountered over generating altruism among the citizens. By affirming the indifference of the individual to the other in the pursuit of rights of identity, the price of secularity emerges: the excess of individualism it relies on to realise its hegemony. The outcome is a crisis over the generation of bonds of solidarity and credible forms of communal affiliation. This represents the issue that eludes advocates of the Big Society. The problem is that only a religion attached to a theology will produce the social glue and forms of involvement in communal identity where each individual has a stake. Surrogate or virtual forms of religion domesticated to the expectations of secularisation do not seem to 'work', as Putnam and Campbell indicate in *American Grace* (2010). All these matters pertain to what belongs to the realms of Durkheim and in that sense have a sociological familiarity, even if the context is rather different. What is new is that similar sentiments are now being expressed from a theological direction.

Secularisation, sociology and 'discernments of the spirits'

In his New Year message, Benedict XVI is right to suggest that the denial of the use or display of religious symbols in the public square represents a thwarting of the social expressions of faith, those that would enable it to flourish, to manifest itself and to generate a contagion of social solidarity in communal forms of worship. He has good grounds for thinking that if religious symbols are neutered, then, there is a risk of future generations losing contact with the priceless spiritual heritage of their countries. It is this detachment from memory, from the rightful means of expending of spiritual capital that poses a danger to Catholicism. The notion of spiritual capital is an extension of Bourdieu's approach to capital, usually conceived in cultural, symbolic and social versions (Verter 2003).

If religious symbols lose their social milieu of use and are cast to the museums as the archaic artefacts of dead beliefs, then it could be the fate of a future generation to be trapped in the ways of seeing ordained in the virtual religions of commodification where the glittering are consecrated as celebrities, new icons are cast and discarded at whim and where pop idols rise and fall with indifference to their fate. With Twitter, Facebook and Google, all seems of fleeting moments exempt from a concentrated gaze. What pertains to the social has become antique, inconvenient and artificial. If the need to ritualise dies, then *both* theology and sociology will mourn its loss. Secularisation is not just about the displacement or disappearance of religion; it signifies something about the state of modernity itself. This accounts for why the collapse of religion can be understood in two different forms: wet and dry.

The most notable wet example derives from Arnold's reflection on the sea of faith, that religion vanished out on the tide and in the ebbs of modernity it is not seen to return. Similarly, one could deploy Bauman's notion of liquid modernity, which would suggest that, like other things, religion has just melted (Bauman 2000). In the other form, modernity is deemed afflicted with a dry rot that causes religious belief to crumble. Reference to modernity generates a fiction that edification in religion is an impossible task in a culture that denies that such upwards constructions can be built on secure foundations. But this version has echoes of the parable of the sower and the seed, which might generate second thoughts about secularity. What is sown might well perish, but, likewise what is planted might also grow. Nature plays tricks; so too does the Divine.

Whatever the case and for whatever reason, perhaps it is not surprising that in *Light of the World,* Benedict should call believers to enter into conflict with secularism, by recognising that they 'are capable of carrying out the discernment of spirits'. He regards this process as 'the real, great task of this hour', his fear being that society might fall into an abyss (Benedict 2010a: 57-58). In a strange way, this seems to invite a sociological response.

Perhaps, this unexpected invitation to this unnamed discipline is not that odd. After all, secularisation has been long embedded in sociology's characterisations of modernity. The traditional

stance of sociology is as an advocate for secularity, but also as a beneficiary of its advance. It is difficult to think of any other discipline whose stewardship is so directly concerned with precluding society from falling into an abyss. But if sociology is to make an alliance, however improbable with a theologically sourced critique of society, it needs to offer its own agenda, one that reflects on the persistence of secularisation and the particular and peculiar forms it takes within modernity. Contrary to expectations, sociology's attitudes to secularisation are deeply equivocal. Bizarrely, at a time when the credibility of secularity has been so advanced in the English mass media as to be beyond scepticism, sociology treats the process with incredulity. Most in sociology think the term is dead (Stark 2000). In the U.K., there are two only well known advocates of secularisation still writing, even though one of them has become aware of doubts on the topic (Bruce 2011). Why has the term been treated with such disdain?

The obvious reason is that the thesis postulated an incompatibility between religion and modernity that was not uniformly pervasive. In Asia, and especially in China and to some extent in the U.S.A., modernity did not realise a decline in religion as the secularisation thesis would suggest. Nor was religion incompatible with politics, as experiences indicate in the Middle East and in Poland, during the Solidarity era. A recent study of world religions suggested that Islam and Judaism were peculiarly immune to secularisation (Joas and Wiegandt 2009). These comparisons suggested that the secularisation process was exceptionally advanced in Europe and most particularly in its Northern countries. If secularisation had a distinctive theological location it was in liberal Protestantism. The situation in England is more complex.

Advocates of the secularisation thesis could take comfort from the long decline in church attendance figures. Yet, the 2001 Census seemed to complicate these assumptions. Under the section on ethnicity, 70% claimed to be Christian, but only 10% or less turned up in Church, a discrepancy famously expressed in the notion of believing without belonging. This suggested that the secularisation thesis contained mixed feelings regarding the sacred and the significance of religion in English society. In some unarticulated and ill-explored way, the responses suggested that Christianity,

notably expressed in Anglicanism, embodied a sense of Englishness, one vivid and complete in a country neither colonised nor invaded. Witnesses to that implicit Christianity abound in law, parliament, cathedrals and churches which give the English a magnificent sense of security in identity and culture. Deference to precedence and tradition, the ventures of the heritage industry render England a desired site for tourist inspection where Christianity is a legacy, but one which the current natives are loath to claim. Somehow, they identify with a genteel Anglican form of Christianity that is brilliant at Christmas, wonderful at choral evensong and unequalled in supplying the state, in its religious moments, with a ceremonial apparatus of unequalled grandeur. These exceptional ascents conceal descents into the fractures of postmodernity which are reflected in a diversity of forms of worship that might be deemed infinite (Spinks 2010). But is the secularisation thesis in both forms pointing to processes that are not peculiar to religion but are characteristic of modernity itself?

It is perhaps ironical that the party which most advanced secularity in English society, the Labour Party has suffered a virtual collapse in its membership. Putman's *Bowling Alone,* based on data relating to the U.S. indicated a fall in membership in voluntary associations, leisure activities and civic associations (Putnam 2000). The problems afflicting religion, of a decline in commitment and voluntary membership might not be peculiar to it but rather could be endemic in the state of modernity itself. These points suggested that the secularisation thesis is based on misleading tenets. But is the thesis even partly right, that religion had virtually disappeared?

Early realisations that religion had not quite disappeared emerged in Kepel's *The Revenge of God*. This French study pointed to the unexpected re-vitalisation of religion. This emerged in the quest for orthodoxy in Christianity, one encapsulated in the slightly otiose term 'fundamentalism', a term also used to denote the rise of Islam in the West (Kepel 1994). Somehow, the cultural map of Europe was changing but, oddly, in ways that suggested it was secularisation which was disappearing, not religion.

Very recently, a realisation of this point emerged in Germany where the term post-secularity was invented to reflect the persistence of religion in the public square. Habermas, Joas and Beck

represent prominent figures in German sociology who have responded to this realisation, however reluctantly, that religion is an unavoidably significant aspect of the culture of modernity as it matures.

Oddly, as Catholicism was waking up to the threat posed by secularisation (in its aggressive forms), Ulrich Beck, the German sociologist, in his new work, *A God of One's Own* was suggesting that 'the collapse of secularization theory is, therefore, of far greater significance than, for example, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc' (2010: 21). His reasons seem quasi-Durkheimian, but with an odd theological twist. Whereas Durkheim asserted the necessity of religion in purely social terms, Beck complemented this stance by suggesting that with the anxieties and risks generated by modernity, the reflexive individual needed to invent a god. This questing for a god/goddess within can be found as an outcome of postmodernity where therapy assisted the nativity (Birch 1996). But Beck is pointing to something newer and wider, a need to turn to religion, for only in that collective affiliation can the individual find the necessary god of comfort and amelioration. Thus, if anything, the need to quest for a religion has increased in modernity and not decreased, as the secularisation thesis would suggest.

Things are in disarray in modernity. Like wreckage, bits and pieces of religion float about on Arnold's sea of faith presenting patterns difficult for the sociologist to discern. An indication of this confusion, one peculiar to that elusive term postmodernity, emerges in regard to the realisation that spirituality could and should be pursued without reference to a religious ambit. This conundrum emerges from an unexpected outcome of the postmodernity in the 1990s: the crisis of the self.

Anxieties over the self coincided with the sociological discovery of the cultural and symbolic significance of the body. The self in reflection in the body sought a holism, an integration that would realise health, or well being. Not surprisingly, these concerns gave rise to what is known as holistic spirituality whose sociological implications are still under consideration (Heelas and Woodhead et.al.2005; Flanagan and Jupp 2007). Critics such as Voas and Bruce might well claim that the hotchpotch of holistic spirituality contained a lot of shopping around in activities that denoted leisure rather than a questing for the sacred (2007; Heelas 2007). Yet, since the birth of the counterculture in

the late 1960s, the need for some form of spiritual nurture was emerging which the Churches, for some mysterious reasons, could not supply. But there was another distracting property to the advance of the secularisation thesis which again points to its illusory basis.

The thesis assumed a decline in the significance of religion, one peculiar to modernity. This contained a comparative assumption that religion had declined from a medieval period, a Golden Age when belief flourished and Catholicism pervaded all aspects of life. Critics of this approach, such as Stark argue that the secularisation thesis thrives on a myth of past piety, a fallacy that religion was all pervasive and embedded in all aspects of medieval life. He suggests that religion in the medieval world had a much more complex existence than advocates of the secularisation thesis admit (Stark 2000: 47-55). What the debate on secularisation masks is that the practice of religion, notably Catholicism, has always been a struggle and that the times for its enactment have seldom been propitious. Yet, for different reasons there is a grain of truth in the responses of these advocates to the medieval world of Catholicism.

There is a melancholy property to modernity, partly induced by the secularity, which signifies that something *has* been lost. Maybe practice rates were not as great as many claim, but what is handed to modernity from the medieval world is a rich amount of symbolic capital, where ritual, symbol and sacramental actions were uniquely fused into a coherent theology whose architectural expression was to be found in the Gothic abbeys and cathedrals. This symbolic and spiritual capital now seems spent in a culture of modernity that lacks the means for its replenishment, hence the way nostalgia takes a different turn to what advocates of the secularisation thesis envisaged. These points give the secularisation thesis an odd twist but turned in an unexpected direction.

The thesis is right, that religion is not re-producing in ways that animate and mobilise as in the medieval world. But instead of celebrating the loss, believers might have a sense of displacement in modernity, of being in exile within it, and where they are forced to inhabit cultural circumstances which are mysteriously infelicitous for the expenditure of symbolic and spiritual capital on the scale accomplished in the medieval world. For some, modernity signifies a fall from the medieval world, a

displacement expressed in the angst of Romanticism and the efforts to replicate the neo-Gothic as modernity matured into alien forms in the Victorian era. Perhaps this accounts for the present, deep seated, academic fascination with the medieval world and its religious accomplishments in architecture, visual culture, ritual, philosophy and above all, its capacity to situate manifestations of the unseen under the sacred canopy, so that what was of earth was fused to heavenly realities in ways which now modernity has cast asunder.

If the secularisation thesis has some persuasiveness, it can be found by reference to the loss of the monopolising powers of Catholicism to bind and to lose in relation to the after-life. Fear of hell formed images of Catholicism that gave it teeth that galvanised the sinful to repent of lives of vice and to undertake careers in the pursuit of virtue. It was not the forces of secularisation that consigned this form of theology to the dustbin of ecclesiastical history. Perdition is now a metaphor of films, not a truth of theology. Somehow, in efforts to modernise and to adjust to the spirit of the age, after Vatican II in the mid-1960s, heaven and hell disappeared from view. They existed as doctrines but became the guilty secret of Catholicism that some might have salvation and that others would be damned. The implications seemed so massive in an age of an eternal present where consumerism gave salvation to all, at a price, and when the multi-faith dialogue and the need for tolerance and pluralism demanded a vigorous back pedalling from such stark Revelations on the after life. These issues get to the heart of the secularisation thesis but in odd ways that link to Benedict's dictatorship of relativism. The issue of which form of Revelation is to be linked to salvation is the crucial and fearful divide between Christianity and Islam and one which pluralism and secularisation conspire to concrete over, given the social conflicts which debate on this question could generate.

Who goes where: the salvation anxieties of sociology

Whilst the concerns of Benedict XVI are with the decline in appeals to the Divine as the ultimate source of morality, there is another side to relativism. It denotes powers to de-contextualise, to neuter ambience and to re-classify its basis. But more importantly, because of the indifference upon which secularisation thrives, transgression of religious sensitivities no longer appal. It is now Islam, not

Catholicism that revolts with vigour against the easy dalliances made by challenged blasphemers who transgress their religious sensibilities. These deeply felt responses reflect the way that Islam now proclaims a vocabulary that makes modernising theologians flinch. It speaks of apostates, converts, martyrs, infidels and blasphemy in ways that render the image of Catholicism pallid.

It used to speak of these matters, but in the interests of assuaging fear, it softened its rhetoric and presents a more benign image to the world, condemning none, and excluding none. The properties that rendered it harsh in proclamation have been curtained off. Of its own volition, Catholicism has removed its teeth – its bite no longer injures. But as this process of accommodation advanced, its powers to witness to something distinctive withered. Somehow, the imperative to be a Catholic have been reduced to being a matter of opinion, one devoid of a mobilising vision of the hereafter. Given to too much loosening, the powers of Catholicism to bind seem to have been neutered in the context of modernity. It would seem that in whatever form and in whatever flattering mode, secularisation has 'won'.

Dawkins and Hitchens, the 'new' atheists have sold their works well, dining out on the notion that religion is evil, divisive and the repository of those too obtuse to notice the stupidity of their plight. With their appeals to science, reason and evidence, they seemed to keep on playing winning cards against religion. Yet, it is seldom noted that their utterances have been received in deep silence by those in the humanities and the social sciences. Their muted responses suggest those of astronomers having to debate with flat earth advocates and feeling that there are more important things to get on with in life. Sociological concerns are with understanding rather than explanation – history is based on inference, imperfectly so on facts. In the 1970s, a battle was won that sociology proceeded by reference to the philosophy of the cultural sciences and not the strictures of the natural sciences. The idea that natural science was the paradigm for all thought, even, or especially in relation to the social, went out the window in sociology long ago. But these atheistic preachers are wrong on a crucial point. Sociology does *not* regard the fate of religion as coterminous with the secularisation.

This is because sociology has its version of religion, one invented to deal with the outcomes of a triumphant secularisation. To follow Durkheim, if there was not a religion, one would have to be invented for, in sociological terms, its functions are indispensable. It is religion which uniquely secures solidarity and supplies a mobilising image of society. In the contemporary world, sociology sees religion as emerging in a bewildering variety of adjectival versions, ranging from the civil, the implicit to vicarious and virtual forms. Behind these differing forms lurks Durkheim, who supplied sociology with a form of religion ingeniously resistant to secularisation but also dependent on its advance in modernity. For him, the issue of belief in God was irrelevant. The outcome of his thesis is ironical. He has supplied a form of religion that is perfectly compatible with atheism. But Durkheim pointed to a curious aspect of sociology's relationship to secularisation. For Comte, as a form of social physics, sociology was conceived of as a handmaiden to the positivist religion he founded to replace a discredited Catholicism, supposedly destroyed in the French Revolution.

If secularisation was abroad in modernity, it offered sociology a poisoned chalice, one where the taste for religion lingered. It was *the* sociological problem, the one that eluded resolution. Sociology found that it could not live with religion, but then, as it surveyed the state of modernity it found it could not live without it. The last great works of Durkheim and Weber were on religion. Likewise, and unexpectedly, Simmel, perhaps the most brilliant of the founders of sociology and the prophet of postmodernity was well versed in theology and wrote extensively over his academic career on religion. Furthermore, Radkau's recent biography of Weber destroys the notion of the simple minded secular sociologist – he was up to his neck in theological struggle. Mysticism and demons formed unusually significant aspects of his struggle to reconcile a quest for order with his primitive erotic urges (2009: 174).

Increasingly, it would seem that sociology's disputes with secularisation relate less to the supposed demise of religion and more to the theological issues the thesis concealed within modernity itself. In ways few wish to recognise, secularisation generates issues that are more than about the withering of religion. Its supposed decline signifies a descent into matters of theology. This is not a

wishful supposition, but a connection which the 'new atheists' have made. For them, the process of secularisation was the mark of progress that denoted the death of a Christian God and to that degree, even in a negative sense, the demise of religion bore theological implications. In this form, secularisation generated the notion that in the culture of modernity belief in a Christian God was not possible. In this regard, Taylor was right: the secularisation thesis signifies the way 'that unbelief has become for many the major default option' (2007:14). Scrutinising unbelief (McLennan 2010) generates a counteracting concern with belief (Flanagan 2010), a debate that is decidedly an unintended consequence of attention being given to secularisation.

Given that religion was such a pervasive aspect of the traditions of sociology, why did the discipline underestimate the significance of secularisation, almost recognising the process, but when it ended in what is known as post-secularisation? An obvious answer might be that in secularising itself, sociology was ill-fitted to track its implications which have grown in significance as modernity matured.

Secularisation was treated as irrelevant in sociology, simply because the discipline assumed that Christianity had vanished and that, as a religion, it was self-evidently incredible. In consequence, both religion and secularisation were sent into a cul-de-sac and parked in the sociology of religion. So domesticated within the sociology of religion, secularisation had an equivocal existence. For Berger (who reversed his position in 1999) and Wilson, its primary advocates, secularisation marked the weakening of the social claims of religion. It was displaced from an institutional nexus, could not credibly impose obligation or generate commitment and was uncoupled from modernity. Pluralism emerged as the handmaiden of secularisation, treating differences as impediments to dialogue, one which was facilitated by a growing sense of indifference to sources of division. Hopes for new beginnings were expressed, operating under the banner of tolerance. Pluralism was affirmed but in ways that ignored its status as a creature of secularisation. In the pursuit of pluralism, often expressed in ecumenical and multi-faith dialogue, an unintended consequence was that matters of difference

were bracketed in ways that accentuated the indifference to distinctions which enabled secularisation to flourish unchecked (Flanagan 1990).

But the vacuum so generated, where organised religion was deemed to have disappeared from the centre of society made space for advocates of the significance of cults and sect, new religious movements as they were euphemistically termed in the 1970s and the 1980s. Most of these were religions of self-improvement, experiments devoted to advance in this world; those directed to the other world and making ascetic claims on their followers were small in number. Concerns with these did not upset the secularisation thesis; rather they confirmed it, that organised religion was irrelevant in the sociology of religion itself.

But that consignment of secularisation to the sociology of religion marked its own marginalisation from the concerns of the wider discipline. As sociology of religion took in the secularisation thesis, thus marking the erosion of religious belief, other movements affecting the discipline were occurring which pointed in the opposite direction. The translations of the Frankfurt School thinkers, such as Adorno, Benjamin and Horkheimer in the 1980s brought to the attention of secularised sociologists in England and North America an unexpected amount of theological baggage attached to their Marxism, whose tags needed to be deciphered. This realisation coincided with the re-centring of sociological interest in culture. Its concerns with the language of symbols, aesthetics and forms of cultural expression, whether in high or low forms, generated issues that complemented the theological insights unexpectedly to be found in the Frankfurt School. These two tributaries never did flow into a river that would flood sociology with matters of theological conjecture. But they did set a basis for the realisation that sociology was closer to the edge of theological speculation that either the practitioners of the discipline or theologians realised. How are these issues to be expressed?

In the 1970s and the 1980s, Weber was understood largely by reference to his concerns with status and class, politics, the state and bureaucracy. But of late a shift has occurred. Increasingly Weber is being interpreted by reference to religion. The obvious notable example is his theory of charisma. But it is in his famous essay ‘Science as a Vocation’ and his two essays on the Protestant

Ethic that matters of theological significance are now being found and these have profound implications for sociology's self-understanding of the secularisation thesis and the unexpected theological issues it generates.

Weber's concerns in the Protestant Ethic were with Calvinism and its elective affinity with capitalism that so denotes modernity and which is so peculiar to the West. The Calvinist suffered from salvation anxiety. Given his theological stance, he was denied the illusory comforts of Catholicism and the enchanting image of the afterlife it affirmed in its spiritual, cultural and symbolic capital. This was a theological form of false consciousness to the Calvinist who sought more definite means for resolving his salvation anxiety. His theological solutions had profound implications for sociology's image of the modernity. It was cast in a dark mantle, where the individual found confirmation for his character in a work ethic that validated his calling to find salvation by reference to this world and not in thrall to the after-life. As Carroll has well shown the thesis was a tract on secularisation and one that came by default to be the normative basis for sociology's inspection of modernity (2007). A particular theology was infused into modernity and sociology intoxicated with its own secularity did not see the distortion. Three important implications emerge.

First, the theology of Catholicism, with its concerns with solace and images of the afterlife was excluded, giving to modernity a fated property of disenchantment, one designated as a consequence of Weber's theological option. In dual manner, the properties of secularisation were read into sociological characterisations of modernity. At the same time and by the same process, Catholicism was disqualified from providing solutions to its ills. Secondly, an awkward question arises. If Protestantism in this pure version became a victim of modernity, did this, mean by inference, that Catholicism had some form of inoculation against the acids of secularity? Thirdly, the thesis was tilted towards disenchantment, conceived of it as a 'de-magicing' of the world. The antidote, enchantment emerges as the domain trait of post-modernity, one that reflected the needs of a maturing modernity.

The secularisation thesis has generated a myth that Catholicism, whether due to disqualification or the inadequacy of its symbolic capital, cannot supply those forms of enchantment which postmodernity so needs. From the Reformation, to the settlements of Westphalia in the mid-17th century, to the French Revolution, the Napoleonic decrees on religion in France and to the godless state of Soviet Russia, 'aggressive secularism' has a long, perfidious history of misappropriations that pay religion the backhanded compliment of plundering its symbolic capital. From these thefts and assaults it might seem that the cauldron of Catholicism is emptied by forces of modernity that deny any prospect of replenishment, yet that strange fate of secularisation intervenes, of finding that the defenestration it has accomplished on the field of culture simply makes space for new seeds to grow and exotic blooms to spring up, all pointing to the paradox that Christianity thrives in the wilderness.

A sense of this strange sprouting arises from a cultural moment of late 2010, one brought into focus by remembrance of what postmodernity sought, but never found, enchantment, and postsecularity caught in the embarrassment that religion persists, that it still has the capacity to animate, to mobilise and quicken the spirit to seek that which the world cannot supply. Those, like the young novices, here present always did baffle the worldly wise. No matter how much their vocation is deconstructed and written off, they persist in coming forward for reasons that were always as inexplicable as the grace they receive to invest in heavenly realities. But who is to notice and appraise these newly planted seeds of faith on the field of culture?

Who sees where? theology, sociology and the authority of discernment

In many respects the arguments secularisation throws up in regard to faith and its place in a culture of modernity in all its maturations are spurious. Ever since the Crucifixion the world was lost; only with the Resurrection can it be found. But this is a theological statement, one with no warrant in the argot of sociology. It is partial, based on faith, divisive in outcome and deeply unsociological, or is it? If science shifts by paradigm, so that the basis of faith moves according to circumstances, can not the same apply to religions such as Catholicism? If sociology is a science, mantled in the humanities, it

cannot but be interested in a fundamental question: why does a social arrangement persist? It is the more interesting question than why one fails, which is the persistent concern of secularity in modernity.

A theological answer in relation to Catholicism is readily available, one that points to Divine Providence. This might be a realm to which the pious sociologist might defer, but in so doing finds reliance is turned back on his or her vocation to discern what in the times, what in the resources of the discipline enables a belief system to prevail. Always social enactments have consequences and even if sociology cannot 'make' faith, it does have peculiar powers to discern its site of manifestation, the properties of inculturation that give rise to its flourishing. The difficulty is that often where theological speculation ends, sociological interventions begin and vice versa. In the climate of modernity and post secularity, both have ended up in an unprecedented symbiosis. A glimmer of this relationship arises in chapter 5 of the *Light of the World.*

Whereas John Paul II imperialised understandings of faith and culture by reference to the primacy of philosophy, something different is going on with Benedict XVI. In his ample treatment of aesthetics, culture and the marketplace of belief, he tilts his theology in a sociological direction. This is not to make a foolish assertion that Benedict XVI is a closet sociologist, rather it is to assert, that unusually, as a theologian he speaks in ways that go to the borders of the discipline and its conceit that it is the gatekeeper of understandings of modernity. This breadth of dialogue so receptive to sociological intervention needs to be understood by reference to a close theological associate of the present pope: Hans Urs von Balthasar. He knew of Simmel and in *Theo-drama* appears a short section on sociology and the self, which for its time was awesomely complete in reference and understanding (1988: 531-544). Sadly, this was never followed up at the time in either discipline. Yet, unwittingly, the recent debate on secularisation between Benedict and Habermas has revived issues surrounding the link between theology and sociology.

It is rightly said that for the vast majority of sociologists Christianity barely exists, the conventions and concerns of the discipline legitimising and affirming that inattention. But Habermas

has shifted the sociological paradigm in a vital way. He has now given 'permission' for religion to be placed on the sociological map (Joas 2008: 105-111). It is not that he has become a believer himself but rather that he realises that religion should be recognised as part of the dialogue of the public square. In the term 'post-secularity', he affirms that religion by the nature of its persistence needs to be recognised and that academics who exercise a grand refusal to do so are perverse. This point is recognised in his dialogue with Benedict XVI (2006). Likewise, Benedict has moved significantly to create a space for sociological interventions favourable to his theological insights. He realises that in modernity a disjunction has occurred between faith and culture and the scapegoats for this rupture are secularisation and the dictatorship of relativism cast in some mysterious unholy symbiosis. There is any irony in this theological recognition of the threats to ecclesial culture posed by relativism.

In sociology, relativism is expressed as a form of uncertainty, not of certainty. If relativism has an image in sociology, it is not one that is dictatorial but rather is of a generator of irresolvable conundrums found in efforts to realise understandings between cultures. This image emerged in debates in anthropology in the 1970s and the 1980s on the translation of incommensurable understandings between contexts, notably those of Western and non-Western primitive societies. In many respects, Bauman's interest in hermeneutics anticipated many of the concerns with understanding which later shaped his explorations of postmodernity (1978). But in these controversies, questions generated by relativism were never directed to the position of religion in sociology, with one notable and ironic exception.

In his little work, *A Rumour of Angels* Berger employed relativity as a means of attacking liberal theologians who were charged with dismantling the sacred canopy, with disenchanting belief and having a discrediting zeal *for* secularisation (1970). Progressive theologians were charged with misreading the world by capitulating to its logic. This generates an uneasy question. In seeking to modernise in the Spirit of Vatican II and in particular by reference to *Gaudium et Spes*, did the Church amplify that the processes of secularisation which it now criticises?

No sociologist endorsed Vatican II during its conception, or after, in terms of its reading of the modern world. The list of those who responded critically in sociology and anthropology is quite startling, for these critics were in the forefront of their disciplines. Their critical asides represented a consensus that something had gone seriously wrong after the Council. They had insufficient interest or capacity to work out if the faults lay in the documents or in the unpropitious times of their reception in the late 1960s. Whatever the case, doubts emerged in a significant article by Isambart, a French sociologist who suggested that a form of internal secularisation was the outcome of the strategy of renewal which was based on recognition of the need to modernise and to open out ecclesial culture to this world (1976). But the outcome was strangely paradoxical.

It was as if by some authoritative theological reading of culture and the exigencies it presented for the planting of faith that the strategy of modernisation took on self-justifying properties which enabled the process of secularisation, now treated with hostility, to seep destructively into ecclesial culture. In its affirmation of the world, the Church became a peculiar victim of symbolic violence, so that its misreadings of culture have become mixed up with the outcomes of secularisation, when in fact, each operates (or should) according to contrasting universes. Countries which most assiduously implemented the clarion call from Vatican II to modernise, notably Ireland, Holland and France, suffered the most from secularisation. They conceded most to forms of modernisation without inspecting their secularising wrappings. As a result, the obligations and commitments to Catholicism unravelled. What were treated as impediments to mission were the very properties sociologists treated as germane to the reproduction of faith, ones that would serve as antidotes to secularisation. It might seem that this validated the secularisation thesis that the threat to Catholicism lay in the culture of modernity. Somehow in its misreading of the perils of modernity, Catholicism inadvertently had rendered the reproduction of faith anomic.

This term signifies the gap between norms of practices and the structures to realise these. It realises a weakening of social bonds. The term seems to express the peculiar gap now facing contemporary Catholicism, between the rise of holistic spirituality and the massive interest in religion

in popular culture, where a middle way eludes of reconciling both to the ends of the reproduction of faith.

Sociologists used to speak of the necessity of middle range theory, one that operated between grounded empiricism and grand theory. The significance of that middle ground relates to the collective basis of ecclesial practice, the necessary arena for the deployment and exercise of the sacramental economy. It is in this realm that something has gone wrong since the Council, a point illustrated by the long decline in use of sacraments of baptism, confirmation, marriage and ordination in Europe and most especially in England. In odd ways, undeclared cultural wars occurred between sociologists and theologians after the Council. A mutual contempt was generated where what liberal theologians affirmed as credible and necessary, those few sociologists who did respond, dismissed as incredible and unnecessary. An example of such a trend emerges over efforts by liberal theologians to propagate sin as in some way 'social' and structured. As Daly has indicated, these characterisations, which pertain to the structuring of virtue and vice, 'were predicated on largely unarticulated social theories' (2011: 252). Apart from trespassing into a terrain of indeterminacy in sociology, the ambiguous link between structure and agency, such theological efforts render personal agency determinate and virtually abolish the notion of free will. Dilemmas over vice and virtue lie at the centre of the human condition where the need to realise good in adversarial circumstances is confronted endemically (Flanagan 2001). These matters of mutual degeneration between liberal theologians and sociologists arose in a plethora of areas after Vatican II.

Thus, Catholics who affirmed tradition were branded as conservatives, as saboteurs of the vision and spirit of Vatican II which sought to make a break with the immediate path and set forth with new beginnings. Yet, in many respects these traditionalists were correct – memory did have its functions, if for no other reason than marking a continuity of identity in a world that was becoming increasingly fragmented, a process encapsulated in the later emergence of postmodernity. The eminent French sociologist of religion, Hervieu-Léger spotted this trend when she suggested that the loosening of the chains of memory in religion amplified processes of secularisation (2000).

In other areas, sociological suspicions were aroused over liberal theological endorsements of passing ideological fashions. Liberation theology was seen as naïve and dangerous. In the case of South America, it was treated as the recruiting sergeant for Pentecostalism. The theological endorsements of feminism, with its claims to inclusiveness have turned out to be deeply divisive as in the case of Anglicanism. There is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that the ordination of women in English Anglicanism has had the slightest effect on the long decline in its church attendance figures. Given the fractures within present Anglicanism, the claims for a mandate for the ordination of women based on inclusiveness seem ludicrous. Somehow, these discarded endorsements of passing ideologies have been myopic, being but surrogate readings of culture, which in sociology seem naïve, partial and deeply counterproductive in their endorsements of fleeting fashions in secular thought.

If there is a crisis in contemporary theology, it lies in its failure to find authoritative and credible means for diagnosing the realisation of faith in culture. It confuses simplistic ideological stances with hardnosed sociological analysis. This is not to suggest that much of sociology is free of these. Much of British sociology is shaped by reference to these. But where sociology differs with theology, is having a sense of tradition of analysis and theoretical formulation that affords ongoing wrestling and correctives that qualify propositions and place them in an ongoing dialogue whose audience is rarely composed of theologians. They might speak in tongues beyond sociological understandings; but sociologists deal in concepts whose subtleties are beyond theological discernments.

The world is increasingly constituted in urban orderings, globalisation and the commodifications of culture it has become surreal, intensified and alien. As theologians seek to relate to that world, they risk misrecognising its virtual basis and the way, in resemblance, it reproduces the symbolic capital of Catholicism. Secularisation ‘naturalises’ and renders conventional these misappropriations whose effects are ironic.

As Catholicism innocently engages with these falsely constituted forms of culture, its theologians who acquiesce to its trends in the pursuit of relevance seem to express in purest form what

Bourdieu termed 'symbolic violence'. This term refers to the self-fulfilling properties of those who exclude themselves from sites of privilege (such as art galleries) on the basis of their unworthiness to enter and to profane the fields. They become the agents of their own marginalisation. Making concessions to a culture flattered by a benign form of secularisation generates a distinctive form of 'symbolic violence' where, in marking the products of its symbolic capital as incredible for the age, the Church manages to marginalise itself. It does the work which the secularisation process cannot do itself.

As the creature of modernity, sociology claimed to 'own' secularisation. But that ownership bred distinctive insights, not only in regard to the pervasiveness and the opacity of secularisation, but also over what theological responses to its basis ought to be. In its inductive formulations of the suffering wrought in modernity, anxiety, individualism, de-spiritualisation, the outcomes of the advance of secularisation, sociology generated theological insights which it had no authority either to postulate or to resolve. The implication is that in some departments in their dealings with culture, theologians were asking the 'wrong' questions. They seemed to be re-casting and re-formulating theological propositions on the basis of misreadings of culture, or rather misdiagnoses of the supposed means to plant faith on the field of culture.

Dreaming in the wilderness: postsecular sociological imaginings

A dialogue did start between theologians and sociologists, notably at Blackfriars, Oxford, in the late 1970s which produced a set of essays of lasting significance (Martin, Mills and Pickering 1980). Unfortunately that dialogue petered out as the participants felt they had nothing more to add. The legacy is that each accused the other of having a 'bad' version of their rival disciplines. With the rise of post-secularity and the realisation of the end of secularisation, a radical re-casting of relationships between the two disciplines cannot but come in a future however distant. In the meantime, sociology seems to wend its own way navigating with its own odd theological formulations. Again, these journeys generate a crucial, if not irresolvable issue over who has the authority to read the link between faith and culture? If sociology could confine its insights to religion then matters would

simple. The difficulty is that of late, sociology's formulations seem to move in a theological direction. Bauman's much re-printed work *Modernity and Holocaust* illustrates this trend (1989).

He was concerned to find a distinctive sociological response to the tragedy of the concentration camps that so cruelly exterminated so many of his fellow Jews. European civilisation rather than German culture was placed in the dock. This civility generated indifference, unfettered curiosity and but also manufacturing processes whose productive ends dealt with death. This process enabled the many to 'normalise' the activities of the camp. The impersonality of this industrialisation of death enabled its workers to act as if the moral issues so generated were not their concerns. Not surprisingly, at the end of the study, the conceptual apparatus of sociology was found to have no means of characterising the immorality of this manufacturing process. The only term fit for use was to be found by reference to theology. It supplied the notion of evil. Admittedly, theology does not a monopoly on its use. Yet, it is in theology that evil finds a place, one cast in opposition to good. That placement gives rise to hope that the latter triumphs over the former. Thus, the term evil, so inconvenient to sociology points to a countervailing if not equally mysterious process, one of ultimate goodness that seems equally inexplicable. The example Bauman moves to confront is of the stranger who lays down his life for another (1989: 205-207).

At the end of his long sociological career, in his last and finest work, *The Art of Life,* Bauman comes to another trait of humanity: love (2008). Again, by no means peculiar to theology, but cast in relation to the highest aspirations of man, love comes to denote that which sociology most seeks to understand: mutuality. Perhaps, it is inevitable that in dealing with matters pertaining to culture and modernity, that sociology should generate theological conundrums which it passes on to theologians to resolve. Again, if such serendipitous appraisals were to denote the relationships between sociology and theology, then all would be simple. By inspecting the sites of the reception of Catholic teachings, sociology might claim to find theological formulations insufficient owing to their misconceptions of the culture they are supposed to address. In sociological responses, these can be seen as unnecessarily soft, accommodative and indeed, as aiding and abetting processes of secularisation without putting

theological stops on their ambitions. This returns to matters raised by Weber whose ghost haunts sociological efforts to characterise modernity.

For him, secularisation formed part of the process of modernity that generated disenchantment – de-magicing. But as indicated earlier, that fate of modernity was contingent on a theological preference for Calvinism which was employed to realise the thesis of the *Protestant Ethic.* Calvinism as it modernised emerged as its own gravedigger. Its theology became secularised and redundant as capitalism took on a life of its own. Theological crutches were no longer required for the capitalist to venture into this newly cast modernity. There is an implication in the thesis, however, that some religions – most especially pure forms of Protestantism – were more prone to secularisation than others. With their stress on individualism and privacy, de-magicing of the world these forms were adorned with the mantle of modernity, its gloomy vesture which betokened the grave concerns of secularisation. But as modernity draws a contrast with postmodernity, in a similar manner the failure of Calvinism forces attention to be given to Catholicism to supply solutions and this happened in the case of Weber. But the model of Catholicism he used was not to be found in contemporary forms, but in versions that characterised medieval culture which he intended to explore, but never did.

Medieval Catholicism greatly influenced Weber and Bourdieu and appeal to it runs as a strand through Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007). Seen through the lens of postmodernity, medieval culture in its religious representations seems filled with 'magic' and enchantment. Perhaps because of their singularity in medieval culture, the images wrought for edification in cathedrals, abbeys and churches fixed the mind on higher things in ways no longer possible in present visual culture. Yet even if the eye is secularised in its ways of seeing, in unprecedented plenitudes, cyberspace, Google and the Internet give witness to the enduring significance of the great themes and dilemmas of humanity in enchanting forms, where narrative, stories and tales are intermingled. Many embody themes replete with theological implication, such as in the case of Harry Potter, *Twilight* and the epic *Lord of the Rings.* Fate, destiny, retribution, and resonances of the afterlife haunt these exemplary productions which shape the imaginative expectations of contemporary culture. What Catholicism displaced, in

the interests of presenting an accommodating face to the world is now re-appropriated to visual culture as regulated under secular and commercial management. It thrives in its productions on what some theologians treat as incredible.

Weber's thesis on the Protestant Ethic exhibits an odd plight, one peculiar to modernity. As capitalism progressed it generated cultural conditions that made its theological borrowings redundant and amongst these was the salvation anxiety that so drove the Calvinist. If secularisation, notably in its benign form has a domain accomplishment, it lies in mitigating this salvation anxiety. It conspires to suggest that the trumpets sounding at the Last Judgement will be laid down, that all will enter heaven and that hell is a figment of a medieval imagination, one which modernity, by fiat of reason has cast aside. It is this dismantling of a sense of the afterlife that is the most lethal outcome of 'benign secularisation'. Its prime accomplishment is to suggest that salvation anxiety is a misplaced neurosis.

After Vatican II, with a Puritan zeal, some liturgists curtained off the reredos (or in some cases demolished them) in some churches as if their manifestations belonged to the 'bad history' of Catholicism. In the interests of deferring to reason, the enchanting properties of Catholicism came to be treated as part of the childhood of theology. Somehow, rightly, or wrongly in the three decades following the Council, much of the symbolic capital of Catholicism was deemed unworthy and unfit for expenditure in modernity. As Berger suggested, the angels were left as a rumour, speaking to the medieval world, but denied outlets for utterance in modernity. Ironically, it would seem that angels have returned with vengeance in holistic spirituality, even though their witness still stands slightly muted in contemporary Catholicism.

In looking at secularisation it is easy to see a trait of fate, an irreversible decline wrought by the advance of modernity. But this would be to miss a crucial point. Religion has a genius for re-invention and new forms of technology facilitate this process. For example, the Internet generates enormous possibilities for the re-invention of religious orders. It permits a re-imaging of vocations, their images, structures and life-styles. Those with a communal life, a structured prayer life and

traditional habits are the beneficiaries of these new avenues for advertisement and in that regard they pioneer forms of resistance to the supposed fates imposed by secularisation. The linkage Benedict XVI makes between secularisation and the dictatorship of relativism might seem to present insurmountable problems for resolution. Sociology offers means of avoiding this pincher like fate given to religion. Via Weber, Bourdieu offers a means of understanding the reproduction of religion, not its deconstruction.

Bourdieu was an agnostic, who treated religion in the spirit of Voltaire. In his sociology of culture he offers a radical contextualisation that converts relativism from a sociological liability into an asset. This approach emerges in his approach to the field. It is the site of struggle for power in the expenditure of cultural and symbolic capital. Fields in culture range from those concerned with art, higher education to photography, to name a few. These sites include those relating to religion.

His notion of power is based on capacities to designate, to deploy symbolic capital in manners of mystery and imagination that delude those lacking habitus (dispositions) to read the hidden properties of the field. Bourdieu bases his notion of the power to discern on Weber's concept of office charisma. It is concerned with the transmission of powers to decipher that inhere in the office and not in the personality. Clearly, the source is sacramental. It is mystification, not clarification that enables forms of culture to reproduce. Unexpectedly, Bourdieu's metaphors are derived from Catholicism, notably in medieval forms of expression. True to recent sociological traditions, he has written two unusually acid essays on what he regards as the deceiving outcomes of Vatican II in relation to the priesthood. In an arbitrary manner, mystifications are treated as conspiratorial, to keep the laity in their place. But these have other ends. Symbols are always polyvalent. Their deciphering might well secure clerical hegemony, but they also permit access to matters of mystery, of Revelation, of refractions of the heavenly, where the spirit is quickened to seek and pray to find. Symbols are after all plastic and pliable and they can be re-cast for purposes of sanctification. Such efforts bear on Simmel's notion of religiosity. Taken back to its original setting, habitus can be treated in terms of dispositions to deploy spiritual and symbolic capital. Such resources available to sociological

understanding take on mysterious powers when blessed in grace to discern and what is seen renders the spectres of secularity phantasmagoria.

In *Sociology in Theology,* secularisation was treated as a form of blindsight (2007). This plight related to the incapacity to name what is seen. To name is to assume, so that without authority, a visual anomie can reign. The indefinite in naming is the child of secularisation; definite stipulations are the antidote. What is required is resistance to modernity not capitulation. A recovery of the creative tensions between this world and the next is to be sought if Catholicism is to flourish in its adjusted circumstances of the present. These are shaped and regulated by reference to structures. Neglect of these in the interests of eradicating boundaries to faith misses the point.

New works are always hazardous. A glimmer of an idea for a book needs two focal points: a title and also an image for the jacket-cover. The matter of the title of the next book was resolved after a long gestation from 1996. Its title was splendidly pretentious: *Sociology at prayer: utterances in the wilderness* emerged from a long period of gestation on the topic, started in 1996. Finding an image fitting for such a magnificent title turned out to be decidedly hazardous. Somehow, a photograph of the pious at prayer seemed irredeemably dull and hardly likely to quicken anybody to purchase the book. Without a jacket cover image, the book could not be written.

Strolling around the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin, a portrait caught the eye and seemed to supply the solution to the image of the book. It was an anonymous French 17th century portrait of John the Baptist, but cast in an unexpected form. Somehow, one expected a portrait of the prophet to present him as an elderly agitator with a staff striding in the wilderness, looking either for followers or honey and locusts. Instead, this portrait portrayed him as a very modern looking young man, muscular, tanned, and decidedly virile, sitting with a purple robe across his waist and a lamb at his feet. He was sitting upright as if startled into anger, his hand pointing vigorously upwards towards the top of the frame of the painting as if he was making a point of protest. In the imagination, as the painting switched from the wall to the jacket cover of the proposed book, one realised what the protest

might be about. He was objecting deeply to being cavalierly de-contextualised from his destined site of witness and re-cast as an illustration for a foolishly titled text. But another thought emerged.

If he inhabited the wilderness of secularity, he might have been portrayed as if sitting in the sauna of modernity, that hothouse where religion melted. His pointing upwards might have signified a warning to ignore the uncertainties of this world and to seek the certainties of the other world. So transposed, the direction of his hand might have reverted to its original intention, to warn of the coming of Christ, not of the first, but in the second. That witness would build on the prophecies of Isaiah, dealing less with the desert and more with the wilderness as a metaphor, one employed to characterise the state of religion in the presumptuous secularity of English society. The message of John the Baptist endures and perhaps it comes again in forms fit for sociological employment where analytical eyes are healed of blindsight.

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