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SECULAR SUBSTITUTES FOR RELIGION IN THE MODERN WORLD

I was asked two years ago to contribute to a discussion in Blagoevgrad of whether secular religion was possible. My immediate reaction was to point out that the term secular religion was an oxymoron. According to the Oxford dictionary the term has a number of meanings of which the main two are "concerned with the affairs of this world, not spiritual or sacred:" and "not concerned with religion or religious belief" Religion on the other hand is "belief in a superhuman controlling power especially in a personal God or Gods entitled to obedience or worship and the expression of this in worship".

Despite this there is now a widespread belief amongst sociologists of religion that the function previously performed by religious groups is now performed by other groups or organisations. In order to understand this it will be useful first to look at the way in which religion is treated by the three great classical sociological theorists Durkheim, Weber and Marx.[1]

Durkheim (1912) makes a basic distinction between the sacred and the profane world. The sacred world for him however turns out to be not a world of gods to be worshipped but rather society itself. Furthermore religious expression always occurs in group activity. There is no religion without a church. It does seem that it is easy from this point of view to see that religion is in its actual definition secular and equally that its functions may be performed by other groups or organisations like the Nation or the Party.

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[1] Teachers of Sociological Theory sometimes refer jokingly to courses based on the work of these three theorists as Trinitarian courses.

Max Weber emphasises the growing trend towards rationality within religion. Historically religions move from other-worldy mysticism to wordly asceticism represented especially by Calvinism (Weber 1993). Moreover there is a close relationship between the growth of rational calculating capitalism and the popular interpretation of the doctrine of predestination. (Weber 1910).

Marx's understanding of religion is clearest in his argument with Feuerbach in the Theses on Feuerbach (Marx and Engels 1962). In the first Thesis Marx surprisingly rejects Feuerbach's materialism and points out that idealism has shown a greater understanding of the notion of human activity. In the Fourth thesis he writes: that Feuerbach's achievement: consists in dissolving the religious world and revealing its secular foundations, but "the chief thing still remains to be accomplished. The fact that the secular foundation lifts itself above itself and fixates itself as an independent empire beyond the clouds can only be explained in terms of the internal division and contradictions of this secular foundation. The latter must be understood in its contradictions and then through the elimination of the contradictions revolutionised in practice. … once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family it must be theoretically criticized and revolutionised in practice".[2]

In practical terms the rule of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union involved the suppression of religion and religious belief in favour of the belief system known as dialectical and historical materialism. Religious beliefs were thought of as the "opium of the people".[3] In organisational terms the Communist Party replaced the organisation of the Church. It also had its own ceremonial displays. These facts made it possible for some sociologists to argue that Communism was the new secular religion.

Religion, however had older roots and continued to exist in all communities. In its simplest form it involved the extension of the bonds of kinship to unite the living and the dead. It was in fact one of the "primordial" bonds between men suggested by Geertz. These were kinship, neighbourhood or territory, shared language and shared religion. (Geertz 1963). But religion develops to include much more besides these elementary feeling of belonging It comes to involve a belief in god or gods who should be worshipped. It suggests a difference between the

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[2] In seeking to understand Marx's ideas about religion and politics I have been greatly helped by Isaiah Berlins book on Marx, (Berlin 1978) by Avinieri's study of his Social and Political Thought, (Avinieri 1971)'s, Sidney Hook's From *Hegel to Marx* (Hook 1950) and Tucker's *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (Tucker 1972a) and his *Marx-Engel's Reader.* (Tucker 1972b). The Theses were written in the spring of 1845 when Marx and Engels were starting on their work, *The German Ideology* Engels appended them to his own work *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* in 1888 (see Marx and Engels 1962).

[3] In fact Marx's reference to the opium of the people is preceded by his description of religion as "the cry of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world".

world as it is and as it should be and asked how human beings might be saved. It offers a diagnosis of the causes of human suffering. And it might form the basis for a moral code. All of these things are justified in terms of some kind of narrative such as is to found in the story of the life of Christ or Mohammed or in the story of the Hindu gods, in the priesthoods which they created, or in subsidiary stories involving the emergence of secondary teachers like the Sikh Gurus. Sociologists who themselves may have no religious beliefs have still to note as an empirical and historical fact that all cultures have such narratives in terms of which their members interpret their own experience.

Religion is not, however to be thought of as. something which pertains only to large groups. Churches break up into sets and individuals may have individual spiritual lives. Bryan Wilson has described some of the varieties of sects amongst Christians in his edited book *Patterns of Sectarianism*, (Wilson 1967). Each of the sects his contributors describe might be thought of as moves towards secularism. But there is also a place for sects like the Humanist Societies which are more definitely secular and for the Society of Friends in which individuals who have had direct individual spiritual experiences come together for Meetings.

It is politics rather than religion which binds human beings together on a larger scale (See Malesevics and Haugaard 2002) and to understand the meaning of this we have to turn to the arguments about nationalism which have gone on in England about the theory of nationalism. The leading figures in this debate are Gellner and Anthony Smith.

Gellner has been the major theorist of the modernising nation state. He sees this as the appropriate form of state in an industrial as contrasted with a traditional society. He describes it as follows: The economy needs both the new type of central culture and the central state and the state probably needs the homogeneous cultural branding of its flock, in a situation in which it cannot rely on largely eroded sub-groups either to police its citizens, or to inspire them with that minimum of moral zeal and social identification without which social life becomes very difficult……The mutual relationship of a culture and a state is something quite new and springs inevitably from the requirements of a modern economy.

Thus all subordinate groups like classes and ethnies give way to the notion of citizenship. There is no place for religions other than the civic religion, and the educational system should be such that individuals learn flexible roles and can be moved from one position to another.

A very different view of the nature of nations is given by Anthony Smith. For him the origin of nations is to found in the formation of "ethnies". These are fairly large groups of individuals bound together by symbols. When these ethnies

become attached to a territory they become nations and this is indeed the origin of nations. Such groups clearly have a quasi-religious nature. (Smith 1981 and 1986). Guibernau has suggested that there can be nations without states (Guibernau 2002). On the other hand a collection of essays edited by Hobsbawm and Ranger suggests that what are claimed to be national traditions have been deliberately invented (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1992).

A new idea which has been applied to the situation of ethnics and of transnational communities is that of "imagined communities" arising from the growth of printed material which is attributed to Benedict Anderson (1991). Anderson's account of the emergence of these communities is actually a very complex one in which he sees it as emerging first in the independence movements of Latin America, but there is no doubt some truth in the view that individuals identify not merely with their existing communities but with those which they imagine. Such identifications are a substitute for religion and may be thought of as being the new secular religion.

During the past five hundred years most people have been conscious of living in not simply in ethnic nations or modern nation state but in empires. In the earlier part of this period this took the form of the establishment of rule by a dominant nation over its neighbours, as was the case in Britain where the English attempted to establish their rule over Wales, Scotland and Ireland. In other cases a nation conquered neighbouring nations or in the case of the West European countries rule over distant nations.

In an ideal and extreme form of empire the imperial power simply extends its rule through establishing its institutions amongst the subordinate people as though they too were subjects of the metropolitan state. Such unified control however is not usually possible. The actual actors who carry out the transformation of the subordinate nation are the soldiers, police, bureaucrats, economic entrepreneurs and missionaries inserted by the metropolitan power.

Whereas the world of the nineteenth an early twentieth century was a world organised and controlled by empires (the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Tsarist and Soviet Communist Empires in East Europe and the overseas empires of Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, Holland and Belgium) the world of the late twentieth century was one in which the old imperial systems had been overthrown either because of their own economic or political weakness or through the resistance and growing power of the subject peoples. At this point the question arises of what types of social bond were likely to arise in the formerly subject areas. What we then see is the emergence of post-colonial nationalism as well as pressure upon the former settler communities and other agents of imperialism. The latter may find themselves in a very difficult situation expelled from their former privileged position yet not acceptable in what they see as their homeland.

Such shake-ups of the structure of former empires form the substance of contemporary politics. Thus we have the new independence of the former countries dominated by Russia such as Bulgaria and Romania and the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. The Balkan area becomes an arena of often-violent ethnic conflict in which new forms of nationalism arise. These forms of nationalism are the substitute for religion or, one may say, constitute the new secular religion there. The matter is complicated by the fact that the different groups do have different religions in the simple sense including Catholic, Orthodox and Islam. Any of these can become the embodiment of the new nationalism. I shall return to the role of Islam in a later section.

A question which is raised in relation to all these groups is whether they are "fundamentalist". Fundamentalist can mean many different things. It may refer to strict adherence to scriptures; it may refer to rigid or fixed forms of behaviour; it may be taken as meaning readiness to use violence. In its different meanings it is applied to Christian groups in the United States or Europe and is commonly applied to Muslim movements. In other papers I have suggested that the term is misleadingly applied to such groups as Jamaa-i-Islami in Pakistan. What should concern us here, however, is that the term is seen as the opposite of flexibility of belief and practice and that this flexibility may sometimes be regarded as a "secular" form of the religion.

All that has been said so far refers to Eastern and Central Europe. The societies there have to deal with post-imperial problems and the forms of nationalist conflict to which they lead. A different set of problems occurs in relation to modern West European societies.

In Western Europe one of the major changes which has occurred during the period since 1945 is the replacement of identification of individuals with classes and class struggle with their identification with citizenship. According to Marshall (1951) individuals in Britain first acquired legal equality, and then political equality through the extension of the franchise. A process was under way after 1945 in which a minimum of social equality was being achieved. This included the determination of wages and working conditions through free collective bargaining, the entitlement of all individuals to at least minimum standards of income during unemployment and ill health as well as minimum standards in housing, health services and the personal social services. Marshall was guided in drawing up this list by the work of Beveridge in the Beveridge Report (Beveridge 1942) and his book *Full Employment in a Free Society*, (Beveridge 1944). The concept of social citizenship implied some sort of Welfare State. One can see here a similarity between this and Gellner's idea of the replacement of class loyalties by a common citizenship.

Marshall, however, did not deal with the question of ethnic minorities. This was a question which was raised by Roy Jenkins the British Home Secretary in an address to a conference of Non-Governmental Organisations arranged by the National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants. Jenkins tried to define the term "integration" for Commonwealth immigrants in 1966 "not as a flattening process of uniformity, coupled with equal opportunity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance. (recorded in Joppke 2002). I have discussed this idea and its relation to Marshall's concept of social citizenship in my book *Ethnic Minorities in the Modern Nation State*, (Rex 1996). It involves a specific view of what is called multiculturalism which has to be distinguished from other forms which do not relate it to the Marshallian conception of Social equality in the Welfare State.[4]

In discussing Jenkins definition I suggested that it implied the coexistence of what I called "two cultural domains". On the one hand there was the civic culture based upon the Welfare State which all individuals had to accept; on the other there were the cultures of the separate ethnic communities who would continue to speak their own languages at home, who would practice their different religions and who would continue to adhere to their own customs[5] and family practices.

In fact the relationship between the two cultural domains is a difficult matter. There are those who allow no place for minority cultures as is the case in the French ideology which while insisting on the rights of all individuals to liberty, equal opportunity and fraternity has no place for the continuation of minority cultures. On the other hand there are those in minority groups who demand more than a limited role for their cultures seeking to practice it in its fullest and seeking to impose it in the public domain. They may be one kind of "fundamentalist".

I shall now turn to the special position of Islam and its place in Western European societies. A recent book edited by Shireen Hunter (Hunter 2002) is entitled *Islam, Europe's Second Religion*, to which I contributed a chapter on Islam in the United Kingdom. In my chapter as in the other chapters of the book it is clear that Islam takes many forms ranging from its "fundamentalist" violent and separatist forms to the notion of Islam as capable of having a modern form. One of the outstanding spokesmen for a modernised form of Islam is Tariq Ramadan who has put the case for this is Europe and America (Ramadan 2003) This is a

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[4]   There are many views of multiculturalism. Some like that of Parekh (2002) talk simply of culture without reference to political rights. Others accept the idea of a variety of cultures and groups which have those cultures but do not regard them as equal (Honeyford 1984).

[5]   The inclusion here of the notion of family practices led to objections by feminists who saw questions of the rights of women as a matter for society at large or for the civic culture. There was, however some misunderstanding here in that spokespeople for the minority communities themselves accepted that while seeking to protect their women and children in a sexually promiscuous consumer society, were prepared to recognize that the oppression of women by men was to be opposed.

continuing and centrally important debate in the modern world. and perhaps may be seen as the secularisation of Islam.

Thus all in all there are many substitutes for religion in the modern world. To speak of them as substitutes is better than referring to them as secular religions.

Summary

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SECULAR SUBSTITUTES FOR RELIGION IN THE MODERN WORLD

This article seeks to consider the ways in which substitutes for religion have been found both through a discussion of the treatment of religion in the classical sociological theories of Weber, Durkheim and Marx and then the way in which in modern societies alternative sets of belief and practices which fulfil the same function as religion have been developed in the Communist and the post-Communist and Western worlds.

Key words: Sociology of Religion. Religious substitutes, Communism and Religion, Religion in Western Politics, Religions without God.

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