

## **Who Is to Say?: Defining and Discerning Secularization in Canadian Christianity**

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According to John's Gospel, Jesus prayed to his Father on behalf of his disciples on the night before his death. A few verses from the account of this prayer may help focus our attention on what has proved to be a slippery problematic indeed, namely, secularization. "They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (John 17:16-18 NRSV).

In David Marshall's ambitious book, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940*,<sup>1</sup> he intends to show (in his own words) that "the dominant trend in Canadian Protestant history from some time during the Victorian era has been the accommodation of the clergy and churches to a society growing more secular, not a march of progress towards the Kingdom of God."<sup>2</sup> He goes on to discuss two of the main denominations in Ontario of the time as, one supposes, indicators of this national Protestant trend. And he finds what he thinks are powerful indicators of this sweeping trend.

The question of whether the church becomes too cosy with the world, whether it sells out its identity and mission to an identity and agenda constructed elsewhere, is a perennial and important one. Answering it requires historical and social scientific analysis. I suggest today, though, that it requires more than that – and probably more than most scholars are prepared, at least *as* scholars, to offer. In brief, I suggest that defining and determining "internal secularization" requires theological

analysis and evaluation as well, and theological judgment is something I understand most scholars of religion to be loathe to undertake in their professional capacities.

### ***I. Secularization: Compared to What and When?***

As I understand them, secularization studies generally have sought to analyze the place of the Christian church in various societies – and, by derivation, of other organized religions in theirs. A classic definition is provided by Peter Berger in his influential study, *The Sacred Canopy*: secularization is “the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.”<sup>3</sup> Originally, this meant the transfer of medieval church lands to the hands of secular rulers. Later we see similar transfers in education, health care, and other institutions. At the intellectual level, ideas themselves become less and less influenced by Christian norms, as Owen Chadwick, for example, has detailed in the European case.<sup>4</sup> Secularization, then, usually has denoted a process in society at large.

Marshall, however, wants us to look *within* some Victorian Canadian churches to see whether they secularize as well. Let us call this “internal secularization.” Indeed, he asserts that they *intentionally* become less Christian and more worldly (cf. Latin *saeculum*) in order to preserve and even increase their influence in a rapidly secularizing culture. He wonders if the churches ironically do not give up more and more of what they distinctively have to offer to the world as they reshape themselves more and more in the world’s mould.

In the case of traditional secularization studies, the task of the scholar is reasonably straightforward, if often difficult. One selects a particular society at a particular instant of time  $T$ , and then studies that society through a particular period of time. At the terminus of this period, as well as at points in between, one compares the influence of religion (let us speak for the rest of this paper particularly of Christianity and the Christian Church) on that society with the original state of affairs at  $T$ . If the society seems less influenced by Christianity and the Church at  $T + n$ , then secularization is taking place. (If society seems *more* influenced by Christianity and the Church at  $T + n$ , then the secularization scholar prudently leaves this period for historians of revival and looks someplace else!)

But what is the scholar of “internal secularization” to do? Perhaps she can follow the same procedure, selecting any time  $T$  and comparing  $T + n$  to look for evidence of departure from the faith. Yet if she tries to do so, she comes up against several versions of one problem.

First, why does she believe that  $T$  is a reliable benchmark for true Christianity (let us call it) from which any change is a sign of secularization? To put this graphically, one might say that the construction of a church building to look like a shopping centre is a sign of greater worldliness than constructing one the way Christians used to build them – “like a church,” we might say. But is Gothic architecture more principally Christian than, say, Bauhaus or postmodern eclecticism? Or is it just older and reminiscent of European cathedrals, while we forget about, say, decidedly non-Christian structures like those on Parliament Hill? And while the floor plan of the “traditional” church might be cross-shaped, historians of architecture recognize that the original floor plan was derived directly from classical culture, namely, the Roman house. Perhaps, then, the church at  $T$  was *more* influenced by its culture than at  $T + n$ , and so cannot serve as this kind of benchmark.

Let me take an example from close to home. Winnipeg is the Mennonite capital of the world, and Mennonites in North America are the darlings of sociologists as they provide wonderful case studies of ethnicity, assimilation, and so on. No one will dispute that most Mennonites today resemble the general Anglophone culture of Canada more than they did when they arrived generations ago. This resemblance could be a betrayal of their Anabaptist distinctives, whether for a generic North American evangelicalism (as some argue) or for an even more generic North American consumerism (as others argue).<sup>5</sup>

Theoretically, though, it could be instead that the difference between then and now is simply Old World versus New World patterns, leaving the question open as to whether Mennonites were more Russian in Russia than they are Canadian in Canada. True, they could be just selling out to the bright lights and blandishments of Winnipeg. But they might also be more authentically Mennonite now in a country in which they enjoy more freedom and prosperity than they did a century ago elsewhere.

Well, maybe our scholar recognizes this problem. Maybe she then grasps the nettle and posits a timeless ideal for Christian churches against which all instantiations are to be measured. This ideal functions as a kind of ecclesiastical North Pole, a point of pristine purity from which any

departure is a step down. But is there such an ideal of the Church? And whence shall such an ideal be derived? Is there even, to use Marshall's examples, an ideal Methodism or Presbyterianism? John Wesley's Methodists were Arminians, but George Whitefield's were Calvinists. The Presbyterians in centuries past, I understand, had what to them were significant disagreements about church-state relations, church order, and other matters, and – as Keith Clifford has shown – they could not agree on the nature of Presbyterianism enough to enter as one body the United Church in 1925.<sup>6</sup>

Our scholar might well reply that all that is being attempted here is a relative judgment, not some final evaluation according to some timeless ideal. She might say that this is an extension, even an inversion, of the traditional secularization study of church and society to see in this case how much the society increasingly influences the church. So in the example before us, Canadian churches in 1940 are being compared with Canadian churches in 1850 to see if they resemble their respective societies more as time goes on.

This seems to be a clear enough task. But to make this amount to secularization, one would have to demonstrate that Canadian *society* itself in 1940 was less Christian than it was in 1850, so that a church that increasingly resembled society in the twentieth century was conforming to a less and less Christian norm. But maybe a greater similarity between church and society means that secularization in the “external” sense is being *reversed*, that the church is shaping the culture so much that the gap between church and society is narrowing. So how does one demonstrate the “Christianness” of a society except by measuring *it* against either (a) a particular historical moment or (b) a timeless ideal of *true* faith? Thus to define and discern “internal secularization” requires a true point of departure. And it is not clear to me that such a point can be found through historical or other academic analysis.

## ***II. What Is It, Anyway?***

If we refer back to our opening Gospel passage, then, it would seem that Marshall would expect Jesus to be disappointed in churches that seemed increasingly to belong to the world and showed less and less evidence of being “set apart” (the root meaning of “sanctify”) in the Christian truth. But the last part of our epigraph quotes Jesus, not as

isolating his disciples from the world, but as sending his disciples into the world. And the model for their being sent into the world is the identity and mission of Jesus himself being sent by God the Father into the world.

Jesus' incarnation has functioned as a guiding metaphor for the Christian Church since apostolic times. And the question of how the church is "in" the world – nay, "sent into" the world in order to serve God's purposes as Jesus did – has prompted a wide range of thought for centuries. No mainstream Christian thinker or group of any stripe has suggested that Christians entirely withdraw from society at large, have nothing to do with it at all. Instead, the question has always been just what relationship the church is to have with its surrounding culture.<sup>7</sup>

Missiologists have joined with historians and sociologists of religion to examine this question of the church and society and have coined a range of terms to describe various ways in which the church intentionally or unintentionally adapts to its environment. "Contextualization," "acculturation," "enculturation," "indigenization," "syncretism" and more all indicate aspects of this complicated issue. The point for us here, though, is simply this: for the church to resemble the society around it is *expected* in the Gospel itself. It is not necessarily secularization. Clearly for the church to survive, it must not be completely antisocial. Clearly for the church to build bridges to others in order to evangelize and serve in other ways, it must adapt its message and media and ministry.

Examples in church history abound, from the apostle Paul adjusting his presentation for the Areopagus to Justin Martyr writing in Platonic cadences; from the medieval Church borrowing hierarchical structures from the Roman Empire to contemporary churches learning from business theory and practice; from Jean de Brébeuf carefully observing Huron customs to Matteo Ricci dressing as a Confucian scholar in China; from William Booth's Salvation Army brass bands to guitar-strumming priests and nuns at post-Vatican II folk masses.

If by "internal secularization" is meant, therefore, simply a church increasingly resembling its surrounding society, then it is not clear to me on historical or other academic grounds why this should be called secularization at all, rather than some other term of adaptation. For the word "secularization" in this context seems to me to be pronounced with a distinct tone of reproach, rather than of value-free scholarly analysis. And it is precisely this tone that leads me to wonder about the entire project of tracing "internal secularization" on strictly academic grounds.

### ***III. The Lord versus the Learned***

I believe, though, that Marshall and others do not mean by secularization simply a resemblance between the church and society. They do not mean even a process by which the church intentionally conforms itself to society. They want to point to churches intentionally conforming to society and thereby – despite even their best intentions – compromising essentials of the faith. That, they would say, is secularization and not mere adaptation. So Marshall quotes the doughty Methodist leader E.H. Dewart as decrying the pressure in his day “to reconcile Christianity with modern culture, by renouncing all that is essential and characteristic of religion.”<sup>8</sup>

What Marshall does for the past, sociologists do for religion today. Among others, Reginald Bibby in Canada and James Hunter in the United States have been widely read as they analyze contemporary religion and go on to pronounce it troubled indeed.<sup>9</sup> I suspect, actually, that inside every historian or sociologist of religion there is a pundit – yea, a *prophet* – busting to get out. But prophecy is not history, or sociology, or any other academic endeavour, however well-informed it may be by scholarship. And this brings us to my main – indeed, my only – point.

It is one thing to pursue secularization studies in the traditional way, trying to trace the waxing and waning influence of religion upon society. It is another thing to attempt to discern whether a church in one era is more faithful than in another. And that other thing is prophecy, the evaluative word of the Lord spoken for the benefit of the church.

One cannot trace “internal secularization,” I am suggesting, without a standard of faithfulness. Such standards are well at hand in theology, and Marshall industriously quotes pastor after preacher after professor of divinity who condemns this or that innovation in the Canadian churches as a departure from the true faith as they understand it. But such judgments are properly the province of theologians, since they alone have such standards. Such judgments are the worthy products of prophets who know the mind of the Lord.

Scholars, however, know only what their studies tell them about human beings. If Marshall wants to say that many Presbyterians were dismayed at some of their fellows choosing Arminianism, then let him talk about heresy and apostasy and conversion in appropriately relative terms. If he wants to say that many clergy disliked revivals because they seemed to compromise this or that tradition, then let him talk about the important

tension between fidelity to the “old-time” gospel and the widespread embrace of new ways of articulating it – and how those new media may well have altered the message in turn.

If he wants to say, however, that Canadians were less and less interested in what he calls “spiritual homilies and references to the supernatural” and more interested in hearing references to “morality and the obligation to create social justice,”<sup>10</sup> then let him consider whether the pastors were being directed by their audiences to a more comprehensive version of Christian mission, to a restatement of authentic Christian priorities that perhaps certain kinds of mid-nineteenth-century orthodoxies had understated. The same might be true of Marshall’s references to foreign missionaries who abandoned their original preoccupation with proselytizing and took up a broader agenda of education, health care, and so on.<sup>11</sup> Instead of these developments being secularization, maybe they are instances of the “whole counsel of God” being opened up to complement the emphases upon correct doctrine and spiritual salvation.<sup>12</sup>

Or maybe not. Perhaps the churches *were* selling out the supernatural to buy attention from an increasingly distracted audience. But pronouncing this development to be “secularization” instead of just “a change” means to pronounce upon its authenticity as the Christian faith. Prophets of the Lord need to be sure about such things and say so. It is their calling. Professors at the Learned, though, may not – and, I am suggesting, in the fulfilment of their own vocation *cannot* – be so sure, and so should leave such judgments to others.

### **Endnotes**

1. David B. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).
2. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 4.
3. Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1969), 107. A still useful introduction to the secularization problematic is David Lyon, *The Steeple’s Shadow: On the Myths and Realities of Secularization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985).
4. Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

5. So the work of Frank Epp, Leo Driedger, Peter Hamm and others.
6. N. Keith Clifford, *The Resistance to Church Union in Canada 1904-1939* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985).
7. The classic study, although widely criticized, is H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951); see also Eric G. Jay, *The Church: Its Changing Image through Twenty Centuries* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1977, 1978).
8. Quoted in Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 4.
9. Reginald W. Bibby, *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Irwin, 1987), and *Unknown Gods: The Ongoing Story of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1993); and James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
10. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 5.
11. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, chapter 4.
12. One is put in mind of the so-called Pietists, whose very name now connotes other-worldly preoccupation but whose early history was one of extensive involvement in German society (see Howard A. Snyder, *Signs of the Spirit: How God Reshapes the Church* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989], especially chapter 3; and Gary R. Sattler, *God's Glory, Neighbour's Good: A Brief Introduction to the Life and Writings of August Hermann Francke* [Chicago: Covenant, 1982]).