

Do we witness a “re-enchantment of the world”?
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I

It has become fairly common among students and observers of social developments to speak of a “re-surgence of religion”. Reference usually is made to the strong public profile of new religious movements in all religious traditions and their increasing impact on the shaping of public policy. One of the first manifestations of this re-surgence was the Islamic revolution in Iran 1979, but in the course of the 1980s similar developments took place in a variety of contexts from the role of the Christian Churches and Christian movements in bringing to an end the communist rule in Eastern Europe, the subsequent revitalization of the Orthodox Christian tradition in Russia and other formerly communist countries in Eastern Europe, the sometimes violent campaigns in India aiming at establishing a social order based on Hindu values, the strong influence of conservative-evangelical circles in shaping the policy of successive US administrations since the presidency of Ronald Regan, to the crucial role that Orthodox Jewish groups and political parties have begun to play in Israeli politics.

Speaking of a “re-surgence of religion” seems to suggest that this is an unexpected development which calls for explanation. It certainly reflects assumptions about the continuing decrease of the role of religion in modern societies, assumptions which were shared by the great majority of socially and politically informed intellectuals. These assumptions are part of a generalized theory about the process of modernization which was said to lead inevitably to secularization in the sense of a decline of religious influence on public life and to the progressive privatization of religion. This theory, the foundations for which were laid by the pioneers of modern sociology Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, has been the uncontested core of modern sociology during much of the 20th century.

Empirically, the thesis that secularization is an inevitable consequence of modernization, seemed to correlate with developments in Europe where the Christian churches over these last 100 years have indeed lost much of their traditional influence in society and where religious practise has largely become privatized. Among sociologists it was of course known that the United States offered a different picture, being the vanguard of the process of modernization but remaining solidly religious at the same time. Generally the situation in the USA was considered to be an exception from the rule and it was further taken for granted that the same processes of secularization in terms of a decline of traditional religions would take place in those parts of the world that were only at the beginning stage of the process of modernization.

For those who shared these assumptions, the developments referred to above constituted indeed an un-expected turn of events. This is also true for many contemporary political leaders whose understanding of politics was shaped by secular rationality and who were committed to defending the secular character of the state against ethno-religious claims. In fact, for them many of the movements referred to above appeared to constitute a fundamental threat to the functioning of a liberal, democratic political system. While they were not necessarily anti-religious, they shared the conviction that religion was essentially a matter of private conviction to be kept away from the public space.

However, over the last 15 years the assumptions underlying the theories of modernization and secularization have been subjected to critical scrutiny. To begin with, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, sociologist from Israel, has raised fundamental questions regarding the assumption that the development of modernity in Europe, beginning with the Renaissance in the 15th and being shaped by the influence of the Protestant reformation and the enlightenment, reflected a quasi normative pattern of historical development that would be repeated in all contexts that had come into contact with the forces of industrialization and had undergone the process of social differentiation. He suggested to distinguish between the institutional, structural and cultural dimensions of modernity and to consider modernity primarily as a cultural project that would lead to different institutional and structural responses depending on the social and historical conditions of the respective context. Thus, he began to introduce the concept of “multiple modernities” as a way to account - a.o. - for the fact that countries shaped by Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or Confucian tradition could accept modern economic and political patterns without losing their profound commitment to religion. Modernization and secularization are not as tightly linked as the general theory had postulated.

Further, the more attention was beginning to be focussed on the so-called “re-surgence” of religion, it became evident that religion had never disappeared from the life-world of people. Some of its traditional collective and institutional expressions had been weakened by the impact of colonialism and subsequent “Westernization”, but people were now turning to religion in order to affirm and defend their identity against the cultural impact of modernization. What is more, closer analysis reveals that the effects of secularization postulated by the theory are largely limited to Europe. Thus, American sociologist José Casanova comes to the conclusion: “From a global historical perspective the series of changes we call secularization evince an internal dynamic unique to a particular form of religious regime, Western Christendom and its Catholic and Protestant derivatives, which has very few parallels in other world religions, or even in the oldest and most traditional forms of Christianity, the Eastern Church.”

Another influential American sociologist, Peter L. Berger, who had earlier been a strong advocate of the secularization theory, has come to the conclusion “that the assumption that we live a secularized world is false. The world today...is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled “secularization theory” is essentially mistaken.” This statement is part of a book edited by Berger under the title “The Desecularization of the World. Resurgent Religion and World Politics” (1999). As with the term “re-surgence of religion” one can debate whether “desecularization” is an adequate description of the changes and developments referred to above. However, it points to the fact that at least some of the theories with which social sciences and also the discourse of social and political elites have been working during these past decades are in need of serious reassessment.

II

Turning to the topical question whether we witness a “re-enchantment of the world” you will now understand why I approached my response with this general introduction about the secularization debate. In fact, the notion of “re-enchantment” refers back to an affirmation by one of the originators of the secularization theory, the German sociologist Max Weber. While Emile Durkheim had attributed the dynamic of secularization to the progressive differentiation of society leading to the emancipation of the fields of politics, economy, law, education and the arts from the traditional unified cultural framework and its normative religious foundations, Max Weber had focussed his investigations on the emergence of the

modern intellectual and cultural pattern with its emphasis on instrumental rationality, the spirit of rational calculation and the expectation of continuing progress through the mastery of the forces and laws of nature. Through his research on the great religious traditions of the world Weber came to the conclusion that it was the link between Greek philosophy and the Jewish-Christian religious dynamic which prepared the ground for the emergence of this unique intellectual and cultural pattern which came to its full expression through the impact of the European enlightenment and the ethical influence of the Protestant reformation.

In a lecture on “Science as a vocation”, delivered in 1919 shortly before his death, Weber summarized his interpretation of this modern form of rationality which has become the foundation of scientific work. In comparing this mentality with traditional approaches to the “world” he speaks of an inevitable process of ‘disenchantment’, since this mentality is based on the conviction “that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service. This above all is what intellectualization means: this process of disenchantment, which has continued to exist in Occidental culture for millennia, and, in general, this ‘progress,’ to which science belongs as a link and motive force.”¹

The term “disenchantment” here is used to mark the fundamental difference of this approach to the world of human existence from that of primal religious traditions for whom the world was influenced and controlled by spirits and super-human powers and where magic was one of the ways to enter into contact with these powers and to avert the influence of evil spirits. Of course, Weber was fully conscious of the fact that with the emergence of the world views represented by the traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Greek philosophy and of Ancient Israel, and especially with the reinterpretation of the transcendent realities in terms of Jewish, Christian and Muslim monotheism, the character of the religious approach to the world had changed fundamentally and could no longer be interpreted in terms of the magical worldview of primal religions. However, his point was to explain that modern science as the clearest expression of the rationalization of the world operates on the conviction that there are no mysterious forces that are beyond human investigation and that cannot be brought under the control of human instrumental mastery.

As a scientist, Weber felt that he could not respond to questions that go beyond the limits of scientific rationality and its technical or practical implications. He observed with profound scepticism the tendency among the young generation of his time to turn away from the cold rationalism of the scientific-technological world view and to try to re-appropriate, e.g in the movement of ‘expressionism’ the non-rational dimensions of the arts and poetry. Considering the youth movements of the time he sees their craving for genuine experience, especially religious experience, but he feels that “this method of emancipation from intellectualism may well bring about the very opposite of what those who take to it conceive as its goal.”

Of course, he respects the human longing for some form of “meaning” of human life, a sense of belonging and recognition that goes beyond the explanations that science can offer. He refers with respect to the Russian writer Leo Tolstoi who for his generation has admitted quite clearly: “Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to the only question important for us: “what shall we do and how shall we live?”” And Weber then continues: “That science does

¹ This and all subsequent quotations in:

http://www.molsci.org/research/publications_pdf/Max_Weber,_Science_a15767A.pdf

not give an answer to this is indisputable. The only question that remains is the sense in which science gives 'no' answer, and whether or not science might yet be of some use to the one who puts the question correctly. ...”

Towards the end of his lecture Weber concludes: “The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world.' Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations. It is not accidental that our greatest art is intimate and not monumental, nor is it accidental that today only within the smallest and intimate circles, in personal human situations, in *pianissimo*, that something is pulsating that corresponds to the prophetic *pneuma*, which in former times swept through the great communities like a firebrand, welding them together.” It should be clear, Weber adds, that genuine prophecy cannot be “produced”, least of all by science. To those who cannot bear “the fate of our times” he recommends to return to the wide open arms of the religious communities, i.e. the churches. But they should be aware of the “intellectual sacrifice” that is involved in embracing a religious conviction. He would respect such a return since, in any case, it “stands higher than the academic prophecy, which does not clearly realize that in the lecture-rooms of the university no other virtue holds but plain intellectual honesty.”

So much for presenting Weber’s thought on the “disenchantment of the world”. In an article published in 2000 the Harvard theologian Francis Schüssler Fiorenza takes issue with Weber’s affirmation that “that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.” He refers to the more recent results of scientific investigation, especially in modern physics, that suggest that there may be “limits to our capacity to ‘know’ and calculate the forces that govern the world. Most of the forces we seek to control do yield to our examination and control, more or less — but current research complicates matters by examining phenomena that simply may not yield to our mastery.” This is of more than purely theoretical interest, because it challenges the basic assumption underlying Weber’s thesis of the inevitable ‘disenchantment of the world’. Schüssler Fiorenza concludes. “We may not be approaching the re-enchantment of the world, but we may be approaching the end of the disenchantment of the world. The world is stranger and holds more possibility than our compartmentalized rationalizations acknowledge. Weber assumes that technical means and calculations will serve human needs more adequately than magical means. This may be true, but Weber must have a limited view of what really is at play in human life. Not all human needs can be served by calculated, technical means. A truly vital religion will certainly not seek to overthrow rationalization, nor will it seek to re-establish a lost world. Instead, a vital religion will link the human desire for ultimate meaning — the ultimate human need — with a rationally disciplined ethic. Above all, it will recognize the need for humility before a world that sets the ultimate limits for us and not we for it.”

III

In order to give a more fully developed answer to the lead question we have to consider further what is meant by “re-enchantment”. For Weber the distinctive characteristic of an “enchanted world” was the notion that the world was inhabited and controlled by spirits and powers that could be made benevolent and benign by way of magic and ritual. In particular, nature was seen not as an object for human mastery but as a living organism, as a partner to be treated with respect by humans. We witness traces of this primal relationship with the natural world among indigenous cultures that speak of “mother nature” or “mother earth” and insist that the viability of the human community ultimately depends on maintaining this intimate

relationship with nature, with the soil, with plants, trees and animals. Indigenous art is full of symbols to express this understanding of human life as intimately bound up with the natural universe and its cyclical movements. Some critical natural scientists like James Lovelock or Fritjof Capra have tried to recapture this world view by way of the “Gaia” hypothesis, referring with this notion to the earth as a living planet on which the living things together with the air, the ocean and the rocks all combine into one. And new discoveries in molecular biology provide us with an insight into the ways in which human life is bound up with all life on earth and thus utterly dependent on the integrity of the ecosystem. We may not be approaching a re-enchantment in the sense of a return to a magical attitude towards the world around us, even though some expressions of new-age thinking seem to come close to it. But the challenge to the culture of rationalism is being articulated not only from within the scientific community but comes in particular from the eco-feminist movement in its fundamental criticism of the dualism between nature and human culture and its exposure of patriarchy, i.e. the hierarchical placement of the male over the female, as the main reason for the broken relationship between the human community and its natural origins. In many ways the challenge that the advocates of creationism or “intelligent design” are directing towards the theory of evolution can be understood as an expression of re-enchantment as well.

Of course, with the daunting ecological crisis, especially with the threat of global warming for the sustainability of the life of the human community and the rapid extinction of living species that have served to maintain the ecological balance through millennia, we have no need to refer to any post-modern theory to understand that the culture of instrumental rationality and of cost-benefit calculation is no longer ensuring “progress” but might indeed have unleashed a self-destructive dynamic. Our economy, our social structures and our life-styles, with their dependency on science-based technology and on the assumptions of rational choice as the way to prosperity, turn out to be non-sustainable in the long run. The present financial and economic crises seem to indicate that the “long run” may be less far away than many had assumed so far. The loss of confidence in the promise that the progress of science and technology would be able to resolve all problems and to “master” the challenges arising from human interference with the delicate balance of the natural world has led to a wide-spread sense of insecurity and uncertainty which has been aggravated by the evident inability or unwillingness of those in leadership responsibility to tackle the issues of glaring inequality, of hunger, poverty and disease among growing numbers of the world’s people. Many studies point to the fact that it is this situation of insecurity and disillusionment with regard to the secular, rationalistic and materialistic culture that has made people turn to religion in their search to find a place of belonging that can offer meaning to their lives. Religious narratives and symbols begin to speak to people more eloquently and convincingly than scientific explanations and prognoses. Less and less they feel that opening themselves to the religious dimension requires an “intellectual sacrifice”. In fact, they begin to discover that religious faith-convictions offer a more “realistic” view of the human condition than does modern science. In any case, the question how faith and reason can be related, which was passionately debated for several generations, has become a focus of new interest by philosophers, scientists and people of religion who do not share Max Weber’s scepticism.

It is against this background that the so-called resurgence of religion takes on a new quality. This is true in particular of the many non-traditional movements that have been formed mostly by lay-people in the different traditions, from Buddhism to Muslim reform movements and to the many such groups in the Catholic Church. The most spectacular development is the spread of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity over the last decades, which has now become the most lively profile of the Christian tradition in the post-modern world. Pentecostal and charismatic communities are not necessarily anti-modernistic, and that is true also for the

Buddhist and Muslim reform movements. They are not advocating a return to a pre-scientific, magical world view. But they seek to re-introduce into their respective cultures a fresh awareness of the spiritual dimension of life in human community.

With their celebration of a direct experience of divine presence through the power of the Holy Spirit the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements point to one of the one of the critical legacies that the Christian tradition has bequeathed on Western modernity, i.e. the total de-sacralization of the world and the cutting of any links between God and the world. It is true that early Christianity maintained and defended the understanding of the world as God's good creation over against the tendencies of Gnostic or Manichean dualism. Such dualism reappears today in the different forms of fundamentalist apocalyptic scenarios that see the world as being doomed to destruction in the final battle between the forces of light and darkness. Over against such visions early Christianity has strongly affirmed that the creator God has entered into a covenantal relationship with his creation and will lead it to its final consummation.

However, the strong anthropocentric orientation of Christian thinking saw humans as the crown of creation. It interpreted the biblical affirmation that the human person has been created in the image and likeness of God in the sense that humans had been endowed by their creator with the capacity for reason and thus been set up to be the masters or co-creators and stewards of creation. Creation thus had been separated from its divine origins and given over into the hands and the responsibility of humans as the space and the basis for human culture to be developed. Creation had been marked by the imprint of divine purpose in the form of the eternal orders of creation, but human reason had the capacity to discern these orders and turn them into tools and instruments for human cultural achievements. These divine orders were first 'secularized' in the encounter with Stoic philosophy into 'natural law' and eventually, through the enlightenment and the emergence of modern science, turned into 'laws of nature' which could be discerned with the powers of human reason and then serve as the basis for human industry and technology. In the mechanistic Newtonian world-view God had become utterly transcendent and removed from the world. It was the deistic image of God as "watch-maker" who had provided his perfect creation with the capacity to function according to its innate laws without any further divine interference. This is the basis of what Max Weber has called the disenchantment of the world.

We thus have to acknowledge that the process of secularization and disenchantment has its roots in the development of the Christian tradition and its particular reception of the Hebrew biblical witness. However, today we begin to re-discover that both the Hebrew Bible and the teachings of the New Testament testify to a broader understanding of God's relationship with the world as God's creation. Certainly, the affirmation of the critical distinction between God as creator and the world as God's creation provided a liberating view of the world over against the sacralization of nature in the various fertility cults. It liberated human life from the sense of utter dependency on the forces of nature and its cyclical dynamic, thus opening perspectives for human history. However, both the Hebrew Bible – especially the Psalms – and the New Testament – especially the letters of the Apostle Paul – affirm that God has not withdrawn from creation but continues to be present within creation through the Spirit nurturing and empowering life. In the Psalms, all of creation, the sea and the rocks, the trees and the animals, participate in praising the creator. The Hebrew Bible is full of images and metaphors of an enchanted world. And even the creation narratives which have for a long time been read as authorization for humane mastery and domination of the world are now being re-discovered as carriers of a strong ecological message which entrusts humanity with the responsibility to care for creation.

One of the strongest images of God's continuing creative presence in the world through the divine spirit is found in Psalm 104: All living beings look to God to give them the food they need. "When you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away your breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground" (V. 28-30). The Spirit is the God's power of creation and the life-force of all creatures. Through the workings of the Spirit in the world God maintains God's creation against the forces of chaos and destruction. And it is in this line that the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans develops his powerful vision of creation "groaning in labour pains" waiting to be set free from bondage to decay to obtain "the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom.8, 18ff). The gift of God's Spirit is in fact an anticipation of that eschatological reality when God's covenant of peace and righteousness with the humanity and all of creation will be consummated. The world was created through the power of the Spirit and it is this same power that continues to transform and prepare the world for its final consummation.

In the contemporary discussion about a Christian response to the ecological crisis this powerful biblical narrative is being re-discovered as a source of inspiration and transformative action. Whether we want to call this a "re-enchantment of the world" I leave to your decision. It certainly opens our eyes to the beauty and the fragility of creation. It can teach us to accept in humility our own finiteness and to unmask the notion of unlimited progress as an ideological narrative that has lost its credibility. It challenges us to acknowledge that we have become captives of accumulation and growth as ends in themselves. Growth for growth's sake is the destructive strategy of the cancer cell. In re-reading the design of God's creation we discover a pattern of growth that is linked to the process of maturation and leads through death to the emergence of new life. In our use of energy and natural resources we begin to re-discover and learn to respect the re-generative powers of creation

My answer to the topical question would thus be similar to the one quoted from Francis Schüssler Fioranza: We witness a profound transformation of human consciousness and the need to move beyond the conditions of a disenchanted world; but we may not approach a genuine "re-enchantment". Once the critical distinction between immanence and transcendence, between God and the world has entered human consciousness, there is no way back to the innocence of the enchanted cosmos of primal traditions. However, the religious and symbolic narratives, not only of the Christian tradition but equally of the other world religions, are beginning to speak more eloquently again today and offer dimensions of meaning challenging the rationalism and materialism of a culture that has lost the critical sense of self-transcendence. The implications of this transformation on our sense of values and of the purpose of human life in community are still being spelled out. There are indications that the attraction and influence of traditionalist, morally conservative or fundamentalist movements might grow and that we might witness even more instances of militant, religiously based identity politics. It will be important to consider these developments not as threat to the maintenance of a secular social and political culture, but as manifestations of the transformation of human consciousness in search of spiritual discernment.

