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# The proliferating sacred: Secularization and postmodernity

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The Proliferating Sacred:

Secularization and Postmodernity


by


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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Religious Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida


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Date of Approval:
November 16, 2007


Keywords:  secularization, postmodern,
cultural criticism, religion, sacred, sports

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**The Proliferating Sacred: Secularization and Postmodernity**

**Donald Surrency**

**ABSTRACT**

When analyzing the role religion plays in contemporary American society, one is forced to address the notion of secularization. This is a term that broadly refers to the marginalization of religious influence in culture and society that began at the outset of the Enlightenment, sometime during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but, as Peter Berger argues, can actually be traced back to the times of the great Israelite prophets who emerged during the Axial Age (800-200 BCE). Throughout the available literature, proponents of the secularization thesis extend the marginalization of religious influence from the societal level to the level of individual consciousness; however, this thesis contends that these analyses appear to be inadequate in describing postmodern culture.

This thesis affirms Lyotard's description of classifying postmodernity as a time exhibiting "incredulity towards the meta-narrative." Thus, this thesis will argue that postmodern culture is not best described as secular. By employing Jacques Ellul's understanding of the sacred and Vincent Pecora's "semantic resonance" of religion, this thesis will provide a more adequate theoretic platform to develop accounts for religion in postmodernity. Through analysis of various deployments of the secularization thesis in the context of Ellul's theory of the proliferating

sacred, the adequacy of the available literature that examines secularization in contemporary society will be evaluated.  On the basis of this evaluation, proposals for reconsideration of the secularization thesis will be offered.

Furthermore, this thesis will locate renditions of the sacred in postmodern society through participation in traditional institutional religion and the proliferation of New Religious Movements by employing a substantive approach.  By taking a functional approach, this thesis will analyze the religious dimensions of sports in contemporary American culture.  It will become evident that whether one understands religion substantively or functionally, it is clear that the sacred in postmodernity appears to be thriving rather than eroding.  This thesis will advocate a phenomenological functional understanding of religion and society and support the astute observation made by Graham Ward in his recent work *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory*, that "Religion is once again haunting the imagination of the West."

## Introduction

When analyzing the role religion plays in contemporary American society, one is forced to address the notion of secularization. This is a term that broadly refers to the marginalization of religious influence in society that began at the outset of the Enlightenment, sometime during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but, as both Weber and Berger argue, can actually be traced back to the times of the great Israelite prophets who emerged during the Axial Age (800-200 BCE).[1] Literature that dealt with the secularization thesis began to become popular during the 1950's and 1960's, but it is still as controversial of a topic today as it was nearly a half century ago. The relevance of secularization is evident by the fact that many works analyzing this process are still in print years after publication, and by the constant release of new texts with either "revised" theories, or counterarguments. Notable scholars, such as Peter Berger, Steve Bruce, Karel Dobbelaere, Rodney Stark and Vincent Pecora can be found as staunch supporters, and as strong critics.

In general, proponents of the secularization thesis argue that secularization is a constant process, in which decline in individual religious participation is made evident by pluralism and a decline in church attendance. On the other hand, critics of the secularization thesis argue that individual religious participation is not in decline, and pluralism is actually evidence of religious resurgence. When analyzing secularization

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[1] Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Anchor: 1967), 110-125.

literature, it becomes evident that proponents of the secularization thesis focus too much on institutional religion (specifically Christianity), while critics of the secularization thesis tend to only understand religion substantively. Moreover, while secularization may effectively describe the role and status of religion in *modernity,*[2] it does not appear to be quite as accurate in its account of religion in *postmodernity*. In fact, as will be elaborated shortly,[3] my thesis will argue that postmodern culture is not best described as secular, rather it is best described as religious.

Modernity is described by Steve Bruce as a time exhibiting "the industrialization of work; the shift from villages to towns and cities; the replacement of the small community by the society; the rise of individualism; the rise of egalitarianism; and the rationalization both of thought and social organization."[4] This seems to be an accurate account of modernity, and in line with this description, for purposes of this thesis, three main features of modernity will be presented, to provide a contrast for three main features of postmodernity.

The first feature of modernity is the establishment of the metanarrative of scientific progress. This is best described by Paul Lakeland when he writes:

> The Enlightenment consolidated belief in the inviolablity of the Cartesian ego, put its faith in human reason as the power of mastery over nature and fate, and thus created the intellectual conditions of the explosion of science and technology— the individual's application of reason in order to subdue nature.[5]

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[2] It is important to note that, in following Meredith McGuire, secularization is one of four different narratives that can describe religion in the modern period. The other three are: religious reorganization, religious individualization, and religious economies. For further reading see Meredith McGuire and James V. Spickard *Religion in the Modern World*.

[3] See page 8.

[4] Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*, (Blackwell Publishing: 2002), 2.

[5] Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity*

The second feature of modernity is a production-based culture system. The Industrial Revolution, which started in Europe, spread throughout much of the West via European colonialism. The guiding concept of western industrialization was production. Inventions such as the flying shuttle, cotton gin, and interchangeable parts are examples of the focus on production during this time period.[6]

The third feature of modernity is the marginalization of religion, or secularization. With the establishment of science and reason as the metanarrative of modernity, the metanarrative of pre-modern society, religion, was marginalized. Many scholars, such as Peter Berger and Steve Bruce, argue that secularization is a concomitant to modernization.[7]

Now that a general understanding of modernity has been established, a description of postmodernity can be offered. While postmodern theory is extremely broad, consisting of a wide array of theories, sometimes contradictory to one another, there do seem to be three features common to most descriptions of postmodernity.

The first feature is the collapse of the metanarrative. A metanarrative is "... an over-arching story which can supposedly account for, explain, or comment upon the validity of all other stories, a universal or absolute set of truths which is supposed to transcend social, institutional, or human limitations."[8] This collapse of metanarratives proves to be a major rupture not just to the modern period, but to all of the epochs that precede modernity. However, it is important to note that the collapse of the

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[6] For further reading on this feature of modernity, see Jean Baudrillard *La societe de consummation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970); Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York, N.Y.: BasicBooks, 1978) and Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991).
[7] For further reading, see Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*( Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books,1967) and Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (Oxford, N.Y.: Oxford Press, 1996)
[8] Glenn Ward, *Teach Yourself Postmodernism*, McGraw Hill: 1997, 171.

metanarrative does not mean the disappearance of metanarratives, it just means they seem to function differently in a social environment.  Rather than functioning as a "sacred canopy" of society as a whole, to use Berger's terminology, the metanarratives become small "canopies" for particular groups or individuals.  The collapse of the metanarrative is especially notable in the case of the metanarratives of science, reason, and nationalism.[9]

The second feature of postmodernity is the shift from the production-based culture to a consumption-based culture system.  This represents a significantly dissimilar worldview than the worldview found in the dominating presence of Industrialization in 19th and early 20th century America.  This fundamental shift in society is affirmed by Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson, and further deployed and examined by Dell deChant.[10]

The third feature of postmodernity is widespread religious resurgence.   This religious resurgence takes on the form of fundamentalism and traditionalism, Pentecostalism, and various New Religious Movements in many parts of the world.  These forms of religion are predicated on a nostalgic, golden age myth that is witnessed on a massive scale in the postmodern period.[11]

All three of these elements are critical, but the theory of metanarratives requires special consideration.  In this regard, Jean-François Lyotard's description of

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[9] For further reading on this feature of postmodernity, see Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* ( Minneapolis, Minnesota: The University of Minnesota, 1984).
[10] For further reading on this feature of postmodernity, see Jean Baudrillard *La societe de consummation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, *or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991); and Dell deChant, *The Sacred Santa: Religious Dimensions of Consumer Culture* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2002).
[11] For further reading on this feature of postmodernity, see Peter Berger (ed), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999; and Rodney Starke and William Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (Los Angelas, California: University of California Press, 1985).

postmodernity is foundational. In his work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard defines the postmodern as "incredulity toward metanarratives."[12] Lyotard argues that prior to the Enlightenment, the metanarrative of western society was religion. From primal and archaic cultures, to 16th century Europe, religion was that set of truths that transcended social limitations. However, the Enlightenment brought on the social sciences and thus it produced faith in an entirely different metanarrative—science.

With the birth of the social sciences, religion was understood as superstitious and pre-scientific. Glenn Ward explains Lyotard's understanding of the metanarrative of science by writing

> between the Enlightenment and the mid-twentieth century, science justified itself by claiming that it needed no justification. That is to say, it took advantage of the idea that its activities were pursued in the name of the timeless metanarratives of progress, emancipation, and knowledge. By appealing in this way to ideas whose meanings are taken to be self-evident and universally agreed, science was able to masquerade as a single project objectively carried out for the good of the human race. Lyotard claims that since around the end of the Second World War, these myths have collapsed.[13]

As a result, it is now difficult to equate scientific rationality with progress, and people have grown suspicious of science just as they had grown suspicious of religion during the Enlightenment. In this context, then, the study of religion in postmodernity is faced with a different cultural situation than the study of religion in modernity. It is on this basis that the fundamental line of inquiry in this thesis will be advanced.

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[12] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (University of Minnesota: 1984), xxiv.

[13] Glenn Ward, 171-172. As a note, Lyotard feels this collapse is largely the result of techno-bureaucratic society. Techno-bureaucracy separates the ends from the means while metanarratives do not. Thus, the techno-bureaucratic society was the social cause of the collapse of the metanarrative, and World War II (with the technical efficiency of Auschwitz and other death camps and the dropping of the atomic bomb) was the psychological realization of this collapse of the metanarrative. It is also important to note that many other theorists agree with Lyotard on this, including, but not limited to: Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Alasdair MacIntyre, Dell deChant, and Darrell Fasching.

Of special note here is the relationship of the collapse of the metanarrative to secularization theory. As will be made evident in Part I, proponents of the secularization thesis (or believers in the secularization dogma) seem to be analyzing religion in modernity. In the modern period, science and its myth of progress was the metanarrative of the West; thus, as a component of society, religion had to answer to science. However, after Auschwitz and Hiroshima, this metanarrative of scientific progress has been called into question, thus the argument that religion must comply with scientific rationality in contemporary society no longer seems plausible. With the metanarrative not functioning as it has previously, there is no longer a single ground on which to base a critique of the various components of society, including religion. This collapse of the metanarrative is quintessential of the postmodern condition; therefore contemporary cultural criticism can no longer strictly rely on science as the only viable grounds for analysis.

The understanding of religion deployed in this analysis of postmodernity is based on the description of religion provided by Dell deChant in *The Sacred Santa: Religious Dimensions of Consumer Culture* (2002). Particularly instructive is deChant's elaboration of Tillich's ultimate concern concept. According to this description, religion imparts a belief in an ultimate power that is reinforced communally through myths and rituals while granting participants a degree of power over material conditions. For participants in religion, all of this works "to supply them with answers to ultimate questions regarding nature and the human condition."[14] This description places emphasis on the community that establishes a meaning-producing order and helps answer questions of ultimate concern. It is important to clarify that when Tillich speaks of ultimate concern, he means

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[14] Dell deChant, *The Sacred Santa: Religious Dimensions of Consumer Culture* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2002), 9-10.

ultimate concern in any form; meaning, ultimate concern may attach itself to something that is not truly ultimate for Tillich's personal theology (such as sports) but it still remains ultimate nonetheless.

Building off of these conceptions, my understanding of religion is as follows: religion imparts a belief in some form of ultimate power (the sacred) that is regularly conveyed to the community by way of myths and rituals while providing answers to questions of ultimate concern—whatever that ultimate concern may be. Thus, religion and the sacred are inherently linked—when one is experiencing the sacred, one is undoubtedly engaging in the religious. Furthermore, this experience of the sacred (which is inherently religious) is an essential part of being human. Humanity should be understood as *homo religiosis*, meaning where society is, religion is, and always has been.

On the basis of this understanding of religion and culture, my thesis will argue that postmodern culture is not best described as secular. By employing Jacques Ellul's understanding of the sacred and Vincent Pecora's "semantic resonance" of religion, this thesis will provide a more adequate theoretic platform to develop accounts for religion in postmodernity. Through analysis of various deployments of the secularization thesis in the context of Ellul's theory of the proliferating sacred, the adequacy of the available literature that examines secularization in contemporary society will be evaluated. On the basis of this evaluation, proposals for reconsideration of the secularization thesis will be offered.

In order to accomplish the aforementioned task, the thesis will be organized in the following manner: following this introduction, the first section will review a variety of

available interpretations of the secularization thesis to provide a sketch of the current status of secularization. This section offers critical assessment of these arguments. The second section positions these interpretations in the context of postmodernity, using Vincent Pecora's modification of Jean-Claude Monod's dialectical understanding of the secularization process. The third section deploys Jacques Ellul's idea of the proliferating sacred to augment Pecora's aforementioned dialectical understanding of secularization and thus offers a more stable foundation for the analysis of religion in the postmodern world. The fourth section presents two examples of such analyses, utilizing both substantive and functional understandings of religion. In presenting these analyses of religion, this thesis will demonstrate how the proliferating sacred can be located in contemporary culture, using either substantive or functional approaches.[15] The focus of this section will be on the proliferation of New Religious Movements and more traditional forms of religion, as well as the religious function of sports. This will be followed by a conclusion addressing the implications of this understanding of religion, secularization, and postmodernity and suggesting how this understanding is already evident in the work of theorists although not explicitly.

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[15] It is important to note that in addition to functional and substantive, Catherine Albanese recognizes that religion can be defined formally too.

**Chapter I- The Limits of the Secularization Process: Macro Not Micro**

Through analysis of the understandings of secularization provided by both the

proponents and critics of the secularization thesis a general description of the

secularization process can be provided and the weaknesses and strengths of both sides of

the secularization debate (the proponents and the critics) can be clarified. In presenting

perspectives from both sides of the secularization debate, this chapter will reveal three

features of secularization that are elemental to this thesis. First, it is inaccurate to

understand secularization as a constant process; second, the secularization process should

not be extended to the individual level; and third, strictly relying on the substantive

approach to religion does not adequately account for the role of religion in postmodern

culture. Thus, this chapter will first provide a general account for secularization, and it

will subsequently present arguments from both proponents and critics of the

secularization thesis to establish the weaknesses on both sides of the debate.

The term secularization and the origin of the thesis can be traced to the work of

Max Weber (1864-1920). It was further developed by Ernst Troeltsch in 1958, and

eventually became one of the most prevalent theories in sociology by the early 1970's.[16]

While the term originally comes from the Latin *sæculum*, meaning both "age or era" and

"the world," it has developed over the centuries to broadly refer to the marginalization of

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[16] William H. Swatos Jr. and Kevin J. Christiano, "Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept" in
William H. Swatos Jr., and Daniel V.A. Olson (ed), *The Secularization Debate*, (Rowman & Littlefield
Publishers, Inc.: 2000),1-20, at 1-2.

religious influence on both society and individuals.  The critical turning point in this shift

in meaning of the term was after the Protestant Reformation in England when the Crown

began to seize the property of monasteries and churches.  This seizing of physical

property from the Church, eventually evolved in the West as the seizing of cultural

property as well.   Before presenting the proponents and critics of the secularization

thesis, it is necessary to provide a standard account of secularization.

For organizational purposes, and following William Swatos, secularization is

understood on two levels.  The first, less theoretical, level of secularization refers to the

separation of church and state.  This level articulates that "people are capable both of

living their lives apart from direct 'interference' on the part of religion and that people

may choose among various religions without suffering civil disabilities."[17]  However, if

this is all that was meant by secularization, then there would be no debate; in fact, as

William Swatos and Kevin Christiano observe, the theory would have never been

advanced as much as it has because "there would also have been far less excitement

about the topic."[18]  When secularization simply refers to the legal separation of church

and state, it is not investigating, it is simply stating facts.  What *is* of interest (especially

to this thesis) and the catalyst for the secularization debate, however, is the second level.

The second level of secularization claims that "in the face of scientific rationality,

religion's influence on all aspects of life—from personal habits to social institutions—is

in dramatic decline."[19] This is the level that extends secularization from the society to the

individual, and it has been, as Swatos argues, "the principle thrust" of secularization

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[17] Ibid, 6.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

theory.[20]  An example can be found in *The Sacred Canopy* by Peter Berger, when he writes

> As there is a secularization of society and culture, so there is a secularization of consciousness.  Put simply, this means that the modern West has produced an increasing number of individuals who look upon the world and their own lives without the benefit of religious interpretations.[21]

The secularization thesis thus views religion as incompatible with the overpowering features of industrialized culture: scientific research, humanistic education, high-technology multinational capitalism and bureaucratic organizational life.[22]  In line with many theories, secularization views religion as a survival of some earlier evolutionary stages of humanity, and is no longer useful.  The secularization thesis takes a parallel view of religion to Sigmund Freud's observation that "Religion would thus be the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity."[23]  It is also important to note that the secularization thesis tends to primarily focuses on the West, and specifically, institutional Christianity in the West.  Moreover, many secularization theorists are analyzing religion as a distinct social institution.

*Proponents*

Now that a standard account of secularization has been provided, the arguments made by the proponents of secularization can be presented.  The first and perhaps most ubiquitous interpretation of secularization is that of Peter Berger in his classic work *The Sacred Canopy* (1967).  In this text, Berger defines secularization as ". . .the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious

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[20] Ibid.
[21] Peter Berger, 108.
[22] William H. Swatos Jr. and Kevin J. Christiano, 7.
[23] Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey and Anna Freud, (Hogarth Press: 1961), 43.

institutions and symbols."[24]   Berger asserts that since individuals "look upon the world and their own lives without the benefits of religious interpretation,"[25] the secularization thesis is accurate.  He goes on to write "When we speak of society and institutions in modern Western history, of course, secularization manifests itself in the evacuation by the Christian Churches of areas previously under their control or influence."[26]  This quote is important to mention, because it is an example of a theorist understanding the lack of Christian control and influence on society as synonymous with secularization.

Another important point Berger makes is "It [secularization] affects the totality of cultural life and of ideation, and may be observed in the decline of religious contents in the arts, in philosophy, in literature and, most important of all, in the rise of science as autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective on the world."[27]  Berger observes secularization at the individual level in his assertion that "individuals. . .look upon the world and their own lives without the benefit of religious interpretations."[28]

According to Berger, "Religious developments originating in the Biblical tradition may be seen as causal factors in the formation of the modern secularized world.  Once formed, however, this world precisely precludes the continuing efficacy of religion as a formative force.  We would contend that here lies the great historical irony in the relation between religion and secularization, an irony that can be graphically put by saying that, historically speaking, Christianity has been its own gravedigger."[29]  The reason this world

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[24] Peter Berger, 107.
[25] Ibid, 108.
[26] Ibid, 107.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid, 108.
[29] Ibid, 128-129.

"precisely precludes the continuing efficacy of religion" is due both to the *entzauberung der welt* described by Max Weber, and the "institutional specialization of religion."[30]

*Entzauberung der welt*, the disenchantment of the world, refers to the process of demythologizing the world, which Berger traces back to the Old Testament. Prior to the Old Testament, "the human world is understood as being embedded in a cosmic order that embraces the entire universe. . .[this world] posits continuity between the empirical and the supra-empirical, between the world of men and the world of the gods."[31] Thus, everything on the human plane is paralleled with the cosmic plane. However, the Old Testament "posits a God who stands *outside* the cosmos, which is his creation but which he confronts and does not permeate."[32] The Old Testament demythologized the universe, by "creating a distinct polarization between the Transcendent God, and man."[33] This led to individual identity, because humans no longer saw themselves as representatives of the mythological cosmos, but as individual humans.

The institutional specialization of religion refers to religion as "an institution specifically concerned with religion in counterposition with all other institutions of society."[34] Berger describes this as being relatively rare in the history of religion. The ramifications of this are explained when Berger writes

> The concentration of religious activities and symbols in *one* institutional sphere, however, *ipso facto* defines the rest of society as 'the world,' as a profane realm at least relatively removed from the jurisdiction of the sacred. The secularizing potential of this could be 'contained' as long as Christendom, with its sensitive balance of the sacred and the profane, existed as a social reality. With the disintegration of this reality, however,

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[30] Ibid, 123.
[31] Ibid, 113.
[32] Ibid, 115.
[33] Ibid, 117.
[34] Ibid, 123.

‘the world’ could all the more rapidly be secularized in that it had already been defined as a realm outside the jurisdiction of the sacred properly speaking.[35] The outcome of this process of secularization, according to Berger, is that “the religious legitimations of the world have lost their plausibility not only for a few intellectuals and other marginal individuals but for broad masses of entire societies.”[36]

A theorist in general agreement with Berger is Steve Bruce. In his work *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (1996), Bruce cites a wide range of sources, from Max Weber to J. Gordon Melton in asserting that “this book is a robust defense of the body of ideas commonly designated the ‘secularization thesis.’”[37] He describes the process of secularization when he writes: “The basic elements of what we conveniently refer to as ‘modernization’ fundamentally altered the place and nature of religious beliefs, practices, and organizations so as to reduce their relevance to the lives of nation-states, social groups, and individuals, roughly in that order.”[38]

Bruce also describes secularization as “the erosion of the supernatural.” [39] He emphatically asserts that secularization did not occur because people have become better educated and less credulous. Instead, the following forces were born of modernization: fragmentation (of society and religion), the eclipse of the community, and rationalization. These factors have expedited the secularization process and made religion, Bruce writes, “no longer a matter of necessity; it is a question of preference.”[40] Thus, for Bruce, secularization is evident in religion being voluntary, no longer obligatory.

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[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid, 124.
[37] Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1996), 6.
[38] Ibid, 1.
[39] Ibid, 25.
[40] Ibid, 46.

What is perhaps most helpful in this text is when Bruce cites and refutes some criticisms of the secularization thesis. The first criticism is the claim that the secularization thesis is merely an ideology; that those who offer versions of it are not actually describing reality but rather trying to justify getting rid of religion. Bruce refutes this by listing examples of proponents of the secularization thesis that are believers such as: David Martin, Bryan Wilson, and Peter Berger.

Bruce also cites a criticism of the secularization thesis as saying that it underestimates the present popularity of religion. He answers this by giving the example of someone who claims to be a keen football fan, but has not been to a game since childhood, and does not watch or read about it. Bruce here reminds the reader that the crux of the secularization thesis is to look at how the medieval religionist practiced, and how widespread this practice was. Then, to look at the contemporary religionist, how he or she practices, and how much less widespread that practice is.[41] While Bruce may offer an effective rebuttal of this particular criticism, he, once again, refers to Christianity as his only example of religion. Bruce argues that church attendance is a valid determinant of religious belief and conviction—he believes that it reveals the religious, or non-religious, consciousness of an individual.

Another important proponent of the secularization thesis is Karel Dobbelaere. Dobbelaere's article "Toward an Integrated Perspective on the Processes Related to the Descriptive Concept of Secularization" (2000) was written with the goal to provide "a more integrated theoretical view of secularization and related processes rather than a

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[41] Bruce measures how the medieval religionist practiced through examining Christian Court records, and he measures how the contemporary religionist practices through survey results, predominantly based on Church attendance.

paradigm, and to stimulate international comparative research."[42]  In this article

Dobbelaere defines secularization as "a process by which the overarching and

transcendent religious system of old is being reduced in a modern functionally

differentiated society to a subsystem alongside other subsystems, losing in this process its

overarching claims over the other subsystems."[43]  This is a particularly good example of

a thinker restricting religion to institutional forms.

When analyzing secularization, Dobbelaere insists that there is a "need to

differentiate between levels of analysis: the macro or societal level, the meso or

subsystem level, and the micro or individual level, suggesting convergences and

divergences between existing theories."[44]  This is an important contribution to

secularization theory, because Dobbelaere incorporates precise categories to evaluate the

secularization process.

On the macro level, Dobbelaere asserts that, quoting Bryan Wilson,

"secularization maintains no more than that religion ceases to be significant in the

working of the social system." [45]  Dobbelaere recognizes, along with Berger, that society

has become a smorgasbord of various institutions, and religion is just one of many.

However, prior to the Protestant Reformation, the other institutions were secondary to the

overarching presence of the Catholic Church.  Whereas the Catholic Church was the

dominant institution in medieval Europe, in the post-Enlightenment West, the Church is

given equal footing at best.

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[42] Karel Dobbelaere, "Toward an Integrated Perspective of the Processes Related to the Descriptive
Concept of Secularization, in William H. Swatos Jr., and Daniel V.A. Olson (ed), *The Secularization
Debate*, (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.: 2000), 21-39, at 21.
[43] Ibid, 24.
[44] Ibid, 22.
[45] Ibid, 24.

Dobbelaere portrays the meso level as being quite pluralistic, consisting of various subsystems, of which religion is just one example.  He describes this when he writes

> . . .pluralization has resulted in a religious market, where different religions either compete for the souls of the people or make agreements not to proselytize, as the Anglican church has agreed with the Catholic Church in Belgium.  Religious pluralism and competition augments the *relativity* of their respective religious messages, or in Berger's terms 'it relativizes their religious contents' their religious message is 'de-objectivated,' and more generally, 'the pluralistic situation . . .*ipso facto* plunges into a crisis of credibility.'[46]

Thus, the meso level of society can be viewed as a bazaar, where religion is offered alongside many other products, giving individuals a variety of options.  With such competition, this "crisis of credibility" transforms religion into a commodity, forcing the institution of religion to establish its plausibility to individuals.

Dobbelaere defines the exemplars of the individual or micro level as "individualization, unbelief, bricolage, and decline in church religiosity, i.e., the unchurching of individuals and the lower church involvement of members."[47]  When religion is just one of many available institutions in society, individuals are given the luxury of choice; thus many are apt to choose an institution other than religion.  This pluralistic setting, according to Dobbelaere, is the precise breeding ground for the secularization process.  Therefore, Dobbelaere avers "Secularization indicates that since religious institutions have lost authority and relevance in society and its subsystems, then, as a consequence of the declining impact of the buttressing organizations, the religious collective consciousness, in the Durkheimian sense, must be changing."[48]

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[46] Ibid, 27.
[47] William H. Swatos Jr. and Kevin J. Christiano, 28.
[48] Ibid, 31.

William Swatos and Kevin Christiano, in "Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept", remark that "The underlying conflict to be resolved with respect to 'secularization' is whether the term can be used in a relatively value-neutral analytic way or whether it inherently carries unsubstantiated value presuppositions."[49]  Meaning, is there any way to settle the debate between scholars, when the term is seemingly a value judgment in and of itself?  Swatos and Christiano assert that secularization is "*based on almost no historical evidence.  Rather than systematic studies of the past*, it draws from the commonsense generalizations about history related to systematic studies of the *present*."[50]

Swatos and Christiano cite the underlying religious myth of the secularization thesis as affirming "in the past, people were significantly more religious than they are today.  That is, that sometime, some place in the past there was a solidary Age of Faith in which 'the world was filled with the sacred.'"[51]  However, Swatos and Christiano cite monasticism in the Medieval period as contrary evidence to the supposed Age of Faith. ". . . monastic life is understood to be other-worldly asceticism, that is *withdrawal* from the *world*.  If the Medieval world was so full of the sacred, why did people want to withdraw from it in such numbers?"[52]

Another problem with secularization is pluralism.  Swatos and Christiano claim that "In many respects, secularization theory was an attempt to account for how *pluralism*

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[49] Ibid, 1.
[50] Ibid, 11.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid, 12.

was reshaping the religious map."[53]  Proponents of secularization, such as Berger, Bruce,

and Dobbelaere, cite the pluralistic nature of Western society as primary support for

secularization.  However, Swatos and Christiano argue that just because people "want

their religion á la carte does not necessarily mean that they are 'less religious.'"[54]  One is

then led to ask, has there never been pluralism in the past?  Swatos and Christiano point

to the *Confessions* of St. Augustine as an example of pluralism in the 5th century CE.

Augustine tried out several belief systems (including Manichaeism and Neo-Platonism)

before settling on Christianity.  However, had Augustine chosen a religion other than

Christianity, would he have been any less religious?  Of course not!  Swatos and

Christiano emphasize that it is sociologically important to understand that "if people

cease to believe that Jesus Christ is God and instead believe that Saytha Sai Baba is God,

no secularization has occurred."[55]  Others, such as Mark Chaves and Phillip Gorski, have

argued that there actually  is no empirical link between pluralism and secularization.

Chaves and Gorski demonstrate, in fact, most social science research that has explored

the connection between pluralism and religious participation has been inconclusive.[56]

Perhaps a bit more pointedly and certainly more sardonically, the next theorist

considered here, Rodney Stark remarks:

> Of course, doctrines change—Aquinas was not Augustine, and both would find
> heresy in the work of Avery Dulles.  But change does not equate with decline!  If
> next year everyone in Canada became a pious Hindu this could have many
> interpretations, but secularization would not be among them.  Indeed, what is
> needed is a body of theory to explain religious *variation*, to tell us when and why

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[53] Ibid, 13.
[54] Ibid, 14.
[55] William H. Swatos Jr. and Kevin J. Christiano, 15.
[56] Mark Chaves and Phillip S. Gorski, "Religious Pluralism and Religious Participation" Annual Review of Sociology, 2001.  Chaves and Gorski point out that a "general law" describing the pluralism/religious participation relationship "would have to be formulated with so many exceptions and qualifications that its claim to generality or lawfulness would be empty."

various aspects of religiousness rise and fall, or are stable.  In that regard, the secularization theory is as useless as a hotel elevator that only goes down.[57]

Since the 1980's, Rodney Stark has been one of the staunchest critics of the secularization thesis.  Citing thinkers such as Thomas Woolston, Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Engels, and A.E. Crawley, whose predictions of the end of religion serve as the earliest forms of the secularization thesis, Stark notes that "From the beginning, social scientists have celebrated the secularization thesis despite the fact that it never was consistent with empirical reality."[58]  In "Secularization, R.I.P.," he notes five characteristics common to secularization theory.

The first characteristic is that "modernization is the causal engine dragging the gods into retirement.  That is, the secularization doctrine has always nestled within the broader theoretical framework of modernization theories, it being proposed that as industrialization, urbanization, and rationalization increase, religiousness *must* decrease."[59]

The second characteristic is that "they are not directed primarily toward institutional differentiation—they do not merely predict the separation of church and state or a decline in the direct, secular authority of church leaders. Their primary concern is with *individual* piety, especially *belief*."[60]  However, Stark does not find a decline in individual religious belief, and he feels that this has caused secularization to be defined in several ways, permitting some proponents of the thesis to "shift definitions as needed in

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[57] Rodney Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P." in in William H. Swatos Jr., and Daniel V.A. Olson (ed), *The Secularization Debate*, (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.: 2000), 41-66, at 61.
[58] Ibid, 41.
[59] Ibid, 43.
[60] Ibid.

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order to escape inconvenient facts."[61]  While secularization theorists will often claim that

they are only speaking of secularization on the institutional level, Stark argues that

secularization on the individual level has been the driving force behind the theories.

> At issue is not a narrow prediction concerning a rowing separation of church and
> state.  Instead, as we have seen, from the start the prophets of secularization have
> stressed personal piety, and to the extent that they expressed macro interests it has
> been to claim that they are so linked that a decline in one necessitates a decline in
> the other.  Thus, if the churches lose power, personal piety will fade; if personal
> piety fades, the churches will lose power.[62]

Here, Stark questions the positive correlation between secularization on the

societal/macro level and individual/micro level.  Stark actually argues that pluralism (or

macro level secularization) results in religious revival on the individual level.[63]

The third characteristic of secularization theory is that "implicit in all versions and

explicit in most, is the claim that of all aspects of modernization, it is science that has the

most deadly implications for religion."[64]

The fourth characteristic is that secularization is "regarded as an absorbing state—

that once achieved it is irreversible, instilling mystical immunity."[65]

The fifth and final characteristic of secularization is that while theories focus on

Christendom, all leading proponents apply it globally.  Meaning, as Stark so poignantly

remarks, "Allah is fated to join Jehovah as only 'an interesting historical memory.'

However, no one has bothered to explain this to Muslims."[66]

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[61] Ibid, 43.
[62] Ibid 44.
[63] See Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge *The Future of Religion* (1985).
[64] Rodney Stark, 45.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.

It is now appropriate to return to Peter Berger, the present-day Peter Berger that is. In recent years he has had a change of mind, and refuted his argument in *The Sacred Canopy* that was presented earlier in this thesis. In *The Desecularization of the World* (1999), Berger writes "The world today, with some exceptions to which I will come presently, is as furiously religious as ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled 'secularization' theory is essentially mistaken. . .That idea [secularization] is simple. Modernization necessarily leads to a decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals. And it is precisely this key idea that has turned out to be wrong."[67] This change of mind is important to note. In his classic work, *The Sacred Canopy*, Berger was analyzing the modern world, however, in his more recent work he is, as this thesis is doing, he is analyzing the postmodern world. Along with this book, Berger wrote a paper and presented it at a conference at Georgetown Univeristy in the summer of 2005, and in this paper he wrote "It is not so much the *what* as the *how* of religious belief that changes."[68] This notion is important to understand. Just because the influence of a *certain* religion has declined, it does not mean that religion in general has declined.

Before moving to Part II a brief recap can be offered. In short, secularization can be understood as the marginalization of religious influence in society and individual consciousness. As revealed here, with evidence of religious resurgence in the West (as well as other parts of the world) secularization should not be understood as a constant process (as the proponents understand it). However, just because the process does not

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[67] Peter Berger, *The Desecularization of the World*, (Washington DC: 1999), 2-3.
[68] Peter Berger, *Pluralism, Protestantization, and the Voluntary Principle*, Discussion draft for conference sponsored by Georgetown University in April of 2005.

appear to be linear, with religious participation in a constant state of decline, the secularization thesis should not be abandoned as Stark et al (the critics) have argued. Also revealed here is the extension of secularization to the individual/micro level is highly contested, therefore there is little or no proof that individual religious participation has declined significantly.  However, as will be revealed shortly, strictly relying on the substantive approach to religion (as most of the critics and proponents of secularization) does not adequately account for the role of religion in postmodern culture.  While these three features of secularization may lead one to call for an end to the secularization thesis, I propose that there is a middle ground in this secularization debate which preserves the necessary and helpful features of the secularization thesis while allowing for the modification of weaker elements.  Part II will present a work from this middle ground— Vincent Pecora's *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, & Modernity* (2006).

## Chapter II- Secularization: A Dialectical Understanding

By providing a middle ground in the secularization debate, the theoretic platform that this thesis proposes to account for religion in postmodernity can begin to be constructed. In this chapter, Vincent Pecora's understanding of the secularization process as dialectical and his notion of the "semantic resonance" of religion will be presented as foundational elements in the platform this thesis seeks to construct. Pecora recognizes that secularization is a process that constantly doubles back on itself, thus religion is not in a constant state of decline; but instead, it is preserved by the very process (secularization) that supposedly limits it. In fact, the semantic resonance of religion continues to be present in what is typically understood as a secular culture.

*Semantic Resonance*

Vincent Pecora's *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity* (2006) supplies the necessary middle ground for analyzing secularization in the postmodern setting. This text offers what is, perhaps, the best available review of philosophical literature, without ignoring the sociological literature, on secularization, and provides a novel understanding of the theory. After Pecora briefly reviews various understandings of secularization, he writes "It may come as no surprise that the empirical study of religion and secularization in the West is itself a mass of contradictions and opposed perspectives."[69] In bringing these contradictions to light, he offers a description,

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[69] Vincent Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism*, (University of Chicago: 2006), 7.

derived from Jean-Claude Monod, which appears to be the best available understanding

of secularization.

> In effect. . .if secularization signifies the *retreat of religion* as a dominant sphere
> and the reconstruction of institutions on a rational basis, it accords well with two
> fundamental assumptions about modernity, which Monod adapts from Reinhart
> Koselleck: 'the belief that the present epoch opens a new perspective without
> precedent, and the belief according to which men are capable, and more and more
> capable, of 'making' history.' In this sense, secularization becomes one of the
> 'guiding-concepts' of modern times.

This understanding of secularization is consistent the position of the proponents of

secularization. It is essentially describing secularization, to use Dobbelaere's typology,

on the macro level. Both proponents and critics of secularization seem to view

secularization in this same light. However, it is the second part of Pecora's

understanding of secularization, that offers departure from the standard accounts, which

is of importance to this thesis. Pecora continues his description of secularization when he

writes:

> On the other hand, 'if secularization designates essentially a transfer having
> consisted of schemes and models elaborated in the field of religion; if religion
> thus continues to nourish modernity without its knowledge, the theory of
> secularization constitutes a putting into question of the two fundamental modern
> beliefs. Modernity would live only as something consisting of a bequest and
> inheritance, despite the negations and illusions of auto-foundation. Modernity
> would then not be a new time, founded and conscious of its foundations, but
> would be only the moment where there is effected a change of plan, a *'worlding'*
> *of Christianity*.'"[70]

This "worlding of Christianity" that Pecora presents here is imperative to understanding

his view of secularization. Pecora explains that through the process of secularization "the

religious is both negated and variously rediscovered in the idea of the social . . . [and] the

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[70] Ibid, 5.

process of secularization in the West paradoxically may have enabled the making sacred of 'society.'"[71]

This offers a different understanding of secularization than the other secularization theorists. It is in this remark where Pecora makes the observation that religion is still resonant in contemporary times, and that, in fact, it has always been. He borrows Jürgen Habermas' concept of semantic contents and refers to this as "semantic resonance."[72] In explaining this notion, Habermas writes "As long as religious language bears with itself, indeed, unrelinquishable semantic contents [resonance] which elude (for the moment?) the expressive power of a philosophical language and still await translation into a discourse that gives reasons for its positions, philosophy, even in its postmetaphysical form, will neither be able to replace nor repress religion."[73] Thus, just as the implentation of quotas was meant to counter racism but still contains within in it categories inherently racist, secularization limits and marginalizes religion, but actually preserves it (in the form of semantic resonance) in the process. This semantic resonance of religion is traced by Pecora throughout the post-Enlightenment intellectual history of the West. He does this by reviewing thinkers including, but not limited to the following: Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Alasdair MacIntyre, Matthew Arnold, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Siegried Kracauer, and Emile Durkheim to demonstrate that, even with the vast differences in theories, all of these theorists have a religious resonance in their work, despite their commitment to secular ideals.

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[71] Ibid, 24.
[72] Ibid
[73] Jürgen Habermas, *Nachmetaphysiches Denken*, (Frankfurt and Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 60. Translated by Pecora.

For Pecora, the most striking example of this semantic resonance of religion is found in Virginia Woolf, a British novelist who is considered by many one of the foremost modernist literary figures of the twentieth century, and the Bloomsbury Group. Virginia Woolf's great-grandfather and grandfather were members of an Anglican group of social reformers known as the Clapham Sect. However, Virginia Woolf and a few of her siblings were members of the controversial Bloomsbury Group—a group of atheists with antagonist attitudes toward religion. Pecora traces this road from the Clapham Sect to the Bloomsbury Group in an attempt to illustrate that even the most secular parts of culture (the Bloomsbury Group) maintain a semantic resonance of religion. Pecora understands the Bloomsbury Group to be the epitome of the dialectical process of secularization. While the group appears to be the quintessential example of secularity, it cannot escape from the Puritanical cultural milieu it emerged out of. In fact, John Maynard Keynes, a member of the Bloomsbury Group, described the group in a memoir as closely following "the English puritan tradition."[74] Therefore, Woolf's "secular" viewpoints and lifestyle were "powerfully intertwined with the cultural narrative of her (largely disavowed) religious tradition."[75] Meaning, even what is initially understood as being profoundly secular contains a resonance of religion—a resonance that never is removed. For the Bloomsbury Group this resonance was the worldview of social reform and criticism of the ruling class that was similar to the Christian Clapham Sect.

It is important to note that this is an example of Pecora's elitist tendencies. By only locating this semantic resonance of religion in the scholarly community, and the

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[74] John Maynard Keynes, *Two Memoirs* 84-87, quoted in Noel Annan, *Leslie Stephen: The Godless Victorian* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson: 1984), 160.
[75] Pecora, 168.

Bloomsbury Group, he never seems to make clear the empirical connection between the resonance of religion among the elite, and the presence of this semantic resonance of religion among the masses. Along with this, Pecora does not propose a way to measure the semantic resonance of religion, apart from textual analysis (which is indicative of his postmodernist tendencies). With this method of textual analysis, he does not offer justification for his selection process, in terms of why he chose these particular theorists, as opposed to presenting others.

Important to Pecora's understanding of secularization, is his recognition that the persistence of religion is consistent with the secularization process; but in a way that seems entirely different from many of the proponents of secularization. Rather than giving attention to demographic data and related disputes or focusing on traditional or institutional embodiments of religion, which is typical of studies of secularization,[76] Pecora recognizes enduring substrata of religious ideas not easily recognized in institutional forms of religion or not easily quantifiable via demography. For him, the key is an enduring cultural consciousness of religion, which functions somewhat like a sub-world or secondary cultural base.[77] He refers to this enduring consciousness of religion, or sub-world, when he writes:

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[76] Rodney Stark, Karel Dobbelaere, Liliane Voye, Peter Berger, Steve Bruce and Grace Davie are just some examples of theorists focusing on demographic data, specifically church attendance, as support for or against the secularization thesis. Rodney Stark and Lorne Dawson are examples of theorists who analyze traditional embodiments of religion such as New Religious Movements in the context of secularization. Pecora's understanding of secularization appears novel, because he completely avoids survey data in his analysis.

[77] It is important to note that this is similar to James Beckford's analysis of social movements. Beckford sees many ideas and values that originated in the teachings of religious institutions being adopted by contemporary social movements. These social movement actors may not themselves be affiliated with religious institutions, but religious ideas and values, or in Pecora's terms "semantic resonance" is found in new manifestations. Pecora is different, perhaps because of his elitist tendencies, because he is finding textual resonance of religion, while Beckford is finding actual social resonance of religion. Pecora is also

> The will to secular rationality in modern culture thus preserves the imaginative rudiments of its religious traditions, not merely as a kind of strategic resistance to the irrationality of capitalism's 'iron cage' and its demand that everything have a price, that all things be treated equivalently as no more than commodities, but because secularism, in constantly redefining and reenergizing itself by reference to outworn religious traditions, is finally a way of preserving, at a more rarified and rationally persuasive level of awareness, precisely what it seeks to destroy.[78]

This understanding is generally at odds with the bulk of secularization literature that limits the interpretation of religion to Christianity and institutional forms of religion and seems preoccupied with issues related to demographic data. This is important, because it sets Pecora apart from the aforementioned critics *and* proponents of secularization.

For example, when critics, such as Stark, find religion persisting, they immediately see it as counting against the secularization thesis. However, Pecora finds the semantic resonance of religion to be completely compatible with the secularization process. Conversely, proponents of the secularization fail to recognize the semantic resonance of religion in the postmodern setting. Apparently this is because the existence of religion in any form, including semantic resonance, would count against secularization.[79]

Thus, Pecora's position on semantic resonance stands in distinction from both dominant positions on secularization. Perhaps the key reason for Pecora's uniqueness in this regard is that he has added one additional measure that can be used to examine whether secularization is truly occurring, and that measure is semantic resonance. While some scholars examine secularization by analyzing institutional differentiation, others

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different from Beckford because of his outright resistence to the use of demographic data. For further reading see James Beckford *Religion and Advanced Industrial Society*, (London: 1989).
[78] Ibid, 20.
[79] This denial of any significance in religious expressions is found in several sources, most notably Steve Bruce.

through trends in acceptance of religious authority, and others by analyzing the privatization of religion, Pecora is asserting that it is equally important to examine the semantic resonance of religion. Examining this semantic resonance can allow scholars to analyze the "imaginative rudiments" of religious traditions.

Absent Pecora's nuanced approach, any evidence of persistent religion causes critics to call for a rejection of the secularization thesis, and proponents to question the authenticity of survey results. However, when the study of religion is shifted from strictly quantitative grounds, which seems to dominate secularization literature, and moved to a broader cultural analysis, the presence of religion becomes more recognizable. To use a hackneyed expression, but one which in this case is remarkably apt, this is a case of not seeing the forest for the trees. While secularization theorists continually devote their focus to survey results regarding Church attendance and participation, they completely miss the profound manifestation of religion all around them.

*Verwindung*

To further explain the seemingly contradictory nature of the secularization process, Pecora borrows a concept from Martin Heidegger and suggests that secularization should be understood as *Verwindung*, a distortion. He describes this *Verwindung* as ". . . an extended, errant process of recollection, transformation, convalescence and emancipation, a process that is constantly doubling back upon itself."[80] Thus, because of the constant doubling back on itself, religion is both marginalized and reinforced at the same time and the relationship between religion and

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[80] Ibid, 21-22.

secularization should be understood as dialectical, not oppositional. This, again, sets

Pecora apart from both proponents and critics of secularization. Proponents, such as

Bruce, argue that religion is in a constant state of decline, while Pecora notes that due to

the dialectical process of secularization, religion is actually necessary and indispensable

to the process of secularization. On the other hand, critics, such as Rodney Stark, argue

that the process of secularization is cyclical, and human history has been marked by

cycles of religious decline and revival.[81]

To better explicate the distorting character of the secularization process, Pecora

writes,

> . . . secularization can be considered simultaneously curative and distorting in the
> sense that its consequences can be understood to include both an enlightened
> liberation from dogma and an opening up of certain collective possibilities—
> redemptive revolution, nationalism, imperialism, racism—that could not have
> attained their full and often destructive potential otherwise.[82]

This interpretation of secularization seems to be an adequate cultural critique, and, with

certain modifications, as will be offered in the following chapter, it may well serve to

even more accurately portray contemporary American society.

As has been presented in this chapter, Pecora recognizes that secularization is a

process that constantly doubles back on itself, thus religion is not in a constant state of

decline; but instead, it is preserved by the very process (secularization) that supposedly

limits it. In fact, the semantic resonance of religion continues to be present in what is

typically understood as a secular culture. However, this semantic resonance of religion

seems to be located only in the elite of society. Therefore, to adequately account for

religion throughout culture, Pecora needs to be modified.

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[81] Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion*, (University of California Press: 1985), 3.
[82] Vincent Pecora, 22.

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As a basis for this proposed modification of Pecora, it is important to note his specific understanding of religion as well. In the introduction of his text he writes ". . . it is clear that a more functional definition of religion, of the kind pioneered by Emile Durkheim, which focuses on the social cohesion religion provides rather than on the depth or efficacy of specific beliefs, may allow for a broader and richer understanding of the persistence of religious motifs in nominally secular social life."[83] It is precisely this type of understanding that Jacques Ellul provides in his work.

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[83] Ibid, 17.

**Chapter III- The Proliferating Sacred**

Jacques Ellul's observation that "the sacred is proliferating around us"[84] can be

used to supplement Pecora's idea of the "semantic resonance" of religion. Where Pecora

finds the persistence of religion in the elite, Ellul observes the sacred throughout society.

Although Ellul draws distinctions between the sacred and religion (as will be presented in

the next chapter), as presented at the beginning of this analysis, I view the sacred and

religion as inherently linked—where one is, so the other is as well. Therefore, this

chapter explores Ellul's notion of the proliferating sacred to further construct a theoretic

platform, which began by accounting for religion as mere "semantic resonance" but will

end by locating religion "all around us."

Perhaps one of the most prolific writers in the twentieth century was the French

sociologist and theologian Jacques Ellul. His work is especially helpful in the study of

secularization. Of his many works, perhaps one of the most intriguing is *The New

Demons* (1975). In this work Jacques Ellul offers an understanding of religion which

appears to be quite similar to Pecora's. Ellul writes that

> Without the slightest intention of falling back on the idea that religion is inherent
> in man's nature, without basing anything at all on a nature of man, we can at least
> note that religion has always fulfilled an essential function, and we can raise the
> question whether, in that case, it is not inexhaustibly renewed. Religion is not an
> 'ideology' in the Marxist sense, nor is it a gratuitous and superficial activity.
> Since it is a collective expression and manifestation, it is obviously sociological,
> but to see it merely as a 'historical stage of humanity' or as a 'reflection-cloak-
> justification' of man's actual condition is childish. Religion has the most

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[84] Jacques Ellul, 65.

profound and seemingly ineradicable roots in the very being of man. Experience shows it to be ineradicable, because the greatest attempts to destroy religion only result in new religiousness.[85]

This relates to Pecora's understanding secularization as *verwindung*—the process is constantly doubling back on itself. Pecora's observation that religion is simultaneously being marginalized and reinforced seems to demonstrate the ineradicable roots of religion. In this way, Pecora seems to be echoing Stark's observation that the secularization process' effect on religion is like "driving in a nail—the harder you hit, the deeper it goes."[86] The secularization process can certainly be considered one of these "greatest attempts" to destroy religion, however, when understood dialectically as Pecora argues, religion necessarily persists. However, as will be presented momentarily, Pecora fails to address this "new religiousness."

Ellul goes on in his understanding of religion by offering some comments on the secularization process in the West[87]. He writes,

> The nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century witness an overwhelming advance of rationalism, scientism, and secularization. But all that came into play only in connection with Christianity. . .Then, the moment the defeat of Christianity became obvious, when, also, enough time had elapsed to allow the religious to free itself, to invest in new objects and develop new forms, religion reappeared. . .Hence there was a temporary hiatus, but basically such interruptions are observed whenever a religious system goes down and another takes its place. The succession is never immediate. The replacement is not automatic, and those who live during that period always lament the irreligion of their times and the loss of sacred traditions.[88]

This understanding seems to be in agreement with Pecora's notion of "semantic resonance" and the dialectical relationship between religion and secularization.

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[85] Jacques Ellul, 131.
[86] Stark and Bainbridge, 17.
[87] Ellul's description here is quite similar to Rodney Stark's cyclical understanding of secularization.
[88] Ibid, 162-163.

However, further analysis of Ellul demonstrates quite a different view of contemporary society than that of Pecora. While Pecora sees "semantic resonance" of religion in the secular ideas of various scholars, Ellul finds the seemingly secular ideas and institutions to actually be full blown expressions of religion. This is evident when Ellul writes, ". . . our world is so *religious* that objects and actions of the most materialistic kind, those seemingly most devoid of depth, are transformed into religious phenomena."[89]

*On Secularization*

Ellul advances the claim that the fundamental heresy, and the cause of what many scholars term secularization, was the relationship between church and state in Christendom which led the church to "conformism and power."[90] This was the root cause of, what Ellul terms, the post-Christian era. In his evaluation, it was because of the overbearing power of the Church, society became laicized; meaning religion played no dominant role in the state. The two spheres of Church and State that seemingly parallel the cities St. Augustine wrote about in *The City of God* became separate, setting the foundation for contemporary society.

The separation of these two spheres and Christianity's loss of influence over everyday life is consistent with other understandings of the secularization process. However, Ellul asserts that the "improper assimilation of religion and Christianity"[91] is the catalyst for the secularization thesis. By this he means there would not even be a secularization thesis if these terms, Christianity and religion, had not been conflated. As he writes,

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[89] Ibid, 147.
[90] Ibid, 20-21.
[91] Ibid, 41.

The intellectual progression which has led from post-Christendom to the idea of a secularized society (or to the secular city) reflects a defect of method and not only a philosophic urge. In particular, there is a complete lack of critique with regard to presuppositions and preconceptions, hence a complete breakdown with regard to the concepts employed.[92]

It is important to contrast Ellul's line of analysis here with Bruce's refutation of the ideological nature of secularization. As presented previously, Bruce asserts that secularization cannot be considered an ideology, because there are Christians who are proponents of the secularization thesis themselves. Bruce's argument here appears to be a fallacious argument *ad hominem*. Bruce uses the personal beliefs of a theorist to determine the validity of a theory. Ellul, on the other hand does not attach any value to the personal beliefs an individual. He argues that

[this] view of modern man and modern society [the view advanced by the secularization thesis] leads to the conclusion that the sacred, myth, the religious, theism, are categories corresponding to the past, outworn, and obsolete attitudes which can only be nonproductive. . .Thus, a priori, those concepts and categories are exhausted. They cannot appear in new forms. This is very interesting, for it shows . . . in their very claim to be putting an end to dogmatism, [they] continue to be dogmatic.[93]

This is a modification of Bruce asserting that the secularization thesis is not ideological. Ellul argues that the secularization thesis is dogmatic at the very least, and that secularization theorists "philosophic urge" regardless of the personal beliefs of the scholar. It is evident that Ellul is addressing Christian scholars here too, because he singles out Harvey Cox as a particularly fine example of this dogmatism.

By seemingly using the terms religion and Christianity interchangeably, Ellul argues that theorists who advance the secularization thesis falsely claim that

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[92] Ibid, 44.
[93] Ibid, 43.

contemporary culture has rejected the sacred. Ellul counters this by asserting that

contemporary culture is suffused with the sacred, not just the Christian sacred.

> In reality, one passes from the statement that 'modern man no longer believes in
> Jesus Christ' to 'modern man is atheistic,' from 'modern man is no longer
> Christian' to 'modern man is no longer religious,' from 'modern man no longer
> reads the Bible and no longer listens to sermons' to 'modern man is rational and
> takes no part in mythical discourse. . .I stress the fact that this necessarily
> presupposes the prior assimilation of Christianity with religion, the mystery of
> revelation with the sacred, and the recitation of the Bible with myth.[94]

This also sets Ellul apart from the critics of secularization as well. In challenging

the secularization thesis, Ellul does not cite church attendance or other data as counter

evidence, or challenge the existence of a golden age of faith (such as the medieval

period), as do Stark and Swatos, Ellul focuses on the problem of terminology; the error of

fallaciously conflating the terms religion and Christianity. By arguing semantics, Ellul

actually seems to grant the proponents of secularization a general decline in church

attendance (primarily in some parts of Europe); however, he argues that there are other

forms of the sacred besides the Christian sacred. This is similar to the arguments of

Swatos, Christiano, and Stark, because Ellul is willing to get away from the confines of

institutional religion and Christianity.

It is also important to note that this sets Ellul apart from Pecora as well. Pecora

understands secularization as a dialectical process, which both preserves and

marginalizes religion simultaneously; however, he still can be considered a proponent of

secularization. Ellul, on the other hand, clearly rejects arguments in support of

secularization due to their being predicated on faulty understandings of both religion and

the sacred.

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[94] Ibid, 41.

Ellul begins his description of the sacred by writing, "The sacred has to relate to man's necessary condition, to that which is inevitably imposed upon him, to that which he must experience without any possibility of remission."[95] He organizes his description of the sacred into the following three categories: functions of the sacred (of which there are three), forms of the sacred (of which there are three), and the sacred today. For organizational purposes, this thesis will use these same categories to explicate Ellul's theory.

In the first category of analysis, Ellul explains that the sacred has three basic functions. The first function of the sacred is the function of discrimination. Ellul explains that in the process of establishing an order, the sacred has a function of discrimination. It is a "bestower of meaning"[96] and orientation by placing boundaries and limitations. The sacred reveals what actions are allowed and what actions are forbidden, and even where these actions are permitted (sacred space). In establishing certain actions, or rites, in the context of sacred space, individuals receive meaning from the sacred.

The second function is that it deals with time. Ellul expounds upon this by writing, "Sacred time is inserted into the sacred order as a period of legitimate disorder, of transgression included in order."[97] Ellul's description of the sacred and its relationship to time is seemingly in line with the work of Mircea Eliade. Eliade recognized that in cosmological cultures, there were often times of ritual chaos, but what made the chaos

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[95] Ibid, 50.
[96] Ibid, 52.
[97] Ibid.

ritualistic and sacred was that the chaos was overcome.[98] Sacred time is often chaotic or a

period of "legitimate disorder . . . which one must come out of if the [sacred] order is to

have force, virtue, and validity."[99]

The third and perhaps most crucial function of the sacred is that it integrates the

individual into the group. The sacred provides harmony between the individual and the

group through justifying and normalizing behaviors and beliefs. Without the sacred,

according to Ellul, there is no group, and humans cannot exist without the group.[100]

In the second category of analysis, Ellul asserts that the sacred contains three

different forms. The first form is an expression of the unpredictable, dark and destructive

powers. Ellul writes that "It [the sacred] is the concentration of all that threatens and

saves man."[101] The second form is a combination of absolute value (which defines the

boundary of the sacred), rites of commitment (rites of initiation, one has to learn and be

trained, the absolute value becomes the personal value), or embodiment in a person (a

person becomes a reference for people as an example of the sacred- how they should act,

appear, behave, etc). Ellul explains the third form of the sacred by writing that it ". . .is

organized around opposite poles which, though conflicting, are equally sacred. . .The

sacred is the coupling of pure/impure, holy/blemished, cohesion/dissolution,

sacred/profane, respect/violation, life/death."[102] For Ellul, the sacred is the relation

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[98] This idea of ritual chaos and sacred time is expounded upon by Eliade in his following works: *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: 1959), *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: 1958), and *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: 1959).
[99] Ellul, 52.
[100] This is quite similar to Peter Berger's assertion that the human being is a "social animal" in *The Sacred Canopy* (1967).
[101] Ellul, 52.
[102] Ibid, 57.

between the two opposites. It is around the axes where the order of the world is established.

The third category, and most important for this thesis, is Ellul's description is the sacred today. It is here where Ellul makes his critical observations of the status of the sacred in contemporary society. Ellul writes that ". . .it cannot be said that man is no longer religious just because Christianity is no longer the religion of the masses. To the contrary, he is just as religious as medieval man. It cannot be said that there is nothing sacred now just because we claim to have emptied out the sacred from nature, sex, and death. To the contrary, the sacred is proliferating all around us."[103]

This idea of the proliferating sacred, while in partial agreement with Pecora's notion of "semantic resonances" of religion in the secular, is a different read of the nature of the sacred, and hence the nature of religion as well, in postmodern society. Rather than labeling society as being essentially secular with a deep subterranean of religious impulses and drives as Pecora does, Ellul, as mentioned previously, claims society is fundamentally religious.[104] Thus, applying Ellul's notion of the proliferating sacred to Pecora's revised understanding of secularization, one can gather that contemporary society is not best understood as being fundamentally secular, but, rather, it is better understood as profoundly religious.[105]

However, the religious character of contemporary society should not be understood as being religious in the transcendental sense. Using Dell deChant's description (based on Eric Voeglin's), transcendental refers to "religions and culture

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[103] Ibid, 65.
[104] See footnote #87.
[105] This is in line with the conclusions of Rodney Stark, James Beckford, Lorne Dawson, Andrew Greeley, and numerous other sociologists of religion.

systems that locate the ground of being in a supernatural dimension—literally, a realm beyond and radically different from nature."[106] Rather than understanding contemporary society in this transcendental sense, it is perhaps more helpful to understood contemporary society as being religious in a cosmological sense, similar to primal and archaic cultures.[107] Again, following deChant (and Voeglin), cosmological refers to "religions and cultural systems that locate the ground of being or ultimate concern in the natural world."[108] Ellul describes the different nature of contemporary religion when he writes,

> After an appearance of rationality, coupled with an obvious indifference to Christianity and heightened by the rationalism of the nineteenth century, we have witnessed for a half century now a prodigious resurgence of religions. But they are no longer the same . . . The situation is *the same as at the beginning*. The need is *the same* one our distant ancestors knew. It is *the same* specifically religious attitude, lending similar, though not identical, explanations.[109]

This religious need that "our ancestors knew," as well as the resurgence of religions that "are no longer the same" as Christianity, can be explained by asserting that contemporary religion is best understood as embodying a cosmological sense of the sacred and a religious expression that is antithetical to transcendental religions, including the dominant religion of the West—Christianity. Further, if this reading is correct, Ellul is challenging the secularization thesis in a particularly novel manner. It is not so much that the secularization thesis is rejected, but rather that it is corrected in two major ways. First, Ellul is correcting an error in terminology found in many early works on

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[106] Dell deChant, 4.
[107] For more on the terms "primal," archaic," see Robert Bellah's *Beyond Belief* (1968). For more on the terms "transcendental" and cosmological" see Dell deChant's *The Sacred Santa* (2002) as a modification of Eric Voeglin's *The New Science of Politics* (1952).
[108] Dell deChant, 4.
[109] Jacques Ellul, 129-131.

secularization, in which the terms Christianity and religion become conflated. Secondly, Ellul shifts the focus of the thesis from transcendental religion to cosmological expressions. Finally, the virtue of reading Pecora through the lens of Ellul is that the manifestation of Pecora's "resonance" becomes explicit not implicit, dynamic not passive, and proliferous not residual. The implications of this to the secularization thesis are particularly significant and they will be considered in the conclusion. Prior to considering these implications, however, a brief observation of how the proliferating sacred may be experienced in contemporary society will be offered.

**Chapter IV- Locating the Proliferating Sacred in Contemporary Society**

In order to better reveal the significance of Ellul's approach to the analysis of religion in contemporary culture, this section will attempt to locate examples of the proliferating sacred. To accomplish this, this section will first specifically address the relationship between the sacred and religion. Subsequently, examples of the proliferating sacred will be presented using first a substantive definition of religion, followed by a functional understanding of religion. This thesis will locate the proliferating sacred using a substantive approach by examining participation in traditional institutional religion and the proliferation of New Religious Movements. To locate a contemporary manifestation of the proliferating sacred using a functional understanding of religion, this thesis will review Joseph Price's work analyzing sports and religion. It will become evident that Price is one example of a scholar studying seemingly secular phenomena (sports) using religious categories. However, Price offers this analysis completely oblivious to Ellul's theory. Nonetheless, this analysis seems to be entirely consistent with Ellul's work. Following this brief review, specific analysis of sports embodying Ellul's understanding of the sacred will be offered.

*The Sacred and Religion*

It is important to now delineate where certain details of Ellul's theory, will not be deployed. The approach to studying religion in postmodernity that this thesis is proposing is not as nuanced as Ellul's theory, therefore it does not fully deploy Ellul's

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understanding of the relationship between the sacred and religion.  While this thesis

certainly defers full treatment of Ellul's theory on the sacred and religion, it is necessary

to briefly present Ellul's understanding, and then demonstrate that in terms of this

analysis, the omission of Ellul's detailed distinctions between the sacred and the holy

does no disservice to his theory.

According to Ellul, the sacred is not a category of religion; rather, religion is one

possible "rendition of the sacred."[110]  Therefore, for Ellul, sports or politics do not have

to be considered religion; they can just be considered expressions of the sacred.

Furthermore, religious phenomena themselves can be divided into either the sacred or the

holy.  Both the sacred and the holy are "religious" but they are quite the opposite.  The

sacred sacralizes the social world, while the holy desacralizes the social world.  Ellul

makes the distinction between the sacred and the holy to explain how, as Max Weber

indicated, religion can either reinforce the routine order of society (this is what the sacred

does) or it can charismatically transform the social order (this is what the holy does).[111]

The practical example of this is that Christianity was used to reinforce the order of

society that advocated segregation and slavery; however, Christianity was also used by

Martin Luther King Jr. to transform this social order through the civil rights movement.

How can the same cause (religion) lead to two opposite effects (segregation/slavery and

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[110] Ibid, 48.
[111] For a detailed treatment on the distinctions between the sacred and the holy, see Darrell Fasching's *The Ethical Challenges of Auschwitz and Hiroshima: Apocalypse or Utopia?* (1993) or Darrell Fasching and Dell deChant's *Comparative Religious Ethics: A Narrative Approach* (2001).

civil rights)?  Ellul answers this question by establishing two categories for religion to draw from—the sacred and the holy.[112]

Since religion can be a rendition of either the sacred or the holy, if one classifies a certain phenomenon as sacred, following Jacques Ellul, it does not necessarily mean that the particular phenomenon should be considered religious—because religion is just one avenue of experiencing the sacred.  However, if one classifies a phenomenon as religious, then it *can* be considered a manifestation of the sacred,[113] because religion is a rendition of the sacred according to Ellul.  This thesis does not offer Ellul's nuanced distinction between the sacred and the holy, because that particular distinction seems to be an ethical distinction, and this thesis is not conducting an ethical analysis of culture.  As Darrell Fasching has demonstrated in his work,[114] Ellul's categories of the sacred and the holy are quite helpful when doing comparative religious ethics; however these distinctions are not as helpful when evaluating the secularization thesis.  Therefore, this thesis does not deploy the sacred/holy dichotomy that Ellul offers because the distinction both convolutes and unnecessarily complicates this particular argument by adding tangential ethical categories.  With this being established, when this thesis is attempting to locate a "rendition of the sacred" it is, in fact, actually attempting to locate "religion."  Furthermore, this thesis argues that Ellul's idea that contemporary society is "profoundly

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[112] Much more can be explained on the specific characteristics of the holy and the sacred, as well as Ellul's specific categories of the secular and the profane.  However, this thesis defers such a presentation to another paper.

[113] According to Ellul a religious phenomenon can be considered holy as well, but this thesis is not making that distinction.

[114] See the following works by Darrell Fasching: *Narrative Theology After Auschwitz: From Alienation to Ethics* (1992), *The Ethical Challenges of Auschwitz and Hiroshima: Apocalypse or Utopia?* (1993).  Also see Darrell Fasching and Dell deChant's *Comparative Religious Ethics: A Narrative Approach* (2001).

religious" is best supported by identifying instances of the presence of the proliferating sacred he describes.

*Substantive and Functional Approaches to Religion*

When defining religion, scholars typically use one of two approaches—the substantive approach or the functional approach.[115]  As Steve Bruce explains, "Functional definitions identify religion in terms of what it does: for example, providing solutions to 'ultimate problems', or answering fundamental questions of the human condition. Substantive definitions identify religion in terms of what it is: for example, beliefs and actions which assume the existence of supernatural beings or powers."[116]  Naturally, each way of defining religion has both advantages and drawbacks.

Substantive definitions of religion focus on the inner core and essence of religion, and tend to emphasize a relationship between the practitioner and an ultimate power.[117] These definitions are helpful because they set limits for what can be considered religion, and what cannot be.  This draws a distinct line between what is religion/sacred and what is secular/profane.  However, in setting these limits, substantive definitions tend to be over-exclusive.  This tendency towards over-exclusivity is most likely the result of the use of "supernatural" in the majority of substantive definitions.  Substantive definitions work well with Western religions, but they are difficult to apply to Eastern religions, such as Confucianism or Daoism.

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[115] Catherine Albanese actually identifies a third way scholars define religion which she calls formal. However, this thesis will only focus on the substantive and functional approaches because they seem to be the two axes of definition, where there is much contention between approaches.
[116] Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World*, 6.
[117] Catherine Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1981), xxi.

The functional approach to religion is different than the substantive approach, because the functional approach does not focus on what religion *is*. Rather, the functional approach seeks to answers the following questions: Why do people hold these beliefs? Why do religions survive? As Daniel Pals points out, "the answer [to these questions] can be found only in one place: not in the content of the beliefs, not in what they claim about gods or the world, but in their *function*—in what they *do*, socially, for those who live by them."[118] Therefore functional definitions of religion are easier to apply cross-culturally, to both Eastern and Western religions. However, there certainly are drawbacks to the functional approach as well. The line that substantive definitions of religion draw between religion and secular is blurred, and often times completely erased by functional definitions. Therefore, functional definitions of religion tend to be over-inclusive. Some functional religions can allow for *anything* to be religion, thereby making it difficult to decide what is religious and what is not.

*Substantive Approach*

A good example of a substantive definition of religion is provided by Steve Bruce in *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (1996). Bruce defines religion when he writes "Religion, then, consists of beliefs, actions, and institutions which assume the existence of supernatural entities with powers of action, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose."[119] Bruce feels that this definition "seems to encompass what ordinary people mean when they talk about religion."[120] When using a substantive understanding of religion, the proliferating sacred can be found

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[118] Daniel L Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, (Oxford University Press: 1996), 114.
[119] Steve Bruce, 7.
[120] Ibid.

in different manifestations, but this thesis will focus on two locales—traditional institutional religion and New Religious Movements.

The first locale of the proliferating sacred is traditional institutional religion, such as churches, mosques, temples, etc. Now, in order for secularization on the micro level to go unchallenged, attendance at religious institutions should be in a state of decline, or at least be at a lower level than the past. However, Christian Smith demonstrates, as conveyed by James Cavendish, that "American evangelicalism is enjoying a level of religious vitality—in terms of membership, attendance and participation, adherence to and confidence in Christian beliefs, commitment to the mission of the Church, and salience of faith—unmatched by other Christian traditions in the United States since the year 2000.[121] Thus, American Evangelicalism is one example, others being Roman Catholicism and Pentecostalism, that "Christianity is not eroding, at least in any uniform, linear fashion."[122] Christianity, however, is not the only institutional religious resurgence. As Peter Berger recognizes, Islam is rapidly growing from North Africa to Southeast Asia and from Europe to North America.[123]

The second locale of the proliferating sacred, in terms of the substantive approach, is in New Religious Movements. If the secularization process is occurring on the micro level, then New Religious Movements should be turning up with less frequency. However, as J. Gordon Melton observes, "the appearance of new religions has been fairly steady for over a generation [in America] . . . The rate of appearance in

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[121] James Cavendish, "Religion and Modernity in America: A Perspective on the Secularization Debate" in Danny L Jorgensen and Joni Wilson (ed), *Religion and the Challenge of Modernity: The Recognized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in the United States Today*, (Binghamton, NY: 2001), 25-56, at 26.
[122] Ibid, 28.
[123] Peter L. Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview" in Peter L. Berger (ed) *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Washington D.C.:1999, 1-18, at 7.

Europe has also equaled and in many cases surpassed that of the United States, indicating that the growth of religious pluralism is not simply an American phenomenon, but is a major trend in Western society."[124]

Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge argue that this enduring popularity of New Religious Movements (or "cults") is a result of conventional religions becoming somewhat weakened. Stark and Bainbridge point out that the weakening of conventional religion is sometimes inaccurately used as evidence for secularization. However, as Stark and Bainbridge argue, "no secular meaning system can provide such general explanations about life that it replaces religion."[125] Thus, according to Stark and Bainbridge, secularization on the macro level does not extend to the micro level, it just leads to religious innovation and a time of new religions—New Religious Movements.

While the majority of Americans have not ever been members of New Religious Movements, their cultural impact has been significant. As Lorne Dawson argues,

> The religious landscape and consciousness of Americans have been irreversibly changed and a new spiritual pluralism established. The denominational accommodation between Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism that shaped personal and collective identities in the period of prosperity immediately after the Second World War (Herberg, 1955; Wuthnow, 1988) has been fractured permanently by the sheer number of ever more conspicuous religious alternatives . . . in the words of Robert Wuthnow (1988: 152) 'it was as if the bits of mosaic that had given shape to the religious topography had been thrown into the air, never to land in exactly the same positions as before.'[126]

Thus, with a substantive understanding of religion, the proliferating sacred finds its manifestation in non-institutional forms such as New Religious Movements, as well as in

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[124] J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America*, (Garland Publishing: New York, 1992), xiv-xv.
[125] Stark and Bainbridge, 17.
[126] Lorne L Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements*, (Oxford University Press, Ontario: 1998), 13-14.

traditional institutional expressions of religion such as Christianity (with rises in individual participation in Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant forms[127]).

*Functional Approach*

Now that it has been demonstrated that the proliferating sacred can be discovered using a substantive understanding of religion, attention can be given to a functional understanding of religion. Probably the most classic example of a functional definition of religion is provided by Emile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Here, Durkheim defines religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them."[128] It is the second part of Durkheim's definition that is functional, religion unites people into a single community. Thus, in order to locate the proliferating sacred in contemporary society using a functional understanding of religion, this thesis will first review Joseph Price's work on sports and religion.

While there have been a number of texts that seriously engage the possible religious function of sports, perhaps the most helpful work is *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion* (2001) by Joseph Price. In this work, Price provides a compelling argument for sports functioning as religion in America. It is an anthology of articles written by various scholars, with Price being the author of a few of them. However, for purposes of this thesis, it is the conclusion, *An American Apotheosis: Sports as Popular Religion*, that is of most importance. In this conclusion, Price does a review

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[127] Peter L Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview", 6-9.
[128] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, translated from the French by Joseph Ward Swain, (Macmillan Publishing Co, New York: 1915), 62.

of literature that analyzes the religious function of sports in America, and he also offers

some observations on the religious nature of sports.  In itself, Price's study challenges the

secularization thesis, but when put into the context of Ellul's theory, its significance

increases dramatically.

Towards the beginning of the chapter Price cites Joyce Carol Oates as writing,

"The decline of religion as a source of significant meaning in modern industrialized

society [secularization] has been extravagantly compensated by the rise of popular

culture in general, of which the billion-dollar sports mania is the most visible

manifestation."[129]  This is an important observation because it demonstrates a scholar,

recognizing secular popular culture, sports specifically, fulfilling a social function that

had previously been allotted to religion.  Price drives this point home more explicitly

when he writes,

> For tens of millions of devoted fans throughout the country, sports constitute a
> popular form of religion by shaping their world and sustaining their ways of
> engaging it.  Indeed, for many, sports are elevated to a kind of divine status, in
> what I would call an American apotheosis.[130]

To add to these observations, Price cites the clever NPR affiliate Frank Deford as writing

the following statement in a Sports Illustrated article in the late 1970's:   ". . .if Marx had

lived at the end of the twentieth century in the United States rather than in Victorian

England, he would have declared sports the opiate of the people, anesthetizing them to

the class struggles and focusing their hopes on events that project fulfillment through a

vicarious form of participation and through an often delayed form of gratification."[131]

While this may first strike one as humorous, as Deford's observations typically do, it is a

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[129] Joseph Price, *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*, (Mercer: 2001), 216.
[130] Ibid, 216.
[131] Ibid, 216.

telling analysis of the seemingly religious function of sports for millions of Americans. While there are certainly critics who argue that sports in no way contain the traditional components of religion, Price counters by asserting, "Even though sports does not have all characteristics of religion, neither does any particular religious tradition, because such comprehensive definitions of religion are simply ideal norms against which actual religions are measured."[132]

After making these general observations and statements, Price then goes on to analyze the experiential aspect of sports, which appears to have many affinities with religious experience. To begin his analysis of experience, Price cites the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's definition of religious experience as ". . .the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it."[133] Price then notes that experiences in sports can easily be described in the same way. However, Price goes on further to cite Mircea Eliade's studies of rituals in cosmological culture. He points out that Eliade recognized the worldmaking [cosmicizing] functions of ritual because ordinary space and ordinary time are suspended, thus the rituals replicate cosmogonic acts.[134] This interpretation is quite reminiscent of Ellul, but it lacks the theoretic ground. Without the theoretic grounding, this is merely an interesting analogy between ancient culture and contemporary culture. But what does the analogy mean? Ellul recognizes that it is the proliferating sacred that causes this. Without Ellul, Price's

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[132] Ibid, 218.
[133] Ibid, 221. This "state" Csikszentmihalyi is writing about is reminiscent of Emile Durkheim's notion of "collective effervescence".
[134] Ibid, 222.

work is just an analogy based on Eliade's studies. Ellul provides the theoretic ground

that allows for the broader study of postmodern culture.

Building on Eliade's theory, theologian Michael Novak applies this notion of

religious rituals to sports rituals when he writes

> They [sports] teach religious qualities of heart and soul. In particular, they
> recreate symbols of cosmic struggle, in which human survival and moral courage
> are not assured. Through their symbols and rituals, sports provide occasions for
> experiencing a sense of ultimacy and for prompting personal transformation.[135]

It is for this reason that this thesis argues that sports constitute a form of cosmological

religion in contemporary America. Put another way, and in the context of Ellul, cultural

phenomena can, and do, reveal the proliferating sacred.

Along with the similarities in rituals and experiences found in sports and in

religion, Price offers many specific examples that can be given to support these ideas.

One great example is in the movie *Bull Durham*, with Kevin Costner and Tim Robbins.

At the opening of the movie a character in the movie named Annie Savoy gives her

"confession" when she says "I've tried 'em all, I really have. And the only church that

truly feeds the soul day in and day out is the Church of Baseball."[136] While this may just

be a "Hollywood" example that some would argue is exaggerated for effect, in Price's

more recent work, *Rounding the Bases: Baseball and Religion in America* (2006), he

cites countless examples of individuals understanding baseball in this fashion. One

example is J. Anthony Lukas, whose mother was manic depressive and committed

suicide when Lukas was at a very young age. Rather than turning to church for comfort

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[135] Ibid, 223.
[136] Ibid, 226.

and meaning, Lukas listened to the Yankees games broadcast over the radio. Lukas recalls these times when he writes:

> To millions of Americans the Yanks were arrogant. . .spoilsports who squeezed all innocent joy from the game. But to an anxious youth still shaken by the implosion of his ordered world, the masterful Yanks were vastly reassuring. If I couldn't control my environment, they surely dominated theirs. And by some alchemy of fandom, their triumphs were mine as well.[137]

The preceding quote is a compelling anecdote of sports embodying the previously explained understanding of the sacred offered by Jacques Ellul. Ellul argued, as explicated earlier in this thesis that the three functions of the sacred were: to establish order, to create sacred time, and to integrate an individual into a group. These three functions are clearly present in Lukas' recollection of what the Yankees did for him as a troubled youth. It was the Yankees that made access to the sacred possible for Lukas, not traditional religion. Price asserts this when he remarks, "In a way akin to a new Christian's experience of hope and security in the Kingdom of God, Lukas found the victorious world of DiMaggio and Dickey, of Gordon and Keller, to be the realm of deliverance that enabled the living out of routines and combating pain in the everyday world."[138]

With a plethora of other examples of stories much the same as the one of Lukas, it is clear that sports do provide a prime example of the proliferating sacred in American society. Price further expounds upon this when he writes, "The expressions of devotion by fans are not restricted to fervent individuals; they also extend to communities that often establish their identity by supporting their local team and celebrating its heroes."[139]

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[137] Joseph Price, *Rounding the Bases: Baseball and Religion in America*, (Mercer: 2006), 228.
[138] Ibid, 228.
[139] Ibid, 226.

An example of this is "Hoosier Hysteria," a term that describes the state of Indiana's love

for basketball—which has actually been called the state's religion.[140]  It is high school

basketball in Kentucky and high school football in Texas that demonstrates the sacred

component of sports. In Alabama, when Auburn and Alabama play football, in many

small towns across the state, all of the businesses close—and this is on a Saturday when

these businesses would do their greatest retail sales for the week.

The list of examples of the sacred component of sports in America goes on and

on.  For as many sports teams as there are in America, there are hoards of fans to go

along with them as faithful followers.  While the debate regarding the extent that sports

should be considered sacred and a form of religion in America is far from being

settled[141], just turning one's television to ESPN every Sunday night for a recap of the

day's football games provides ongoing evidence of the sacred quality of sports.  To end

this section, it is appropriate to cite Price one final time:

> They [sports] exercise a power for shaping and engaging the world for millions of devoted fans throughout America; they enable participants to explore levels of selfhood that otherwise remain inaccessible; they establish means for bonding in communal relations with other devotees; they model ways to deal with contingencies and fate while playing by the rules; and they provide the prospect for experiencing victory and thus, sampling, at least in an anticipatory way, 'abundant life.'  In America, quite simply, sports constitute a form of popular religion.[142]

In this quote, Price, albeit unknowingly, illustrates every function of the sacred Jacques

Ellul so explicitly spells out.  Joseph Price is not alone.

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[140] Price, *From Season to Season*, 226.
[141] For further reading see: Ferreri, Higgs and Braswell, Hoffman, and Prebish.
[142] Ibid, 229.

## Conclusion

It is now important to reiterate the problem this thesis has attempted to address. Is it accurate to label postmodern culture secular and has a more stable theoretic platform to analyze religion in the postmodern world been provided? This thesis has contended that postmodern culture is not secular and the many proponents of secularization fail to fully address the role of religion in the postmodern world, typically by confining religion to strictly institutional forms. Also, while critics of secularization, such as Rodney Stark, are willing to cite New Religious Movements as evidence contra the secularization process, the functional approach to religion has largely been overlooked. Thus, this thesis has demonstrated that postmodern culture is best understood as religious by providing a theoretical framework for analyzing contemporary society, via the work of both Vincent Pecora and Jacques Ellul. Through analyzing each theorist's work, it is clear that separately, both Pecora and Ellul are quite helpful in postmodern studies; however, when used together, their contributions are immeasurable.

In terms of this issue, Pecora is especially helpful. His conception of secularization as a dialectical process, which is constantly doubling back on itself, accounts for the presence of religion differently than other secularization theorists. It does this because it uses a functional understanding of religion while traditional works on secularization adhere to the substantive approach. It also takes seriously the power of religion in postmodern society, albeit in a semantic form. However, Pecora still

concludes that contemporary society is essentially secular; although it possesses a significant semantic resonance of religion. Furthermore, Pecora's elitist tendencies make it difficult to gauge the extent of this semantic resonance.

Jacques Ellul is perhaps even more helpful, especially because of his notion of the proliferating sacred. Because of this understanding, Ellul does not view society as secular; rather, he finds it to be profoundly religious. By providing scholars with specific forms and functions of the sacred, Ellul provides an important groundwork for analyzing seemingly secular phenomena using religious categories. He also makes explicit what is implicit in Pecora, and extends religious resonance to all of society, not just the elite.

While separately both Ellul and Pecora contribute a great deal to the academic study of religion, it is clear that together they provide even more. Pecora accurately provides a middle ground for evaluating the presence of religion in the context of secularization. However, his notion of semantic resonance does not seem to adequately account for the seemingly religious characteristics of phenomena traditionally understood as secular, e.g., sports. Ellul's understanding of the sacred provides the necessary groundwork for studying these phenomena as functional equivalents to religion; however, his work on secularization may not be quite as helpful as Pecora's. While Pecora provides a middle ground between the proponents and critics of secularization, Ellul is another example of a dismissive critic.

Another contribution this thesis has attempted to make is to not only provide a theoretical framework for analyzing contemporary society, but also to illustrate that this methodological approach is already happening, most especially in studies of popular culture. Part IV demonstrated that Joseph Price provides an example of an academic

study of the relationship between sports and religion, which unknowingly seems to be using this approach. However, Price is certainly not the only scholar doing this. From works on the economy and consumerism by Dell deChant and Harvey Cox, to works on sports by Shirl Hoffman and Robert J. Higgs and Michael C. Braswell, to works on politics by Eric Voeglin and Jacques Ellul, to works on various elements of popular culture by Michael Jindra, David Chidester, and Michelle Lelwica, seemingly secular phenomena are being analyzed using categories of religion regularly.[143] However, many of these scholars analyze postmodern culture without the aid of a systematic theoretical framework such as the one provided by this thesis.

Now one may be forced to ask: What does the argument of this thesis mean for religion? Is the secularization thesis false? In short, yes—postmodern culture is not best described as secular. I have attempted to sketch out possible alternatives to the standard account of religion in the context of the secularization thesis. In this regard, my alternative approach has sought to necessarily engage the issue of religion as an essential aspect of human existence. While arguments regarding the possibility of the religious impulse being innate to humans are far from being settled, the following observation made by Pecora regarding contemporary culture appears to be accurate:

> This [*Verwindung*] is not simply a function of language or geography but is perhaps something to be acknowledged as the result of an *irreducible set of needs* in human group psychology. One might then conclude that the society that produces Enlightenment never fully outgrows its desire for religious sources of coherence, solidarity, and historical purpose, and continually translates, or

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[143] For further reading see the following works: Dell deChant *The Sacred Santa: Religious Dimensions of Consumer Culture* (2002); Robert J. Higgs and Michael C. Braswell *An Unholy Alliance: The Sacred and Modern Sports* (2004); Shirl Hoffman *Sport and Religion* (1992); Michael Jindra "It's About Faith in Our Future: *Star Trek* Fandom as Cultural Religion" (2000); David Chidester "The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock 'n' Roll" (2000); Michelle Lelwica "Losing Their Way to Salvation: Women, Weight Loss, and the Salvation Myth of Culture Lite" (2000); Eric Voeglin *The New Science of* Politics (1952); and Jacques Ellul *The Political Illusion* (1967).

transposes them into ever more refined and immanent, but also distorted and distorting, versions of its religious inheritance.[144]

This thesis agrees that the secularization thesis is an important body of literature that must be taken seriously by any scholar attempting to do contemporary socio-cultural analysis. However, it seems that theorists writing in support of secularization seem to adopt an ideology of secularism (the intellectual standpoint that religion has already been replaced by reason), thus any resurgence of religion, in its institutional form, is merely explained away as an exception to the rule—Bruce's rebuttal notwithstanding. Conversely, critics of the secularization thesis search high and low for increases in individual participation in religious institutions (usually Church attendance) to provide evidence against the secularization thesis. What this thesis has attempted to do, however, is provide grounding for another interpretation and another way of reading the text of postmodern culture. In addition, it has offered one example of an apparent resurgence of an alternative form of religion, sports, which is entirely consistent with and fully accounted for in the context of this alternative approach. While religion certainly has risen and fallen in sociological status throughout human history, it has never gone away. For this reason, this analysis can be culminated with one final quote from Jacques Ellul in describing the place of religion in society:

> It is the irrational on the basis of which all the rest [religion] is constructed. The moment one tries to eliminate it, it reappears in some other form. When one curbs it on one side, it breaks out on the other.[145]

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[144] Vincent Pecora, 22.
[145] Jacques Ellul, 150.

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