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Secularization and Religious Acculturation *

RAMON C. REYES

I have been asked to speak this afternoon on the topic of "Secularization versus Religious Acculturation". This is perhaps the one professional difficulty of the philosopher: namely, that he is expected to be able to speak on everything and nothing. It is hard enough to say something adequate about the meaning of secularization, harder still to say something that has not already been said about the various aspects of religious acculturation. But now to speak of that relational "versus" between the two, aye there is the rub, as the playwright would say.

And yet, there may after all be justice in this expectation that the philosopher should have something to say about everything, since, in so far as his task is to seek the *truth*, he must in a sense be all things to all men.

Let us therefore start our discourse by saying that in general, secularization and religious acculturation would seem to refer to two different aspects of human reality, one immanent, the other transcendent, the former being of the history of man in search of himself, his dignity, his liberty, the latter being

* This paper was read during the 15th Annual Session of the Baguio Religious Acculturation Conference, December 1971, at the University of the Philippines, Baguio City.

primarily a divine happening, that of God Himself seeking man, and becoming man.

Secularization is the social process whereby functions formerly filled by religious institutions are subsequently assumed by non-religious institutions. More positively, we might say that the secularization is the passage of man from the stage of *mythos* or myth to that of *logos* or reason.

Ordinarily, myth would signify something that is fictional and fabulatory. Here, however, we are taking myth in the strict sense, as used by a Malinowski or a Mircea Eliade, for whom myth denotes a certain world-view and a particular state of the human spirit, wherein all of reality is seen as one undifferentiated whole—man, nature, society, the sacred.

Professor Robert Fox, for example, says in his description of the Tagbanwa world-view in one of the past papers of this conference series:

They make no distinction . . . between a social world and a "natural" environment. They see in the environment countless deities and potentially malign spirits, and interact with them daily. When a huge tree crashes on a person who is making a clearing, it is seen as the act of an angry spirit. . . . In sum, one social and moral order encompasses the living, the dead, the deities and spirits, and the total environment in which the Tagbanwa live.¹

In myth, therefore, we see that nature and society partake of the element of the sacred. The cyclical rhythms of the cosmos, the social institutions and patterns of human behavior, all are viewed as having been foreordained from the very beginning by the gods, or by the cultural heroes acting by their authority and power.

Father Lambrecht, in turn, points out in his paper on Ifugao local customs,

Indeed, the whole Ifugao social order, including practical ways of life, social institutions and rules, morality and everything else, constitute a unitary system; and it is looked upon as a religious phenomenon

¹ Peter G. Gowing and William Henry Scott, editors, *Acculturation in the Philippines* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1971), p. 8.

of supernatural origin. All of these phenomena are believed to have been revealed to their ancestors, some vaguely, others more clearly....²

Within such a world-view, we see that time is taken not as a linear irreversible process entailing man's existence, but rather time is seen to be more of an eternal cycle, revolving around the archetypal actions of the gods. Consequently, the whole of human existence becomes really one sacred ritual of repetition, reiterating, commemorating, reliving the original actions by which the gods in their eternity continuously create and sustain man and his world.

Father Lambrecht says in the same study on Ifugao customs,

The religion of the Ifugao is not in a compartment, isolated by the walls, from other cultural traits. When the Ifugaos cultivate rice or sweet potatoes, build houses, sell their lands or valuable heirlooms; when they engage in anything that pertains to the ordinary life cycle of each one of them, as when they marry, give birth, raise children, celebrate feasts; when they settle their disputes or impose fines on the transgressors of their law and customs; when they pull their spears from under the thatch of their roofs, in order to wage war on their enemies or to hunt boar and deer; when they care for their sick or bury their dead; in a word, when they live their lives in accordance with the sacred traditions of their ancestors, at the same time they practice their religion....³

Nevertheless, not even the man of myth can avoid the movement of life and age and change. For which reason myth provides for special rites whose main function is to abolish time, or rather to cure the ravages of time by leading man back periodically to the moment of cosmic creation, if not further back to the original state of chaos when the gods, man, and the universe were together fused as one magic unity.

In this context we see for example the importance of those interminable recitations of genealogies in all peoples of myth. The rationale is to lead the community all the way back to that time *ab origine*, and by this process induce a purification and a spiritual renewal.

² *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 90-91.

As Mircea Eliade explains, speaking of a parallel structure in Ancient India,

We can grasp the meaning and the aim of this technique: to re-ascend the stream of Time would necessarily bring one back ultimately to the point of departure, which coincides with that of the cosmogony. To re-live one's past lives would also be to understand them and to a certain degree, "burn up" one's "sins" But there is something of even greater importance: one attains to the beginning of Time and enters the Timeless In other words, it is possible, starting from any moment of temporal duration, to exhaust that duration by retracing its course to the source and so come out into the Timeless, into eternity. . . .⁴

It is in this same context of a "return to an original unity" that we should view the whole function of the *feast* in mythical peoples. Structurally, the *feast* is a religious rite whereby periodically the whole community undergoes a liberation and a purification from time, by way of transporting man from the petty routine of *Chronos* to the primordial unity *Chaos*. Throwing away the implements of work, if only for a day, for work is part of the misery brought by time, the community goes into a collective consumption and destruction of material goods, for material possessions are part of the conditions and degenerescence induced by time. Also, there is a certain paroxysm of life, wherein the community is taken up in one orgiastic transport of wine and sex and song, in reiteration and commemoration of that glorious and holy eternity when there was no man as distinct from woman, no human separated from beast, no creature at variance with the gods.

If, as we have just seen, such is basically the structure of myth, then the mythical man, or as Mircea Eliade says, the "archaic" man, does not represent some pathological state of the human spirit. Rather, forming a totality sufficient to itself, the mythical system is a culture like any other, representing a creation and a fulfillment of man, a certain ethos, a certain style of human living.

This being the case, the question which, I understand, has already been expressed during one of the past conferences of

⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 86.

this series, arises: why change such a system? If as the anthropologist has shown, each culture is absolute, forming a self-generating, self-legitimizing configuration of human values, what sense is there in replacing a mythical system of meanings with another to which a mythical people is alien?

In this regard, the philosopher is endowed with no gift of divination or prophecy as to foretell the destiny of tribes and nations. All he can do is reflect on what man has actually experienced and what man has actually done. And the fact is, there are peoples that have passed on from myth to non-myth, and it is this passage that we must now bring into our consideration. For in this very transition and metabasis lies the whole meaning of secularization.

Karl Jaspers shows us that if we study the period of world history between 800 BC and 200 BC, we notice three regions mutually independent of each other, in India, in China, and in some parts of the West, making a break-through from mythos to logos. This was the period of Lao-Tse and Confucius in China. In India emerged the Upanishads and Buddha. In Iran, Zarathustra developed a doctrine viewing the world as a whole struggle between good and evil. Greece saw the light of a Parmenides and a Heraclitus, to be followed by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and the Greek tragedians. In Palestine, this was the age of the prophets from Elijah all the way to Isaiah and Jeremiah.

As Karl Jaspers describes this period,

Human beings dared to rely on themselves as individuals. Hermits and wandering thinkers in China, ascetics in India, philosophers in Greece and prophets in Israel all belong together, however much they may differ from each other in their beliefs, the contents of their thought and their inner dispositions. Man proved capable of contrasting himself inwardly with the entire universe. He discovered within himself the origin from which to raise himself above his own self and the world...⁵

What characterized this period therefore was that for the first time, man discovered his spiritual nature, by virtue of

⁵ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, translated by Michael Bullock (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p.3.

which he is above the world and above even his own vital self. For the first time, he came to the realization of the realm of the universal, which enabled him eventually to evolve the fundamental categories of thought and to pose the beginnings of world religions. We might therefore say that this first outburst of man from myth to reason was the first phase of secularization.

The second phase of secularization came during the early part of the 16th century with the development in the West of modern positive science. This was the time of Copernicus and Bacon, Galileo, Kepler, Tycho Brahe and later Newton.

With this modern science, the West came upon a universal method of objectivizing and reducing nature to a system of functional variables, thus translating the world to a set of possible alternatives of technical transformation. By this method and its application to industry in the latter part of the 18th century, man gained mastery over nature's forces and determinisms, enabling him to harness nature's hitherto untamed elements.

The third phase of secularization came with the desacralization of society and of political authority, as marked by the American and the French revolution. Applying the concept of natural law as previously developed by the English and French philosophers, these two revolutions established definitively the principle that sovereignty, far from being absolute and divine, is instrumental and functional, in view of the public good. State powers then must be limited and functionally separated to insure that the government shall be for, by, and of the people.

We might at this point recapitulate by saying that, endowing man with a sure consciousness of himself as a being distinct from and above nature, shaking the foundations of the old social order that was at once cosmic, political and divine, secularization has given man the sense that something can be done, that life is not one ritualistic repetition of some eternal cosmogony, but that human break-through, novelty, invention are possible, that in solidarity with fellowman, human discourse and human labor are capable of recreating man's world and

man's society, and open up for him an ever receding horizon of possibilities. And so, what was formerly locked together in one confused whole — cosmos, man, society, the gods — are now sundered distinct. Henceforth, if man is to achieve any form of total harmony and unity, it will not be by some ritual return to the primeval origins, but only as a fruit of human striving, technologically denying nature its usual course and rhythm, re-shaping the structures of social processes in view of the conditions of justice and freedom.

To go back to our question, why change from mythos to logos? And the answer, as we have tried to show, is because man owes it to his own nature and *élan* as spirit. Admittedly, in this question, the philosopher labors under a bias. For philosophy, like science and political theory, is born of this very movement from mythos to logos. Nonetheless, if partial, the philosopher examines and justifies his partiality. And here lies the whole difference. While the man of myth *lives* his meaning, the man of logos not only lives, but knows his meaning to be true. More properly, the man of logos *knows* the part of truth both in his life and meaning as well as in those of the mythical man. The mythical or archaic man is right, and his has been the privilege of showing it first: the point of life is to achieve total unification of existence. In this the mythical man has primacy over those for whom life is but violence and arbitrary existence. And in so far as all human societies labor under the constant risk of reverting back to this state of violence, all societies, including those of the man of logos, will always have need of myth as prolegomena to logos. Hence, the various civil and religious rites of modern societies — as celebration of one's birthday anniversary, New Year's Day, etc.

Nonetheless, ultimately, the unification of existence sought by the man of myth will not be attained by some magical "*regressus ad uterum*," as if unity existed already achieved in some past golden age, but rather in the future, only at the end of the history of human labor and human thought.

This brings us to the second part of our topic this afternoon, namely, that of religious acculturation.

It would be superfluous for us to try to define religious acculturation after having listened to innumerable papers in this series of conferences now in its 15th session discussing material examples and patterns of religious acculturation. We even have the elements of a formal definition in one of the past papers. As Hubert Reynolds says in his paper on "Concepts of Acculturation": ". . . acculturation is the process and effect of significant change through mutual borrowing and adaptations by peoples of different cultures in contact with some continuity."⁶

I would understand then that *religious* acculturation would be such a mutual interaction between men of different cultures brought together by virtue of their acceptance of a common religion as we see in the case of mission work.

It will be seen however that such a concept as religious acculturation is possible only on condition that at least one of the participant cultures has previously undergone secularization. As long as a religion is merely a societal function, representing the gods of one's race or one's *polis*, then the problem of different cultures mutually interacting in the process of sharing a common faith and yet retaining their respective identities could never even arise. What would happen would be that either of the participant cultures assimilate the other, as the anthropologist would show, or else, if they should be of equal strength, then some form of pluralistic or symbiotic situation would arise, but not religious acculturation.

It is only after the process of secularization as we have described above has desacralized nature and secularized the *polis*, only after logos has awakened man to the awareness of the openness and infinity of his spirit, that man could finally perceive the notion of a true religion, which, being true, would therefore be transcendent to all peoples and cultures, and thus being of no culture of itself, could truly be the religion of any and of all cultures.

We Christians do believe that our religion is of such a nature, for Christianity primarily is not a culture but a divine

⁶ Gowing and Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

event, that of the Word becoming Man, for all men, Gentile or Jew.

And yet how long did it take Christianity itself to fully appreciate the import of its true universality?

Was it not Saint Paul who had to struggle against fellow Christians of the early Church to prove that the Faith was also for the Greeks and the Romans?

And then again in the fifth century, when Judeo-Greco-Roman Christians realized that the Barbarians were also worthy of redemption.

And more recently in the 19th century, when the Church finally decreed that non-Occidental Christians need not abandon their own cultures in order to accept the Faith.

And so today, we find ourselves met in this religious acculturation conference series, in order to find ways and means to put into practice what has taken the work of many ages to finally make clear at least in principle in our minds if not in our hearts, namely, that idea and that revelation of a true faith, which in answer to the confusion of Babel, works not toward the hegemony of one culture or one people, but rather toward the realization of that Church of Pentecost, that Spirit speaking all tongues and seeking all peoples.

Let no one forget however that there had to be a Confucius and a Buddha, a Galileo and a Newton, a Montesquieu, a John Locke, a Thomas Jefferson, a Saint Paul, a Saint Augustine, a Father Ricci, in the course of this long gestation from mythos to logos to Johannine Logos, for us to be able to say here today in all tranquillity that Christ walks not only on the waters of the Sea of Galilee, but also by the banks of the mountain rivers of Ifugao, and by the shoreline among the fishermen of Navotas, Rizal.