

A Sociologist Comments on Sommerville: The Whole is *Less* than the Sum of its Parts

DAVID YAMANE[†]

President Harry S. Truman was apparently no great fan of the ambiguities of empirical social science. Confronted with economic advisors who offered analyses of the “on the one hand . . . but on the other hand” variety, he is rumored to have exclaimed: “Would someone please tell me where the hell I can find a one-handed economist?!” At the risk of driving my fellow social scientists of religion to a Trumanesque response, I must begin this comment by highlighting my own ambiguous feelings about Professor Sommerville’s essay.

On the one hand, I agree with almost every individual point made in the paper, and especially its critique of the critics of secularization. On the other hand, the relationship of those points to existing work on secularization is insufficiently developed. Consequently, at the same time the individual points are unobjectionable, the overall contribution of the paper to the debates over secularization is unremarkable.

This comment is colored by my recent experience at the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in San Diego, at which critics and defenders of secularization once again failed to engage in any constructive debate over the theory of secularization and its alternatives. Elsewhere, I have argued that part of the problem with these debates — or lack thereof — is that “new paradigm” critics have misrepresented the “old” secularization paradigm by unjustly simplifying the paradigm through selective citation (Yamane 1997: 113–14, Table 1). Sommerville’s essay similarly fails to advance the debate by not systematically relating his arguments to the existing literature.

Too often, Sommerville refers to supporters and (especially) critics of secularization without naming them, a practice which can only serve to confuse an already confusing debate. For example, when he writes that the secularization thesis “is often thought of as an aspect of Modernization Theory,” I want to know by whom? And when he claims that “some of those attacking the [secularization] thesis seem to imply that they are closing off any further discussion of secularization,” I want him to name names. This is not to mention the evasive wording of the second sentence of the essay, “The *general drift* of such discussion is to deny secularization” (emphasis added). What scholars, I want to know, are part of that drift? Certainly the discussion is not drifting on its own. Failing to cite authors is unfair to those being implicitly criticized and it makes it impossible for the reader to assess the validity and importance of the arguments being criticized and the alternatives being proposed. Moreover, I do not think that correcting these omissions is simply a matter of adding a few citations here and there. Sommerville simply has not engaged the literature on secularization sufficiently to make a useful contribution to that literature.

At the outset of his essay he acknowledges the “considerable confusion on the subject” of secularization, and asserts “it is time for someone to declare the rules for using the term.” In fact, such rules have already been declared, *twice* in recent years (Chaves 1994; Yamane

[†] David Yamane is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI 53706. Email: yamane@ssc.wisc.edu.

1997), a point that Sommerville fails to acknowledge, much less to take into account in presenting his own rules.

The rules Sommerville proceeds to lay out bear a strong resemblance to the rules Chaves offers in his 1994 essay just noted. Chaves builds on Dobbelaere (1981) and others in arguing that secularization is best conceptualized not as the decline of religion but as the declining scope of religious authority on three analytical levels (societal, organizational, and individual). Each of Sommerville's first five rules for using the term secularization can more or less easily be fitted into Chaves's framework. Uses 1 to 3 — differentiation, transformation, and transfer — can be understood as three aspects of the same process of societal-level (or institutional-level) secularization. And use 4 — shift of attention — addresses one of the processes of individual-level secularization. Use 5 distinguishes between societal-level secularization and individual-level secularization (structure vs. persons, role-structures vs. those filling roles).

Again, my problem is not that I disagree with Sommerville's individual points. Rather, I question the overall contribution of the work. For example, although his distinction in use 5 between societal and individual-level secularization is *extremely important* in deflating the claims of many critics of secularization, who tend to focus exclusively on the individual-level (Yamane 1997: 115), it is a point which has already been made, repeatedly, by other scholars attempting to systematize secularization theory (Chaves 1994; Dobbelaere 1981; Yamane 1997). I wonder, therefore, how Sommerville sees his rules for using the term secularization as superior to Chaves's? Or to Dobbelaere's? Or to my own? Unfortunately, his work is silent on this question.

Sommerville's strategy for saving secularization is to free it from the stranglehold of academic definition by embracing the multiple uses to which the term is commonly put. In my view, this is exactly the wrong way to go about revitalizing the secularization perspective in the social scientific study of religion. The fact that all of Sommerville's rules for using the term secularization can be incorporated into what I have called *neo-secularization theory* (Yamane 1997) — which centers on Chaves's respecification noted above — makes me wonder why social scientists interested in secularization would want to restrict themselves to a hodgepodge of rules when a more systematic framework is already available. Sommerville's essay has given me no reason to discontinue my attempt to elaborate and apply such a framework, and I hope "the next generation of scholars" to which he refers in closing his essay feels the same.

In conclusion, I should say that I welcome the involvement of Professor Sommerville and other members of the historical profession in the debates over secularization. Secularization is an inherently historical concept, and the future of secularization theory depends upon historical research. But historical scholarship in itself is not sufficient to advance secularization as a research programme (in Imre Lakatos's [1978] terms). Such advancement requires closer attention to and more rigorous engagement with current theorizing than the present essay evidences. By not fully engaging the ongoing debate over secularization, Sommerville has severely limited the usefulness of his contribution. The whole, as a consequence, is *less* than the sum of its parts.

NOTES

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