Mormonism and the Secularization of Religions in the Modern World
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Ernst Benz

Secularization of religions in the modern world is one of the most discussed themes among the scholars of sociology, of theology, and of history of religions today. I had the privilege of attending two of the main international discussions of that theme, the “Salzburger Humanismusgespräche” (September 1970) and the International Colloquy on Secularization in Rome (January 1976). The general impression of both colloquies was that of a happy confusion, which is very typical for conferences of learned specialists. Some sociologists taught the imminent definite collapse of religion; others admitted that this decay seemed to be unavoidable under the present situation, but that there may be a small chance of the survival of religion in case of unpredictable catastrophes. Marxists like Ernest Bloch attacked Christianity because of the fact that the Roman inquisition burned thousands of witches, and even neo-Marxists like Max Horkheimer came back to the theme of burnt witches, as if Christians through centuries had done nothing else than to burn witches.

But just this impression of happy confusion encourages me to condense the broad variety of contradictory statements into some very few and I hope understandable concepts:

There is one basic understanding of secularization of religions in the modern world, which is very widely spread among the leading groups of modern sociologists, and that says that religion in all its historical forms is more and more disappearing from modern society and from the consciousness of modern man, which means that modern life and secularization are identical. Secularization not only concerns the shrinking influence of religious institutions, especially of the institutional churches, on the public life, but also the diminishing influence of religion on the self-understanding of modern man and especially on his ethical behavior. Secularization in this broadest sense is desacralization—the loss of consciousness of the holiness of life not only in the social structures, but also in the private sphere of man. Of special importance is the assertion that this process is irreversible, it cannot be stopped anymore, and that means religion has no future at all; it still survives as a vanishing phenomenon in some marginal fields of society, in some area of cultural hinterland, but its destiny is sealed.
This concept of secularization seen from the standpoint of history of modern ideas, in spite of its claim to be based on facts and critical observations, sounds a little suspicious because of its surprising resemblance with the concept of religion developed by Karl Marx in the footsteps of Ludwig Feuerbach. According to Marx, religion is necessarily dying out from itself as the result of the progress of the socialist society, and this dying out of religion is irreversible, because religion is based on an ideological self-deception of man, keeping man in the state of an opiate dream of a pretended better beyond, which hinders him from settling his life in this world by his own force and from building up here the perfect socialist society.

Yet it would be dishonest not to admit that there are some real historical reasons for the rise of a strong process of secularization in modern times. This process began in its conspicuous form in the time of enlightenment of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries as a direct consequence and reaction upon the terrific religious wars, during which the Christian gospel of love was so thoroughly compromised by the fighting Christian churches themselves. There arose a sharp criticism of the traditional religions and of their established institutions among the leading spirits of the epoch. The criticism of religious doctrines and institutions of this “First Enlightenment” was at first represented by only a small minority of intellectuals and scholars, but with the spreading of the modern natural sciences and the extension of public education of the modern school and university-system in the following centuries, we reach today the epoch of the so-called “Second Enlightenment,” which means that the state of merely rationalistic and scientific interpretation of nature, history, and man has not reached the broad masses and modelled the whole consciousness of modern society. We have to admit that the religious institutions were by themselves the main reason and stumblingblock of the general criticism of religion because of the discrepancy of their own theological pretension and highly sublime self-interpretation on the one side and the deficiency of their practical behavior on the other side.

As a matter of fact, secularization is a phenomenon typical for all living world religions, for Judaism and Islam as well as for Hinduism and for Buddhism. There are some peculiarities among the different types of secularization in the religions in question, and there exist very interesting studies of the typical form of secularization, for example, in Hinduism and Buddhism, but we cannot enter here and today into the details of this side of the problem. I suggest to limit our inquiry of the phenomenon to the secularization of modern Christianity with a special outlook on Mormonism.

Here let us begin with a critical distinction, which is the more necessary as most of the scholars of sociology did not take it into consideration. Basically there are two types of secularization:
The first one is the type already mentioned at the beginning, the dis-
appearing of the concept of the holy, the negation of the transcendent ori-
gin of our world and our human life, the desacralization of social and 
private life, the limitation of our self-understanding on a merely rational 
worldly concept of the rules of our social and private life and of our situa-
tion in the natural universe, with the general tendency to eliminate the rest 
of religion also from the marginal areas where it still survives, especially 
from the ethical field.

But there is a second type of secularization which is typical and essential 
for Christianism. The main idea of the Christian faith is God’s self-manifestation 
in this our world through Jesus Christ, and God’s self-realization in this our 
world through the power and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. And this involves 
a quite different positive type of secularization, which means God’s way of 
secularization. In a very pointed formulation we could say: Secularization 
is the way of divine incarnation. God’s will, God’s power, God’s spirit will 
penetrate the matter of the world to model and shape it according to his 
own will, for modelling mankind, for building up His kingdom. Martin 
Luther says in his commentary to the first chapter of the first book of 
Moses: “The Holy Spirit does not like to move always upon the face of the 
waters like a goose, he will penetrate and work.”

Considering this type of secularization we must as historians admit 
that Mormonism is the best example of this positive secularization of the 
Christian gospel because it was driven from its very beginning by the aim 
to prepare and even to anticipate the promise of the coming kingdom of 
God. Mormons were so strongly and directly and so verbally convinced 
of the reality of the message of Christ—“The kingdom of heaven is at 
hand” (Matthew 3:2)—that they began to anticipate it on the American 
soil by cultivating vast areas, by building cities after cities in which they 
gathered their people as citizens of the coming kingdom of God. The per-
secution and the destruction of their holy places drove them finally into the 
western desert, and there they fulfilled the most admirable and astonishing 
work of making, as you say, the desert blossom under the most atrocious 
exterior conditions of nature, of climate, of absence of material resources.

Let me put for a moment the Mormon concept of the kingdom of God 
into the framework of Christian eschatology in general. In the time of Jesus 
there were three different types of eschatological expecting in Israel side 
by side:

The first one was a merely political hope to overcome the Roman con-
querrors and to reestablish an independent Jewish state under the guidance 
of the Messiah in this world with the center in Jerusalem. The Messiah was 
expected to be a political leader, sent by God, who by the help of God’s 
miraculous power would fulfill his work of liberation of the people. In the
New Testament we find several examples of such cases of Messianic political rebellions trying to expel the Romances from Israel and to build up an independent Jewish state. Jesus himself was condemned by the Roman political authorities and sentenced to death as such a Messianic rebel.

There was another more pietist group of believers who did not expect the foundation of an earthly kingdom of a political Messiah, but the coming of the heavenly kingdom, the manifestation of the heavenly Jerusalem, brought down by the heavenly “Son of Man,” the apparition of the new heaven and the new earth, in which the chosen people of all times and generations participated in the state of resurrection. But these two different forms of expectation and of hope were not so clearly separated from each other in the hearts of the believers.

We find very soon, already in Saint Paul’s letters, a third kind of expectation: The resurrected Christ will return to this earth in glory and will establish with his chosen people a kingdom for a thousand years on earth, a millennium, and will rule the world with them during the time in which Satan is bound. Only after a thousand years of the rule of Christ the rest of the promises of the Apocalypse will be fulfilled: the last visitation of the Church of Christ, the last judgment, the resurrection of the dead, and the appearance of the heavenly Jerusalem with its golden gates and its walls of diamonds, jasper, and emeralds and with its river of the water of life.

We can observe during the long history of Christianity that this expectation of the millennium fascinated the Christian believers much more than any other merely abstract theological concepts of the kingdom of God, because it excited much more the human hope of salvation and of fulfillment of the divine promise, it fascinated much more the human imagination, it impelled much more the human energies to work directly for the coming of the kingdom of God, it inspired much more the purpose to accelerate its coming by human collaboration and to prepare for and even to anticipate it here in this world.

This expectation of the millennium produced quite unexpected political and social consequences. Already in Jesus’ time there were people who tried to take the kingdom of heaven by force (see Matthew 11:12). Sometimes this millenarist movement also took the form of a political revolution as in, for example, the millenarist movement of Thomas Müntzer, the revolutionary contemporary of Martin Luther. Müntzer was convinced that it was necessary to eliminate first the enemies of the kingdom of God, the princes and the bishops of this time, by the power of the sword, accelerating so by an open rebellion the coming of the kingdom of God. His revolt was shot down by the artillery of the Protestant and Catholic princes and bishops.
The Mormons differed from all other millenarian movements of Christian history by two reasons:

First, their program to assemble the chosen people of God in an own reign or empire or kingdom or state or church was realized under the colonial conditions of the United States, first in the Middle West, and later in the Far West. There was at that time still empty land enough to build up such an own holy state by the work of their own hands and to extend this planning of an own church-state or state-church of the Latter-day Saints even to the enormous size of “Deseret,” covering most of the western territories of the United States to the coast of the Pacific Ocean.

But there is a second still more striking peculiarity of Mormon millenarism: in the Book of Mormon the traditional eschatology finds its new geographic center in America. The traditional idea of the Christian “Heilsgeschichte”—history of salvation—with its center in Jerusalem, in Palestine, in Minor Asia, in Europe, gets a new pole in America, first in Jackson County, Missouri, and then in Salt Lake City in Utah. The sacred history of the redemption of mankind, described in the Old and the New Testament, finds its parallel in the sacred history of America, described in the Book of Mormon. Europeans generally do not understand very clearly what that means, and I had always some difficulty to explain it to my students. Prior to Joseph Smith, America as a continent seemed to be in a certain sense excluded from the traditional biblical history of salvation. America is never mentioned in the Bible. For the Puritan immigrants, America was the wilderness, including the American Indians, a wilderness provided by God to European religious refugees for the plantation for a better church in the desert, better than the older European churches corrupted by popes, bishops, and kings. The American continent appeared to the European immigrants as a wild place of refuge, a wilderness without history, a tabula rasa offered by God for a new beginning. The historical consciousness of the Puritans was always that of immigrants.

The Book of Mormon brings a supplementary description of God’s deeds on the American soil. America in the Book of Mormon is no more considered as a wilderness devoid of history but has its own long history of people and tribes and generations, including the whole pre-Columbian period, and this history of America is sacred history, history of salvation from its beginning. Even the history of the Jews finds its parallel on the American continent by the presence of the lost ten tribes of Israel or at least of some of them. This was one of my first experiences in this country. In 1960 I had an invitation to be a guest professor at Harvard Divinity School. In that time the visa regulations were still so complicated that they gave me an immigration visa. So I had to go to the immigration office at Boston. I was waiting there for a long time in the midst of a crowd of Italians,
Syrians, Greeks and other newcomers. At the wall of the office I discovered a poster, representing the famous Indian chief standing on the rock at the coast of Plymouth, looking at the approaching *Mayflower* and crying: “Hey, foreigners!” It was a very nice comfort for all these timid newcomers to discover that this continent is populated by foreigners like them. With the only exception of the Mormons, who belong together with the Indians to the old-timers of this continent.

That means the Mormons are the only true Americans with a fully developed American historical consciousness, without any minority complex of immigrants. They belong to their American continent from ancient times, not only from the late *Mayflower* times. This historical consciousness directly inspired, for example, the studies of pre-Columbian archaeology and ethnology which are so highly developed at this university. And I would say Mormons alone from all the rest of Americans have the privilege to celebrate not only centenaries like the latecomers of this continent, but millenaries of American history and prehistory if they want to do so. Mormonism is the producer and the most realistic and practical result of the positive way of secularization of the gospel of the kingdom of heaven at hand in America, including, in the most advanced point of secularization, the printing of their own dollar bills of the Kirtland Safety Society, Anti-banking Company, signed by Joseph Smith, Israelite.

Now, I have talked about two types of secularization and I have to underline that there is a danger also in the positive line of secularization. The process of secularization in the sense of developing the original impulses of the gospel, of the power of the Holy Spirit, can proceed so far into worldliness, that is comes in the advanced state of it to an interruption or a loss of contact with the original or heavenly source and with the heavenly aim. The vision of the heavenly kingdom of God may disappear and may be more and more absorbed by a merely social, technical, economic interpretation of the aim of mankind. “Vertical eschatology,” the expectation of the “kingdom of heaven which is at hand,” turns over into a merely “horizontal eschatology,” the expectation of the perfect society of this world only.

Both dangers are threatening Christianity today. In the second half of the nineteenth century an American of German origin, Walter Rauschenbusch, discovered and propagated the so-called “social gospel,” which influenced very quickly modern Protestant theology. The heavenly kingdom seemed to be no more relevant; the main aim of Christian theology was said to settle first the material social needs of this world. And evidently it was necessary in that time of industrialization to emphasize the social responsibility of the Christian churches in a socially and economically changing world, but some theologians went so far in this program of the
social gospel that they forgot the Everlasting Gospel of the heavenly kingdom. Today we hear day by day from the newspapers about the worldwide activity of the Ecumenical Council of Churches to help underdeveloped countries to overcome their social troubles, an activity based on merely social and even political understanding of a so-called “theology of liberation” including revolution and terrorism; the whole activity seems to move more and more in the line of a merely “horizontal eschatology” with all its political consequences. This danger of forgetting the heavenly origin and the heavenly aim of the gospel is evidently also threatening the Mormonism of today. I am not entitled to talk in the name of Mormonism, and I want to avoid the slightest suspicion of arrogance to do so, but after all my studies of the religious sources of Mormonism and of the fascinating history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and of the modern research-works on Mormon eschatology, I have the impression that Mormonism keeps in its own traditional understanding of Christian life and thought three basic concepts, which are sources of permanent spiritual reinforcement and could be antidotes to overcome this danger of a wrong secularization:

The first is the concept of the *Everlasting Gospel*, which we find in Apocalypse of St. John and which his so strongly emphasized in the Book of Mormon and in the prophecies given to Joseph Smith, recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants. It means that the basic promise, the primitive power, the original spirit and force of the gospel of Jesus Christ is not exposed to decay, to corruption or to depravation in any sense of the word. This Everlasting Gospel includes the permanent duty of universal mission, as it is said in the Apocalypse itself; and the same appeal to the permanent duty of universal mission is also expressed by Joseph Smith in Doctrine and Covenants 133:36:

> And now, verily saith the Lord, that these things might be known among you, O inhabitants of the earth, I have sent forth mine angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel, who hath appeared unto some and hath committed it unto man, who shall appear unto many that dwell on the earth. And this gospel shall be preached unto every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people. And the servants of God shall go forth, saying with a loud voice: Fear God and give glory to him, for the hour of his judgment is come.

This order demands the continuity, the permanence and universality of the spreading of the Everlasting Gospel, which represents an effective antidote against the theory of the irreversible secularization of religion.

The other point of resistance, of attack, and of reconfirmation against the dangers of the wrong secularization seems to me to be the insisting upon the promises of the permanent presence of the gifts of the Holy
Spirit. Today we can observe in midst of the crisis of Christianity and of the
different Christian churches the completely unexpected rise of the so-called
“charismatic movement” or “pentecostal movement,” emerging in the dif-
ferent traditional Christian denominations, even in the Roman Catholic
Church. Many Christians, disappointed by the general progress of secular-
ization in midst of their own church, begin to rediscover the reality and the
power of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which were forgotten or neglected or
ignored in the different churches sometimes through centuries. If I look
into the history of Mormonism, I discover that The Church of Jesus Christ
of Latter-day Saints insisted from the very beginning of its dramatic history
on the powerful presence of these gifts of the Holy Spirit; they never forgot
them or ignored them. Other Christian churches are beginning to redis-
cover the imposition of hands, forgotten and ignored through the cen-
turies. Mormons practiced it permanently from the beginning. They
understood their whole history as guided by the presence of the Holy Spirit
in the form of prophecy, of advice, of confirmation, of warning, and—let
us use an otherwise unfashionable word—of miracles. What the charis-
matic movement propagated as their new discovery, can be already found
in the seventh Article of Faith of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day
Saints, formulated by Joseph Smith: “We believe in the gift of tongues,
prophecy, revelation, visions, healing, interpretation of tongues, etc. . . .”
Mormons always preserved a very living feeling and consciousness of the
presence of the Holy Spirit and of the activity of his gifts, above all of
prophecy as a living element of the guidance of the Church. Prophecy is
more than mere adaptation, more than compromise, it is the way of divine
guidance through the dangerous deserts and rocky mountains of human
history, it inspires and enables the believers in the future as it did in the past
to prepare and to anticipate so far as possible the coming kingdom of God.

There is still a third concept, which may preserve Mormons better than
others from the wrong way of secularization. This is a concept in which
they distinguish themselves from all other Christian denominations. It
concerns the understanding of the religious origin and destiny of man. It is
the idea of the incarnation of preexisting spirits in human bodies. But this
incarnation is understood in a completely different sense than we find it
expressed, for example, in the Hindu concept of incarnation. Man does not
come into this our world as a victim of his thirst for life, and the incarnated
soul is not understood to be a victim of a theft by which his heavenly gar-
ment, the heavenly pearl, is stolen from him; incarnation is not considered
a catastrophe, caused by the sin committed in an earlier life, but the human
soul descends from heaven into this bodily world to get the unique chance
to advance in the grand scale of being, in which he is to move in the eternal
worlds. The spirit descends into a body of flesh and bone because of the
great council in heaven, in which God shows the human soul the possibility to develop his force and his knowledge in full consciousness of all the difficulties awaiting him there. To this knowledge belongs also the knowledge about death. The spiritual beings pressing for incarnation know very well from the beginning that the passing of death belongs to the tasks in whose performance man has to stand the test in this world. This great council is put before the free spirits for their decision. In a free decision man enters the way of endless progression, and with the full knowledge of all the risk of it, the great law of increasing complexity, the law of endless development of all his powers in the midst of a universe becoming increasingly complex. In this concept of man there is practically no place for the sense of the loss of the consciousness of the transcendent origin and aim of man. Denying his heavenly origin, man would deny himself, would deny the sense of his life, the meaning of the community of man in which he lives, the sense of the universe in which he dwells.

This is actually, I think, the main argument against the assertion of the end of religion and the irreversibility of its secularization. This assertion ignores and even offends practically the human nature itself. Man is not only the *homo faber*, the technical man, not only the industrial and economical man, *homo economicus*, but also from the beginning the *homo religiosus*, the religious man, the man who has a *sensus numinus*, an inner sense of his transcendental origin and aim. It is that inner sense, which is described in the Book of Creation by the words: “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness . . . So God created man in his own image” (Genesis 1:26, 27). The will of developing this image of God, the will to perfection, the will to reach the end of the development of all his power given him from above is deep-rooted in man’s life; hope and aim of perfection is a basic element of life itself.

This allows me to add still a few words about the centenary of this university. With respect to the University of Marburg, which is my university, the oldest Protestant university of the world, founded as a Protestant university in 1526, it could be said that the Brigham Young University is a relatively younger institution. But this would be an inadequate consideration. If we consider the circumstances of its rise, it is a really admirable and unique foundation. Let us look at others. The Spaniards arrived in America in 1492, and they founded their first university forty-six years later in Santo Domingo in 1538; other universities were established in 1551 in Mexico and in Lima, 1562 in Guatemala, 1573 in Bogota and 1598 in Cusco. They founded them 50 to 100 years after their arrival, and that in spite of that fact that they had at their disposition all they needed for such academic foundations: learned scholars, who were monks and could easily be sent out by obedience, maintained by their monastic organizations; they
had excellent libraries and printing presses at home, providing them with all the necessary materials for study and education and with the full traditional system of academic training.

The Protestants of America were a little faster with building up an educational system of academic level: the Pilgrim fathers arrived in 1620, Harvard College was founded in 1636, sixteen years later. The Puritans also had the opportunity to import directly their scholars and their books from England and to adopt the continental academic traditions directly from the other side of the ocean. For the Mormons the task of building up a system of higher education was much more difficult. They were poor people, persecuted from the beginning, but even under these circumstances they started already in Nauvoo a university which was destroyed during the brutal expulsion. But with an indefatigable resoluteness they came back to this plan here in Utah in spite of the fact that they were fully occupied with the enormous difficulties of colonization of the country and the daily need of survival in the desert. One generation after the arrival at the Salt Lake Valley they had their own university which reached very soon the standard of the highest academic institutions of this country. This university had to be founded under the most difficult outer circumstances, far away from the academic foundations of the East coast. Even after the construction of the railway they had to build up their system of higher education under greater sacrifices.

They could do it, because for the founder of this university, Brigham Young, education was of central value in his religious thinking, a main part of religious life itself, intimately connected with his idea of eternal progress, of permanent perfection. For him education was included in the order of Jesus Christ “Be ye perfect even as your Father, which is in heaven, is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). His concept of education has its roots in its understanding of the highest aim of man, the aim to become perfect. “Intelligent beings are organized to become Gods, even the Sons of God, to dwell in the presence of Gods, and become associated with the highest intelligences that dwell in eternity. We are now in the school, and must practice upon what we receive.”

In that sense he proclaimed for his people the program to reach the highest possible standard of knowledge as an essential element of the gospel. And he says:

Not only does the religion of Jesus Christ make the people acquainted with the things of God, and develop within them moral excellence and purity, but it holds out every encouragement and inducement possible, for them to increase in knowledge and intelligence, in every branch of mechanism, or in the arts and sciences, for all wisdom, and all the arts and sciences in the world are from God, and are designed for the good of His people. (JD, 13:147)
I was very surprised to discover in Brigham Young’s writings the interpretation of a biblical idea, which is very much discussed among the pietists of my own country in Wurttemberg, the concept of sin against the Holy Ghost mentioned in Matthew 12:31: “Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men, but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men.” There were some pietists who were very much terrified by the atheistic and merely materialistic development of modern sciences, and sometimes they understood the warning of Christ against the blasphemy of the Holy Ghost as a warning against modern science. Brigham Young ignored such as anxious attitude. He says in his genial interpretation:

If we continue to learn all we can, pertaining to the salvation which is purchased and presented to us through the Son of God, is there a time when a person will cease to learn? Yes, when he has sinned against God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Ghost—God’s minister; when he has denied the Lord, defied Him and committed the sin that in the Bible is termed the unpardonable sin—the sin against the Holy Ghost. That is the time when a person will cease to learn, and from that time forth, will descend in ignorance, forgetting that which they formerly knew . . . They will cease to increase, but must decrease . . . These are the only characters who will ever cease to learn, both in time and eternity. (JD, 3:203)

So his concept of education, and with it his concept of the aim of a university, is included in his concept of perfection, which opens the human mind and fills it with a real love of knowledge and joy of wisdom. In our time, where all kinds of reform programs of education are elaborated all over the world, based on a more or less totally secularized understanding of human nature, I find it inspiring to discover in the discourses of the founder of this university words which encourage students, teachers, and scholars to study and learning as an essential element of perfection of man and of human society with its outlook on the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven. Let me close with this really ecumenical statement of Brigham Young, underlining the right way of secularization and preserving from its going wrong:

How gladly would we understand every principle pertaining to science and art, and become thoroughly acquainted with every intricate operation of nature, and with all the chemical changes that are constantly going on around us! How delightful this would be, and what a boundless field of truth and power is open for us to explore! We are only just approaching the shores of a vast ocean of information that pertains to this physical world, to say nothing of that which pertains to the heavens, to angels and to celestial beings, to the place of their habitation, to the manner of their life, and their progress to still higher degrees of perfection. (JD 9:167)
This concept of education is unique for this Brigham Young University and is worthy to be celebrated forever.

A forum address delivered 30 March 1976 at Brigham Young University. Ernst Benz is professor of religion at the University of Marburg, Germany.