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Posted: 05 Mar 2007 18:14 Post subject: March 2007: Secularism: Religious, Irreligious, Areligious

Thank you for visiting the Religion and Culture Web Forum's public discussion board for March 2007. In this thread you will find the invited responses from John Schmalzbauer and Kristen Tobey.

To leave your own response to Clark Gilpin's essay or to another posting, choose "post reply." In order to submit a comment, you must register with a personal user ID and password.

Debra Erickson
Editor, Religion and Culture Web Forum

jschmalz

Posted: 09 Mar 2007 02:15 Post subject: Secularism and Higher Education

As a sociologist who has traveled in the company of American religious historians, I was pleased to see Professor Gilpin call attention to a key difference between our disciplines: Unlike their colleagues in sociology, historians rarely integrate the story of secularization into their narratives of American religion.

As Gilpin notes, such was not always the case. In his magisterial [i]A Religious History of the American People[/i] (1972), Sydney Ahlstrom used the term in a half-dozen places (this and subsequent counts come from Amazon.com), discussing at one point the impact of "secularization" and "social differentiation" on urban religion. For a season, scholars of American religion incorporated such -ization theories into their historical interpretations.

Today the situation is quite different. Consistent with Professor Gilpin's

analysis, I have found that the secularization storyline is almost entirely absent from the leading textbooks on the history of religion in America. Such omissions suggest that Gilpin is right to call secularization a “persistent, but virtually unused theory.”

And yet there are important exceptions to this generalization. Perhaps the most extensive discussion of secularization can be found in the works of the evangelical historians George Marsden and Mark Noll. The index to Marsden’s [i]Religion and American Culture[/i] contains no fewer than 21 pages under the heading “Secularism and Secularization.” Likewise, Noll’s [i]A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada[/i] mentions secularization on 17 separate pages.

Why do evangelical historians pay so much attention to secularization? Part of the answer may lie in their autobiographies. In my book [i]People of Faith[/i], I discuss Marsden’s construction of an “autobiography of marginality,” noting the tendency of evangelical scholars to tell their life stories in ways that call attention to their outsider status.

On an institutional level, the secularization storyline serves a similar purpose, functioning as what sociologists call a “diagnostic frame.” By recounting the ways in which religion has been excluded from colleges and universities, it helps build a case for religious scholarship. This is precisely the approach Marsden takes in [i]The Soul of the American University[/i], a work that mentions the word “secularization” on 44 of its 480 pages.

Marsden is not alone in applying the secularization narrative to American higher education. In the middle years of the twentieth century, historians such as Richard Hofstadter celebrated the emancipation of universities from the shackles of religious tradition. More recently, a growing number of scholars have chronicled the marginalization of religion in the academy, calling attention to the ambiguous legacies of secularization.

This burgeoning literature could profit greatly from Professor Gilpin’s rethinking of the concept of secularism. Though Gilpin did not focus his attention on the academy, his analysis suggests fruitful new directions for analyzing the place of religion on campus.

First, his spatial approach to secularism (drawn from Talal Asad) could help scholars think about the intellectual architecture of the modern academy. The historians Jon Roberts and James Turner argue that the compartmentalization of knowledge into disciplinary boxes led scholars to “think small,” excluding questions of meaning and purpose from academic discourse. Scholars need to reflect more on the spatial dimensions of secularization.

Secondly, Gilpin’s use of Harvey Cox’s [i]The Secular City[/i] is especially relevant to higher education given the genesis of this classic in the

student Christian movement of the 1960s. One of the key chapters focuses on "The Church and the Secular University." There Cox ridicules the Protestant mainline for constructing campus ministry buildings "next to the world of the university," while praising the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship for opting to "live in the same world with everyone else." More research is needed on the ways that religious organizations interact with the purportedly secular space of the campus.

Finally, John McGreevy's discussion of anti-Catholicism and the secularization of the public schools (an example of Gilpin's "irreligious secularism") is directly applicable to higher education. Elsewhere in [i]Catholicism and American Freedom[/i], McGreevy shows how the academic advocates of "progress" and "modernity" harbored deep-seated prejudices against Catholicism and religious belief.

In recent years, new scholarship on the secularization of the academy has enriched our understanding of religion and American culture. Gilpin's rethinking of secularism will help ensure that secularization theory remains relevant to this emerging area of research.

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John Schmalzbauer
Department of Religious Studies
Missouri State University

Anonymous

Posted: 09 Mar 2007 18:12 Post subject: Kristen Tobey's response to Clark Gilpin

Professor Gilpin's essay, which describes three modes of secularism operating at three distinct historical moments, is especially instructive for me in providing a way to untangle the discursive knots that seem inevitable when those three modes vie for normative supremacy in the same setting. The essay cites John McGreevy, who shows that one of the places where secular and religious values—or, as Gilpin suggests, religious values that are more coextensive with democratic ideals and those that are less so—have been at odds is the classroom.

Another is the courtroom. With the "religious/irreligious/areligious" framework in mind, I would like to look briefly at a civil disobedience case involving Catholic activists from the Plowshares nuclear disarmament movement. In one trial document alone, brief as it is, all three modes of secularism are at play, and Gilpin's analysis of each is helpful in assessing what may at first seem like a simple contest between non-religious and religious values.

In her opening statement for the 2002 Sacred Earth and Space Plowshares Trial, Sister Ardeth Platte first asks God to bless the jury members and be with them in their decision making process. The prosecuting attorney interrupts: "Your Honor, I object...I don't think this

is a proper opening statement. She is not talking about the evidence. She is talking about God." Here is a clear example of irreligious secularism, whereby public space is deemed an inappropriate setting for God-talk. But the judge overrules the objection: "Well, I respectfully disagree. She is actually making a rhetorical or poetic transition from that statement to fair comment on the evidence in the form of its description."

The judge's response suggests a different kind of what Gilpin calls areligious secularism. Gilpin shows us, via Dan McAdams, examples of people whose life stories include unacknowledged religious elements; conversely, Sister Platte talks overtly about religion, only to be told that she's not really talking about religion. Religious content is, at least by the judge if not by the defendant, distanced from its source, is understood as merely "rhetorical," and is neither favored nor disfavored, at least not explicitly, in the testimony.

The defendant herself, of course, is anything but unmoored from the religious content of her statement; in fact, her religious commitments allow her to simultaneously distance herself from and participate fully in the courtroom's secular space. Manifesting a kind of religious secularism, Sister Platte believes that her religious values are best lived out not in a cloister but in public spaces such as the military facilities where the civil disobediences are performed, and then in a courtroom. But at the same time, hers is a higher law. At one point in her opening statement Sister Platte responds to an objection from the prosecution by saying, "I'm sorry, I don't understand all the laws here." Given the number of civil disobedience trials in which she has been involved, one can rightly be suspicious of that claim. But Sister Platte's suggestion, made both implicitly and explicitly throughout the trial, allows her later to liken her religious values to the laws of conscience to which judge and jury are subject.

In the space of secularism, then, not only are the bounds of the justice system continually figured and refigured; also, the ways that various actors interpret the secular contribute to identity-formation: The prosecuting attorney can present himself as someone who is committed to maintaining a properly irreligious courtroom; the judge can show that he is also thus committed but at the same time understands that claims of religion might have a place there, at least as rhetorical techniques; and the defendant can use claims of religion to show how she is both like and unlike the other parties involved, and to assert a public identity that is crucial to the Plowshares' self-understanding. That public identity is predicated on a certain degree of social marginality; but it also hinges upon not only a willingness to participate in secularized discourse—which, according to Jeffrey Stout and seconded by Gilpin, needs not to silence religious convictions but to allow for a plurality of religious assumptions—but also a savvy in doing so.

Professor Gilpin's essay, then, is useful in unpacking the different kinds

of credence given to religious talk, even within the same secularized space, especially in settings like the courtroom where discursive contests have tangible outcomes not only for the participants but for all of us as citizens.

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Kristen Tobey
University of Chicago

wcgilpin

📄 Posted: 10 Mar 2007 14:05 Post subject: Secularism

I greatly appreciate the incisive and imaginative responses from John Schmalzbauer and Kristen Tobey to my Webforum essay on Secularism.

Mr. Schmalzbauer is exactly right to point to the use of secularization concepts by evangelical historians, especially when they are writing about higher education. I excluded this material from my essay, because I thought that George Marsden and others used secularization in the older sense of "transfer of authority," and I didn't want to divert attention from my "spatial" model of the secular. But, of course, Mr. Schmalzbauer rightly describes the university campus as just the sort of space I ought to be thinking about!



Ms. Tobey takes us into the courtroom as a space of the secular, vividly describing the trial of Plowshares leader Sister Ardeth Platte. In this case, Ms. Tobey complicates the spatial model of the secular by demonstrating that my modes of secularism--religious, irreligious, and areligious--can overlap and interpenetrate within the single space of a court of law, as different actors interpret that space differently. The spaces I describe are both literal and metaphorical spaces, and Ms. Tobey encourages me to think further and discriminate more carefully, in order to illuminate situations such as the one she describes.

Thanks to both respondents! Clark Gilpin

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