SECULARIZATION: SOME HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES
SECULARIZAÇÃO: ALGUMAS PERSPECTIVAS HISTÓRICAS

Richard Allen Lebrun

Professor Emérito da Universidade de Manitoba, Canadá

Abstract: This paper argues that "secularization" may not be as problematic for the future of Christianity (or religion in general) as some fear. In the first place, it must be characterized as a modern "Christian" problem that emerged only after the cooption of Christianity by the Roman Empire (following the "Constantinian revolution") made "union of church and state" gradually become the pattern for Christian states in Europe. Our attempt here is to discuss in some detail the distinctive features of this long historical process and its outcome in contemporary societies.

Keywords: Secularization, Church, State, European societies, History.

Resumo: O presente artigo defende que o fenômeno contemporâneo conhecido como "Secularização" pode não ser um problema tão grande para o futuro do Cristianismo (ou da religião em geral) quanto alguns receiam. Em primeiro lugar, o fenômeno deve ser entendido como um problema específico do cristianismo moderno, surgido apenas depois que a cooptação da religião cristã pelo Império Romano (em conseqüência da assim chamada "Revolução constantiniana") tornou a "união entre Igreja e Estado" a situação padrão para os estados cristãos da Europa. Nossa intenção aqui é discutir em detalhe as características específicas deste longo processo histórico e suas conseqüências para as sociedades contemporâneas.

Palavras-chave: Secularização, Igreja, Estado, Sociedades Européias, História.

Along with Pope Benedict XVI, many Christians have recently expressed concern about what they perceive as the "secularization" of contemporary society. While not denying that some of the issues involved in the social and political changes underway today may have troublesome aspects for religious believers, this paper will argue that viewed in historical perspective, "secularization" may not be as problematic for the future of Christianity (or religion in general) as some fear.

In the first place, it can be suggested that "secularization" can to a large extent be characterized as a modern "Christian" problem. Historically, world-wide, most societies have not exhibited a clear differentiation between "religion" and society, politics, and economics. If we reflect on the patterns of life in the societies of the ancient Near East, the early Roman Republic, the so-called "primitive" societies that Europeans encountered in Africa, the Americas, the South Pacific (including Australia and New Zealand), and most Islamic societies (at least until recently), "religion" was not something distinct from other aspects of life. In the world in which Christianity was born, the Roman Empire had developed a strategy of incorporating the gods of conquered areas into the pantheon of the gods honored by the Roman state. Of course the Jews, with their strict monotheism, were an anomaly in this pattern. In practice, however, the Jews had won accommodation within the Roman state, and the early Christians were at first perceived and treated as Jews.

Both Jesus and his disciples proclaimed that His kingdom was not of this world, and the first generations of Christians did their best to reassure the Roman state that they respected its authority (which Paul described as being from God) and that, rather than posing any threat, they were loyal and exemplary citizens. Christians, however, refused to worship the Roman gods or the deified Roman emperors, and because they also tended to be secretive about their worship services, they were regarded with suspicion by other citizens of the Empire and periodically persecuted by the imperial authorities.

Nevertheless, despite the persecutions, by the early fourth century Christians were becoming an increasingly large and important minority (perhaps 10% of the population) and a political problem for the Empire. The issue

for the emperor was how to incorporate the Christian community and its leaders, its bishops, into existing structures. The emperor Constantine undertook to resolve the problem by moving to a policy of toleration for all. However the so-called "Constantinian Revolution" soon went beyond this accommodation to a policy of state support for the Christian Church. On the assumption that proper worship of God (or the gods) was necessary for the success and prosperity of the Empire, Constantine and his successors began treating the Christian Church and its clergy as the Roman state had treated the state-supported pagan priesthood in the past.

For better or for worse, the Church accepted this new relationship with the secular power, and soon Augustine, the great bishop of Hippo whose writings would have enormous influence for centuries, crafted a Scriptural justification for enlisting the coercive power of the state for the enforcement of religious uniformity. In his exegesis of Luke 14:16-23, a parable about the rich man whose friends decline to attend his wedding feast and who instructs his servants to search the by-ways for strangers, and "compel them to come in,"(in context no more than what was required to overcome their natural hesitancy on being unexpectedly invited to a banquet with their social superiors), Augustine stretched this to a justification of the use of state coercion to suppress his heterodox opponents, compelling them all to accept his own brand of orthodoxy. "Compel them to come in" would be the fundamental text of Christian intolerance for centuries. The corruptive effects of this church-state alliance led eventually to all kinds of abuses: the persecution of heretics, of Jews, the Inquisition, the toleration of slavery, and the rape of cultures in lands conquered by the "Catholic" states of Europe. It was only with the Vatican's "Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past" statement (December 1999) that there was official recognition and apology for these crucial errors of doctrine and praxis.

Even before Constantine, the Church had developed successful institutions for the social support of its members (care for the poor, widows, orphans, the sick, etc.) Within a generation of Constantine, the Empire had made Christianity its official religion, granted privileges to its clergy, incorporated its clergy into its structures, and revised many of its laws to reflect Christian moral standards. With the collapse of the Empire in the West, the bishops and

clergy naturally, and perhaps inevitably, took over many of the roles that had previously been the responsibility of the state. For example, successive bishops of Rome (the popes) exercised leadership in defending the city against the barbarian invasions, and in time were recognized as the rulers of the area of what eventually became known as the papal states. Increasingly, as well, the Church provided "justice" through a developing system of church courts that came to exercise jurisdiction over such matters as marriage, inheritance, and other domestic issues as well as the discipline of its clergy.

This intermingling of civic and religious affairs continued in the centuries that followed, and was confirmed under the rule of Charlemagne, the Frankish king who consciously undertook to re-establish the order of the Roman Empire in Western Europe. Crowned Holy Roman Emperor by the pope in the year 800, Charlemagne assumed responsibility for good order in both "church" and "state," and named and used bishops as instruments of rule over his far-flung empire. Popes and bishops readily accepted the support of the Carolingian state in their efforts to Christianize a still largely "barbarian" Western Europe, and to convert the still pagan Slavs of Eastern Europe.

In the "dark age" that followed the division of the Carolingian realm among Charlemagne's heirs and as a consequence of new attacks and invasions by the Vikings, Hungarians, and Saracens, the Church as well as the successor states to Charlemagne's empire nearly disintegrated. When order was gradually re-established more or less from the bottom up through the evolution of "feudal" arrangements that combined personal, governmental, and proprietary relationships, churchmen found themselves deeply enmeshed in all of this, with bishops not only being named by secular rulers but being "invested" with the symbols of their office by these same authorities. The great "Investiture Controversy" (1075-1122) triggered by Pope Gregory VII's attempt to prohibit such investitures was at least partially successful in re-establishing more autonomy for the Church The Gregorian Reform movement associated with this pope's name led in time to an enormous growth in the institution of the papacy itself and to what some historians have labeled a kind of "papal monarchy" over Christendom during the High Middle Ages. The development of Canon Law and an elaborate system of Church courts (and a system of

papal taxation to finance this system) as well as the extensive use of papal legates extended ecclesiastical and papal authority over many aspects of European life.

On the secular side, the Investiture Controversy also helped prevent the German Holy Roman Emperors from re-establishing anything like the European-wide authority that Charlemagne had enjoyed or even developing effective central political authority over their German lands. Elsewhere, what had developed as 'feudal monarchies" gradually evolved into "national monarchies" in countries like France and England. As these monarchies undertook the "recovery" of governmental functions that had come to be exercised by the Church in the centuries since Constantine, they inevitably encountered opposition from churchmen who resisted this process. The famous clash (1296-1303) between King Philip the Fair of France and Pope Boniface VIII over extending the government's taxing powers over clergymen and the Church exemplifies this tension. In historical perspective, this process of "recovery" by the state of what are properly governmental functions was one important factor in what we now recognize and characterize as "secularization."

The Church's capacity for resisting this development was much weakened by its own internal crises. The so-called "Babylonian Captivity" of the papacy in Avignon in southern France from 1305 to 1378, the subsequent Great Schism (1378-1418) which saw two and then three rival popes claiming the papal office, and the Conciliar Movement that eventually helped bring the Schism to an end – but in doing so also attempted at the Council of Constance (1414-1418) to substitute a "revolutionary" theory of church government by councils as an alternative to "papal monarchy" – all gravely weakened papal authority. When Pope Martin V sought to implement some of the reforms demanded by the Council of Constance by negotiating a series of concordats with individual states, the interests of the secular rulers had to be accorded recognition. And when Pope Eugenius IV finally triumphed over the Council of Basel (1431-1449), he did so only by granting concessions to the rulers to win their support. In short, the popes defeated the conciliar movement at the price of sharing their authority over the Church with secular rulers. The unity of the Church was preserved and the attempted "constitutional revolution" of the conciliarists defeated, but a long step had been taken towards the national

churches of the Protestant Reformation. In France, which would remain Catholic in the sixteenth century, this sharing of authority was institutionalized by the Concordat of Bologna of 1516, a deal that ensured the king the right to select bishops and archbishops, and the pope a steady income from the French faithful.

The secular state's recovery of governmental functions was subsequently favoured by the development of royal "absolutism" by strong monarchs like King Louis XIV in France, a pattern that was soon copied by other European kings. In the eighteenth century, even Church "reform" (e.g., the re-organization and consolidation of religious congregations of men and women) was firmly under the control of the Catholic monarchs. In Austria, to cite what is perhaps the most telling example, Emperor Joseph II carried out a wholesale reform of ecclesiastical institutions in the lands under his control despite strong but ineffectual opposition from the papacy. And in France, on the eve of the Revolution, symptomatically, the "grievance lists" of all three estates looked to the coming Estates-General (rather than to Rome) for reform of the Church.

The process of "differentiation" between the institutions of the state and the Church (perhaps a more neutral term than "secularization") was enormously accelerated by the French Revolution. The abolition of "privilege" and the establishment of "equality before the law" took away the privileged status of clergymen. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which was the revolutionary National Assembly's attempt to transfer the monarchy's authority over the Church to itself, to associate the Church with the Revolution, and to reform the Church according to its own lights, failed disastrously when almost all the bishops and about half of the parish clergy refused to cooperate. The subsequent schism within the French Church, the association of the Church with the cause of the Counter-Revolution, and the persecution of the "non-juring" clergy and then the Constitutional Church by the Jacobin dictatorship during the Terror came close to destroying Christianity in France. The wars associated with the Revolution in France and Napoleon's rule spread the ideas and the institutional changes introduced in France to much of Western Europe.

Some of these changes were temporarily reversed but also stabilized

by the Concordat that Napoleon negotiated with the papacy in 1801. Disliking separation of Church and State (which had been the situation in France since 1795), Napoleon believed that religion must be in the hands of the state so that the government could be assured of systematic surveillance over it. By the Concordat the state was accorded the right to name the bishops and the pope's right to institute them canonically was assured; the Church agreed not seek recovery of its confiscated property; salaries for bishops and parish priests would be paid by the state; and the practice of religion would be subject to whatever police regulations were required for public order. Despite his objections to the "organic articles" embodying these regulations that Napoleon attached to the Concordat, the pope acquiesced for the sake of ending the schism and the restoration of Catholicism in France. The restored Church was at first almost obsequious in its praise, but there were soon tensions over the Emperor's mistreatment of Pius VII and his growing despotism. The heritage of both the Revolution's attack on the Church and Napoleon's re-imposition of control over the Church have troubled church-state relations in France right down to the present day.

In the immediate post-1815 situation, the restored Bourbon monarchy regarded the Church as a powerful support for its rule and it was generally believed on both sides that union of Church and state would make France safe for both. The monarchy retained the Concordat of 1801, which served to maintain the government's control of the Church, while the Church (i.e., the pope and the French bishops) supported the Bourbons loyally as a safeguard against the possible recurrence of the Revolution and accepted the Concordat as a necessary condition for the support of the state. It was an arrangement whereby the Church's authority and activities received government sanction and financial support. Churchmen and zealous Catholic laymen sought and to a considerable extent succeeded in having the government legislate enforcement of the moral teachings of the Church. However, this program of Church intervention in the formulation of public policy was denounced as "clericalism" by many, especially those who still treasured the liberal heritage of the Enlightenment and Revolution, and inevitably provoked an "anti-clerical" response. Tensions and conflicts between the two traditions plagued French politics all through the nineteenth century, culminating in the Third Republic's unilateral abrogation of the Concordat in 1905 and the legal separation of

church and state. So if the Restoration period saw an attempt to halt and even reverse the trend, in the long run it was the lay state and "secularization" that triumphed in France, and eventually in most European countries.

Another major force pushing in the same direction has been the development of modern industrial economies, which have tended to involve the state in such areas as health care, social welfare, pensions, etc. (areas that had once been left to families and the church). Modern economies require a high level of general education. From at least the mid-19th century, in modern nation states (like France, England, Germany, the United States, and, in turn, countries in other parts of the world, including Latin America), governments have taken responsibility for the provision of free compulsory primary education. Similar evolution can be observed in health care and the provision of pensions. These development were not intended to "take things away from God" as churchmen in traditionally Catholic countries often complained.

It has taken a long time for the Church to recognize these developments and to reconcile itself to them. In Canada, for example, the so-called "Quiet Revolution" in the province of Quebec in the 1960s saw the dismantling of an elaborate system whereby the Quebec Church, in collaboration with the provincial government, had operated educational institutions from the primary through post-secondary levels, hospitals, orphanages, and other social institutions. In this case, the leaders of the Church in Quebec quietly accepted the "secularization" of social institutions of the province, and thereby avoided the kind of "anti-clerical" backlash that opposition to developments of this kind had provoked in an earlier period and in other countries.

Still another factor influencing the "secularization" of modern societies is the changing nature and composition of these societies. Increasingly, in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, patterns of colonization, emigration, immigration, and floods of refugees worldwide, have been creating multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious societies. In effect, demographic forces have added their weight to the Enlightenment's ideal of toleration In modern societies, for the sake of peace, order, and stability, governments have tended to become "secular" institutions, imposing one set of laws on all citizens, without regard for the particular religious beliefs of various groups of

citizens.

In September 2005, for example, in Canada in the province of Ontario (the largest, most populous province in the country), there was an important announcement by the provincial premier, Dalton McGuinty, that he would move quickly "to ban all religious arbitration in the Province." Why would he do this? The background to this announcement is that since 1991, under provincial legislation (called the Arbitration Act), disputes over such matters as child custody, property division following divorce, and spousal and child support payments could be settled by "faith-based" arbitration committees, provided both parties agreed to use the procedure and the arbitrators' decisions did not violate Canadian law. The act had been put in place to meet demands by "first nations" (aboriginal groups) and some religious groups that they be allowed to handle disputes of this kind in ways that were more in accord with the values of these various groups than the common law had been. (In Canada, a large percentage of prison populations are of aboriginal origin, much larger than would be warranted by their numbers in the population, and governments have been seeking ways to ameliorate this situation. In the province of Manitoba in recent years, to take another example, some cases involving relatively minor offences by young natives can now be referred to so-called "healing circles," a traditional aboriginal way of handling conflicts in their communities)

In Ontario, in the year preceding the premier's announcement, there had been fierce public debate over demands by some Muslim groups to use the provincial Arbitration Act as a way of expanding "*sharia*" law over Muslims in family matters. Fundamentalist Muslims were advancing the idea, but many other groups, including the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, were resolutely opposed. The issue was becoming quite volatile, and some of these Muslim women had even received death threats by fundamentalist Muslim men over their position.

When the Ontario premier's announcement is legislated into law, the Aboriginal, Christian, and Jewish tribunals allowed under the 1991 Arbitra-

tion Act will disappear. As the premier said in his announcement, "There will be one law for all Ontarians." Some groups will undoubtedly be disappointed, but it seems to me that the premier's decision was wise and even necessary in the context of the multi-ethnic, multi-religious character of modern Ontario society. I would argue as well that in this first decade of the twenty-first century, increasingly, all the world is Ontario.

I believe that it can also be argued that the concept (and to a certain extent the reality) of a world in which there can or should be "one law for all" is in fact largely the heritage and achievement of Christianity. As Jean-Marie Cardinal Lustiger, Archbishop of Paris from 1981 to February of 2005, put it in an article published in the American journal *First Things* in October 1997, "it has been more and more widely recognized that liberty, equality, and fraternity are, in fact, among the fruits borne by the biblical and Christian tradition." Many of the texts of the Second Vatican Council could be used to demonstrate the same point. If this is the case, perhaps "secularization" (or the trend towards a "neutral" society and state in which all inhabitants are treated with equal dignity) is less a threat to Christianity than it is its culmination in the modern world. The questions today revolve about how Christians (and their churches) should act in pluralist societies. Whether Christians are in a majority or in a minority, they should certainly be free to try to influence the mores and laws of the larger society towards acknowledgment of their values, but in ways that recognize the dignity and freedom of other citizens and groups in society, and their right to do the same thing. The era of "Christendom" - when Christianity, instead of functioning as an invitation to moral heroism addressed to the individual, attempted to maintain itself by imposition from on high under a system of unified church and state - has long past. In our time, Christians and the Church have no viable option but to offer to the modern world the witness of holiness of life and loving service to others.