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0521447895 - Religion and the Making of Society: Essays in Social Theology

Charles Davis

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: from the secular to the supernatural*

The purpose of this book is to investigate the relation between religion and society. It begins by examining the thesis that society is the product of human agency. That thesis is characteristic of the modern period. Hence it immediately raises the question of the meaning of modernity and the function of religion within the modern context (Chapters 1–4). The linguistic and pragmatic orientations of both modern philosophy and social theory lead to a discussion of narrative and social practice as vehicles of meaning (Chapters 5–7). The question whether modernity is an incomplete project, as Jürgen Habermas would have it, or a mistaken universalism, as the post-moderns maintain, is debated under the heading of our identity, both individual and collective, and in an examination of the formation of the modern self (Chapters 8–9). The practical relevance of the theoretical analyses comes to the fore in a critique of Michael Novak’s suggestion that we make ‘democratic capitalism’ our ideal, and in an original attempt to define religious hope and its grounding in terms of communicative rationality (Chapters 10–11).

This introduction has a threefold function. First, to introduce the themes developed in the sequence of chapters. Second, to supplement the discussion as found in the chapters by bringing into the discussion some very recent material, particularly the work of John Milbank and his surprising use of the Catholic philosopher, Maurice Blondel. Third, to outline the general context within which all the particular discussions take place, namely, a shift in theology from a focus upon the secular and the theology of secularization to a focus upon the

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supernatural and the theology of grace or of supernatural liberation. Paradoxically enough that change in the focus of theology bears some significant similarity with the much talked about transition from modernity to post-modernity. That similarity might be fruitfully exploited by theology.

Religion is a form of social practice. It is therefore affected by the manner in which society is conceived and organized. Secularization is one particular way of conceiving and organizing society. A secular society is a society or people that has not committed itself as a collectivity to a single set of ultimate beliefs and values. It is pluralist in the sense that it embraces people who differ in regard to their adherence to ultimate beliefs and values. A secular, pluralist society is not secularist in the sense of embodying an ideology hostile to religion.

A secular society arose in the West with the transition of modernity. Indeed, the coming of a secular society is one of the defining features of modernity. Underlying secular society is a prior conception that society is not given anterior to human freedom but is a human construction. According to the pre-modern conception, society was part of the cosmic order. Human beings had to conform to the necessary laws of the social order. A false necessity restricted human freedom within boundaries unchangeable by human action. In the words of Roberto Unger, quoted and elaborated in the first chapter, 'society is an artifact'. As I argue there I do not find the formulation used by Unger a happy one. 'Artifact' relates the construction of society to instrumental and technical reason. A more balanced view of the making of society would stress the contribution of substantive reason and the role of virtue.

The insight that society is a human construct is not the only feature that distinguishes modern society from pre-modern society. Pre-modern society was an undifferentiated whole. In the Christian Middle Ages the Church was the total society. It absorbed all political and socio-cultural elements into itself. A secular, pluralist society was unthinkable. Paradoxically enough the first differentiation of that total society into a duality of Church and State was the result of the papal victory

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in the Investiture controversy. The victory of Pope Gregory VII in excluding the Emperor from ecclesiastical investitures caused the first separation of State from Church. The Emperor as Emperor was now thrust out of the Church, and the Empire became a secular reality. It was not fully secular in the modern sense because of the higher dominion claimed by the Church, but it was the first step in freeing the political sphere as secular.

The history of the West is that of a progressive differentiation between Church and State, between religion and society. The radical change came as a result of the Religious Wars which followed the Reformation. The seventeenth century saw the full emergence of the State as secular, that is, the legitimation of its power structure without any appeal to the Christian religion. Apart from the differentiation of Church and State, of religion and culture, the process of differentiation affected other functions of society. The economic sphere established itself as an autonomous realm, allowing only economic factors to guide economic policy and decisions. But if modern society consists of autonomous yet interrelated spheres of meaning and action, what is the function of religion? Is religion outside the social order or does it still have a function? It is the argument of the recent book by Marcel Gauchet, *Le Désenchantement du monde: Une histoire politique de la religion* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), examined in Chapter 2, that religion as a structural principle of society has come to an end. Christianity came on the scene as the 'religion of the exit from religion', and the Christian religion came to an end around 1700. When Gauchet speaks of religion he limits its meaning to religion as a social system. He does not deny that religion as a reality outside the social order still has validity. It follows from his thesis that 'religion' in its purest form, namely as a social system, came at the beginning in primitive religion. For him, then, 'religion' in the strict sense means that way of thinking and acting which presupposes that society with its structure is given prior to human agency and is therefore unchangeable.

Gauchet's thesis may be seen as an idiosyncratic version of the theology of secularization. In broad terms, the theology of secularization is an attempt to give a positive assessment of

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modern secular society by interpreting that society as the legitimate outcome of the Christian faith itself. When the modern world emerged at the beginning of the fifteenth century it met with opposition from the Church. Secular society was identified with hostility to religion. What remained as the ideal was the restoration of Christendom. However, a shift of attitude took place a few decades ago. It was argued that the granting of a relative autonomy to the secular enterprise need not be interpreted as a rebellion, but simply a differentiation between the sacred and the secular. The most outstanding Protestant theologian of secularization is Gogarten. On the Catholic side the *locus classicus* is the document *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council, together with the political theology of J. B. Metz. Essential to the theology of secularization is a duality between the world and faith or grace, and an acknowledgement of the autonomy of the world. Gauchet, however, takes an extreme position in interpreting the relation of religion to society. According to him, modern religion, or religion after secularization, is not in any way a structural principle of society. He rejects completely the idea that the social order has a source outside itself. It is in no way due to a religious or sacred agency. This seems to me to imply an extreme privatization of religion. Because, according to Gauchet, religion understood as a social system has come to an end, religion in the wider sense of transcendent experience becomes entirely subjective. As a social factor, it relates to society only as a subjective, critical principle. This thesis is in strong contrast to Metz's political theology which understands its task as a deprivatization.

The problem, then, is the respective roles of human agency and religion in the making of society. Does one exclude the other? If society is seen as a human artifact or construction, does that exclude a recognition of the intervention of a transcendent principle? On the other hand, if society is seen as the result of a revelation or supernatural principle, does that exclude human agency so that society is entirely a sacral structure or a theocracy?

Much here depends upon how one conceives religious exper-

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ience. Harm has been done in conceiving religious faith and practice in too narrow a manner. In Chapter 3 I argue for a much wider concept of religious experience than is usually operative in dealing with the social and political functions of religion. There are three places in the whole gamut of human experience where we find a mediation of transcendent experience. These are the cognitive, the normative and the expressive. In each of these places religious experience takes on a distinctive form. In the cognitive sphere, we find cosmic religion; in the normative, political religion; in the expressive, contemplative religion. An important thesis underlying that typology of religious experience is that there is no distinctively religious sphere. Religious faith and practice is a dimension of human experience in all its forms. To think otherwise is a form of idolatry, because it fails to acknowledge that religion is found only when human experience is transcended.

One approach to the secular would be to see it as the acknowledgement of change. Gauchet interprets religion as the idea that the social order comes from a source outside human agency and is thus already given as immutable prior to human freedom and activity. In contrast to the sacred unchangeableness characteristic of religion, the secular, in seeing the social order as due to human agency, implies the acknowledgement of the changeableness of every social order. But even granted that the social order is the result of human creativity there are limits to that creativity. In Chapter 4 I have argued that there is a clash between radicalism and orthodox Christianity. By radicalism I understand the claim that human agency can fundamentally change the human condition. The radicals are those who think that human reason and will are powerful enough to overcome the present, imperfect human condition by bringing about social and political change. Traditionally, human beings have appealed to religion and its transcendent principles for consolation in the face of the aporias of human existence. Generally, those who reject religion declare that human beings must learn to live without consolation when confronted by death and other negativities. The question, however, remains: how far can we reform the social order? What are the limits of

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social revolution? If we try fundamentally to change the present social order are we not in danger of making things worse instead of better?

In general terms it can be said that the context for theology since the seventeenth century has been secular. Even though until this century the Church opposed the modern secular world, a duality of Church and world, of sacred and secular, nevertheless determined theological reflection. Despite the open hostility of Church to the world, some of the principles characteristic of secularity found their way into theology, such as the priority of knowledge over love, the positivistic concept of reason, the search for certitude and necessary laws, the stress on identity instead of otherness and plurality. The last phase of theology's dalliance with the rationalism of the Enlightenment was the theology of secularization, which freed the secular to do its own thing without any check from the supernatural.

Paradoxically enough, a new context is emerging for theology: post-modernity with its emphasis upon contingency, the particular, difference, narrativity and fallibility. In other words, there is a return to the supernatural. John Milbank writes against the secular order in his book *Theology and Social Theory*, of which the subtitle is *Beyond Secular Reason*.<sup>1</sup> In the chapter on Liberation Theology he cites the work of Maurice Blondel as providing a sound understanding of the supernatural in relation to the social and political order.

Does in fact the thought of Blondel offer theologians the possibility of moving from a dominating secular framework to an overtly supernatural context without returning to traditional, pre-modern modes of thought? To assess Milbank's claim that it does, we need to set forth the main lines of Blondel's thought, which will be done here in the Introduction. We will return to Blondel at the end of Chapter 5 in order to relate his 'pragmatism' to the discussions on theory and *praxis*.

The *chef d'œuvre* of Blondel is *L'Action* (1893). He later expanded this in a multi-volume series, but the earlier volume,

<sup>1</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

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which was his doctoral dissertation, remains normative for understanding his thought. What Blondel gives us is a dialectic of action. Action is all specifically human activity. He follows a method of implication in which he studied action, not in what it has of contingency, but in what it has of necessity. There is, he maintains, a dialectic that was necessary and immanent to human life. He made a distinction between *volonté voulante* and *volonté voulue*. The first, *volonté voulante*, is the underlying principle of voluntary action, the deep aspiration of the human will; the second, *volonté voulue*, is any particular object of a precise, determining act of will. The dynamic of the dialectic is to make the *volonté voulue* adequate to the *volonté voulante*. The dialectic set forth in *L'Action* aims at revealing the series of ends which the will cannot but will. The problem posed by Blondel is the relation between autonomy and heteronomy. For him this problem was solved by the supernatural. Human beings achieved their autonomy by surrendering themselves to God.

Blondel establishes his thesis in detail by an analysis of the various levels of human action. The setting forth of the levels or stages of human action is rich in psychological insights that allow us to see Blondel as a precursor of the existentialists. But it is not the aim of Blondel to give psychological descriptions. His concern is to uncover the logic of human action, using a regressive analysis. He begins with two preliminary attitudes which would evade the challenge of human destiny. The first of these attitudes is dilettantism. The dilettante refuses to take any question concerning the meaning of life seriously. If the dilettante attempts to avoid the problem of human destiny by refusing to will anything, the nihilist wills nothingness. Nihilism is the second attitude that attempts to evade the challenge of human destiny. The dilettante does not will anything: the nihilist wills nothing. But neither attitude can escape the dynamic thrust present in the depths of the human will.

After having disposed of these two attempts at evasion, Blondel examines the positive solutions to the problem of human action. Under the heading 'the phenomenon of action' Blondel analyses the various values for which men and women live and die. In doing so he distinguishes the series of stages

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related so as to constitute the logic of human action. Each stage in the dialectic is found to be insufficient in itself, so that if we follow the logic of human action, uncovering the implications of each stage, we shall be forced to transcend each stage in a process of seeking a higher unity. Blondel's analysis moves through the following stages: from objective science to the science of the subject, from consciousness to voluntary action, from intentional effort to the exterior expansion of action, from individual to social action, from social action to superstitious action. Superstition refers to any merely human attempt to satisfy an infinite need for an absolute. Throughout this ascent the human will in its depth has been seeking to find something that would complete it as its term. Superstition is the last attempt to make phenomena suffice. The attempt is a failure. The attempt of human beings to be self-sufficient does not and cannot succeed. To fulfil the aspiration of the *volonté voulante* human beings must turn to the Unique Necessary Being. Thus, human beings to fulfil themselves must turn to what is beyond themselves. Science and art, language and work, are not just expressions of human creativity, they are phenomena that in their implications uncover the social nature of the human agent. Further, society is not an absolute, but it is governed by laws and principles rooted in the Absolute or the Unique Necessary Being. Until he reaches the Absolute, Blondel does not attribute full ontological reality to the phenomena of the lower stages. Once he has reached the Absolute his analysis is complemented with a synthesis. Once God is affirmed the whole series of phenomena is seen as grounded in the Unique Necessary Being. In his affirmation of God Blondel rejects naturalism. Without God the natural order is unfounded. Uncircumscribed within the limits of nature God is called a supernatural being, although that use of the word 'supernatural' is obsolete in theology.

In theology since the High Middle Ages, the word 'supernatural' refers not to beings but to grace as elevating human beings to participate in the divine life. God offers human beings a destiny that lies beyond the potentiality of human nature as such. It is a free gift from God. It opens for human beings a



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destiny that lies beyond anything that could be regarded as demanded as proportionate to the exigencies, not only of human beings but of any finite creatures.

The dialectic of human action does not stop with the affirmation of God as the Unique Necessary Being. It pushes beyond that to force us to accept as our destiny a life that exceeds our human capacity and is of a divine order. It is here that the problem of autonomy and heteronomy reaches its most acute form. We are unable to move of ourselves towards our own destiny. Blondel meets the problem by seeing a demand or desire for supernatural grace as present in the dialectic of human action.

This was the aspect of Blondel's thought that caused the greatest controversy. It was a question of the gratuity of grace. The Scholastic concept of the supernatural was what surpasses the proper exigencies and powers of the whole of pre-existing created nature. The aim of this definition was to protect the gratuity of grace. The life of grace was supernatural because it was beyond the exigencies and powers of human nature, indeed, of any conceivable finite nature. Blondel recognized clearly that the life of grace and our supernatural destiny were beyond human power. At the same time he claimed that his method of immanence or regressive analysis uncovered a necessity or demand for a supernatural destiny. In an oft-quoted sentence: 'Absolutely impossible and absolutely necessary, that is the proper notion of the supernatural'.<sup>2</sup> Blondel did not deny that our supernatural destiny was contingent upon a free decree of God. The necessity in question did not mean that God was compelled to raise human beings to a supernatural order. Blondel's point was that the dialectic of human action drove human beings to form the hypothesis of a transcendent fulfilment of human aspiration. That was as far as philosophy could go. Whether God, in fact, has called human beings to a share in the divine life beyond the powers and exigencies of their nature can be affirmed only by faith.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Blondel, *Action (1893): Essay on a Critique of Life and the Science of Practice*, trans. Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 375.

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The supernatural is, therefore, a dialectical necessity, in so far as it is seen to be an implication of human action when that is analysed. The dialectic is both unitive and dynamic. The dynamism of the ascent is called forth by the insufficiency of each stage. That insufficiency drives the human being to seek a higher unity. In Blondel the dialectic moves beyond the affirmation of God to the hypothesis of a supernatural destiny. The necessary idea of the supernatural places human beings before an alternative. They must either accept the higher vocation to which God calls them or refuse that call and in doing so close themselves off from God. There is a limit to human autonomy and, paradoxically enough, human beings can realize their limited autonomy only by surrendering themselves to the transcendent will of God.

Blondel tried to combine the freedom and transcendence of God's gift of grace with his method of immanence, which, he claimed, revealed the innermost depths of the human will. But is the application by Blondel of his method of immanence to grace and the supernatural compatible with traditional teaching? Three interpretations of Blondel have been put forward. The first interprets Blondel as giving a metaphysics of human nature as such. Hence, he is maintaining that there is exigency for grace in human nature; this is incompatible with orthodoxy. The second interpretation understands Blondel's analysis as a metaphysics of historical humanity; this is compatible with orthodox teaching on the gratuity of grace. The third interpretation does not limit Blondel's analysis to historical humanity. He wanted to construct a universally valid metaphysics of the human being. The object of his analysis was human beings as destined to a supernatural end.

The theological controversy concerning the gratuity of grace focused upon the hypothetical state of pure nature. If God had not called humankind to a supernatural destiny, human beings would have lived in a state proportionate to human nature as such. Properly speaking this state of pure nature is a limit concept. It simply expresses in another way that God was under no necessity to raise human beings to the supernatural order. Unfortunately some theologians thought they were