

# From Secular City to People's Religion

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In what must have been one of the most dynamic decades in the history of theology the name of Harvey Cox has constantly appeared. It would be enough for a theologian to have made a substantial contribution to one development within the period, but Cox has been at the centre of several different movements, not all of them mutually compatible. The history of his own progress during the eight years from 1965 is an interesting commentary also on what has been happening to theology in the period, more particularly the status of religion in Europe and North America.

Cox suddenly emerged on the theological scene in 1965 with his bestseller *The Secular City*. It may be seen as an appropriation of the work of the later Bonhoeffer. He spent 1962 in Berlin, participated in the Marxist-Christian dialogue of the time and was much influenced by Bonhoeffer's idea of 'religionless Christianity'. Perhaps Marx had been right and religion should be superceded. On his return to America he wrote *The Secular City*. 'Much of that book represents my attempt to do for the American scene what Bonhoeffer had done for his'. Whether or not Bonhoeffer knew what he meant in writing of religionless Christianity we may doubt if he would have recognised Cox's book as a continuation of the same theme. The link is rather with Bonhoeffer's theme of 'world come of age'. Bonhoeffer was the first Protestant theologian of standing for a generation who dared to put in a good word for the secular world. Under the influence of Barth the secular world was constantly condemned for Promethean tendencies. The enemy of the Nazis, the prisoner of the Gestapo was under no illusions of the reality of evil in the world, but he could see also the strength and achievement of that world.

It is this theme which is taken up in *The Secular City: Secularisation and urbanisation in theological perspective*. He begins, 'If secularisation designates the content of man's coming of age, urbanisation describes the context in which it is occurring'. Bonhoeffer could not be properly accused by Barthian neo-orthodoxy of returning uncritically to the old Liberalism of Harnack for he rivalled the *Heilsgeschichte* writers in adding a new chapter to salvation history. Secularisation is not a godless development: it is the outworking of God's own purposes. We can hear echoes of Bonhoeffer's castigation of the 'religious premise' when Cox says, 'Secularisation is the liberation of man from religion and

metaphysical tutelage, the turning of his attention away from other worlds towards this one'.

Cox worked out in detail the implications of much of Bonhoeffer's thought and a decade later we can see to what extent the climate of theology has been changed by this book. Up to that point the process called secularisation had been seen as a threat to religion; now it is seen as an inherently religious movement. Till then it was seen as the way of the godless world; now it is revealed as God's way for his world since the incarnation. Then it was seen as the result of rejecting the bible; now it is analysed as the outworking of the biblical faith.

Thus the process of secularisation began not in the 19th Century, where it developed under the influence of various critics of religion, not in the 15th Century where more autonomy was demanded from Christian thought forms and controls. Secularisation goes back to the bible itself where in the creation narrative we have 'the disenchantment of nature'. It goes back to the Exodus and 'the desacrilisation of politics'. Back to the Sinai Covenant and 'the deconsecration of values'. At first this might look like the latest neo-orthodox separation of the world of God and the word of man. Hence William Hamilton's description of the book as 'pop-Barth'. In fact it is quite the opposite. It lays the ground for an acceptance of the autonomy of the secular world-view, the legitimacy of secular institutions and the authenticity of secular values.

However, there is a second section of *The Secular City* which is much more puzzling, not secularization but urbanization. Just as secularisation had been presented in the past as the enemy of religion, so from the earliest days of the Old Testament the city was presented as the place of sin and apostasy. However romantic the belief, however un-historical, Israel remembered the desert as the place of obedience. This model may have underpinned the traditional American idealisation of the rural against the urban. It was therefore no less courageous of Cox to speak now in favour of the city as he had of the secular.

The secular city he maintained is not inherently godless and anti-religious. There are many features about it which are congenial and even conducive to religious faith. The examples which he gives are ambiguous and not altogether convincing. It would have been clearer if he had said that the city he was describing was the city as he had experienced it. For Cox, the sophisticated international traveller grew up in Malvern (population 1,555), Chester County, Pennsylvania, where his family moved when he was six. When in *The Secular City* he described the life of the village as closed and predictable, a community in which there is no real privacy and no breadth of choice, he is describing his home town. By comparison the first city that he visited as a boy was Philadelphia. Its bright Christmas lights, excitement and constant business and movement made a lasting impression on him. The village was the place of traditional religion but the city, to which he moved at the age of 17 was a place of liberation and development in religious as well as secular terms. This section of the book is often

regarded as interesting but willfully and uncritically taking the side of the city. It is not generally recognised that it is rather testimony and autobiography.

The rest of the book is concerned with particular elements in the life of the secular city and what the contribution of the church might be. In this third section of the book Cox is much more critical of the actual life of the city but he tends to speak of its faults as distortions or myths. The church can only begin to fulfil its role in terms of *kerygma*, *diakonia* and *koinonia* if it first gives up its automatic antipathy towards the city and is in many instances recalled by the city to its biblical faith.

With this book Cox was identified with secular theology and with the assumption that if religion survived in the city it would not be through its traditional functions, institutional expressions or present outlook. But in retrospect Cox openly joined himself to those in the secular city who seek the good of mankind and the humane development of the potential of the city in the new technological culture. He had no time for those who turn their backs on the city or deny responsibility for solving the problems of the city. What is also clear is that he is basically at home in the secular city and is confident that if he and other able and honest men work together there is hope for the city and therefore hope for mankind. Even in his chapter 'Towards a Theology of Social Change' Cox displays this confidence that to be a faithful Christian means to work away within the given political options open. 'The coming of the secular city is a historical process which removes adolescent illusions'. If God is making a revolution, one of the marks apparently is the creation of the secular city.

It would be ungracious to complain that when Cox wrote the *Secular City* he did not also include an equally stimulating book on politics and religion. But his apparent political quiescence is all the more difficult to understand when we turn to his second book, *God's Revolution and Man's Responsibility*, since this book was actually written before *The Secular City* and reflects his experience in politically sensitive Berlin. By 1969, when it was published in Britain, revolution was constantly talked about in Europe, and he could say 'The purpose of this book is to portray God himself as in part a revolutionary'. The German translation appeared under the title, *Der Christ als Rebel*. 'Rightly understood, the Bible itself is a revolutionary document, Romans 13 notwithstanding. In fact, it may be that we only hear this real fibre of the biblical word when we are deeply engaged ourselves in the elemental transformation of society'. Thus the preface to the British edition promises us a much more politically radical Cox and a more critical appraisal of the role of the Church in society.

But instead of the European political situation making him more radical it looks as if Cox uses the radical political situation simply as a more picturesque vehicle for presenting the line taken in *The Secular City*. It is God's world we live in. He is more concerned with His world than with His church. If we want to see the evidence of His work then

we should look to the revolutionary movements of the day. In other words, as the process of secularisation is taken to be the activity of God (the whole process, taken as a whole and without qualification) so now revolution is the name of His activity (revolution taken together, without qualification). Once again the bible is a commentary on the contemporary movement. 'Very early in the Bible God tips us off to his method of working in the world. He frees the captive people from economic and political bondage'. Or again, 'The Biblical God recognises no inner freedom apart from external conditions of freedom'.

The total impression of this book is that since God makes the revolution it is the responsibility of the Christian to join in. But it is a constantly frustrating book to read since it is not clear how the Christian is to act if some political group makes the revolution. What are the criteria for supporting such a revolution? We are offered no political analysis on the basis of which Christians might either support or even start a revolution. Nor is there any content to his theology which might contribute to the revolution. For example, he speaks of solidarity with the world in terms of joining a picket line. If questioned about it, 'This may be our God-given opportunity to say the word however reticently and stumblingly'. But what word would that be? Would it be a repetition of someone else's political word, or would it be an assertion that it is God's picket line?

The book does not represent a political theology. It is still presenting us with the claim that it is God's world, and that God is concerned with the secular at least as much as with the holy, with the world at least as much as the church and that the biblical faith liberates us to carry out our responsibilities in this revolutionary world. The early promise of the book is dissipated in discussions about sin, Gospel, Sacraments and Ministry. He takes up the rhetoric of the day; the Christian as soldier, member of a guerilla army. But in the end it is God's revolution and it is He who is threatening society. Perhaps every Christian would join in such a revolution if it could be shown to have such an Author. The conclusion must be that the theology of this book is secularised, but not politicised. It follows Bonhoeffer in theory, but not in practice.

After two years silence Harvey Cox issued his next book, *On Not Leaving It To The Snake*. It gathered together various essays from 1960-67. The title recalls a phrase from his last book in which he noted that Christians often failed to take responsibility for themselves and concluded, 'let's not allow any snake to tell us what to do'. He returned to a theme from his earlier treatment of sin, namely, that although sin has been identified with pride a more dangerous sin is what used to be called *acedia* (lit. 'not-caring'). Eve's original sin was not pride, but allowing the serpent to tell her what to do. It belongs to man to be responsible for himself. To avoid responsibility is to avoid becoming man. Once again, therefore, we begin within the tradition of Bonhoeffer: secular man or man come of age, is adult. Adults are not perfect, they are responsible for themselves and their effects on other people.

In this collection there are various essays about the Marxist-Christian

dialogue, or East-West relations. In each case Cox takes a progressive line. In one piece he deals with the significance for theology of the work of Ernst Bloch. For most of the essay his attention is taken up with the dialogue with atheism and the current discussion about the death of God. But in a conclusion which comes rather surprisingly on the argument so far he ends: 'Radical theology would have more radical social consequences than the so-called radical theology of the death of God has produced so far'. Although the content of a radical theology (politically radical) is not worked out here there is displayed a certain impatience with a theology which is radical only about *theological* issues.

Most of the essays deal with the religious and civil situation within America during the period, repeating some of the points made about the role of the church in *The Secular City*. There is, however, one essay, also from 1967 on 'The "New Breed" in American Churches: Sources of Social Activism in American Religion'. Here, for the first time, we find hints of the kind of political consciousness which might have been expected in the two previous books. In contrast to 'the churchgoing Bourbons' who see religion as the sacred cement that binds society to its past and who have a lot to lose by any socio-political change, there is the New Breed of laymen and clergy who are not simply for justice but want the church to take a direct role in supporting or inducing social change. They are often supporters of Saul Alinsky's type of organisation of local power for the people groups. The New Breed know that their role is about politics and not just help. Alinsky was mentioned in *The Secular City* but then the interest seemed to be in his techniques. There was no attempt to work out the implications for theology. But now Cox goes on to present something like a theology of the poor. In the teaching of Jesus the poor have a special place with God. But gradually adopted poverty is given a certain status in the church. Giving *to* the poor has a special significance. But if today poverty is no longer regarded as a punishment for sin or laziness, then the assisting of the poor becomes a political act.

It might be said, therefore, that after three books Cox had not progressed very much. He began by advocating secularisation and urbanisation. He opposed the false division of this world and some other, the secular and the sacred, the world and the church, as spheres of God's activity. But throughout his work lacks any cutting edge, any political consciousness from which the secular society might be judged by Christian standards. He consistently encourages Christians to become involved in social change but it must be said that such participation on the basis of a theology which is not politicised could once again see religion as either the opiate of troubled consciences or as social lubrication which makes the world go round pretty much as before. Yet in fairness we have seen two brief references to a theology that would have radical social consequences, theology influenced by hope, and a theology of the poor which is overtly political.

But just when it might have been thought that Cox would move on

to a more radical theology, something quite extraordinary happened. 'Radical' theology could mean either radical in the European sense, politically radical, or in the American sense, more secular. Cox might have come to a more politicised theology in the light of what happened in America in the late 1960s, or in view of the continued decline in institutional religion he might have further developed that early theme of religionless Christianity. Neither happened: perhaps we should have been prepared for that. But we could not have anticipated *The Feast of Fools*.

Cox had certainly not moved towards a more secular theology. To the contrary he had moved back towards religion. It is difficult to see how this reaction took place: perhaps Cox himself would have difficulty in tracing the stages precisely. It was not a retraction of his previous work but an attempt to redress the balance: the Dionysian now was emphasised over the Apollonian. He saw no contradiction between the two positions of his first and fourth books. After all, 'The first real city I knew was the place we went to celebrate the most colourful festival of the year'. And even in *The Secular City* there had been chapters on 'Work and Play' and 'Sex and Secularisation'. It was as if secularisation had led to a narrowing down of experience, an impoverishment both of life and the expectation of life. The secular city, the place which might yet save religion was now in danger of losing its humanity. Where is the secular man to look to renew himself and regain dimensions of his humanity lost in this present culture?

The answer, ironically, is in religion. Not secular religion or religionless Christianity, but in religion that is not much concerned with secular things, religion which simply gets on and celebrates for the sake of celebration. 'Man is by his very nature a creature who not only works and thinks but who sings, dances, prays, tells stories, and celebrates'. The secular culture is one of reason and control, planning and restraint. And secular man has these characteristics too. 'The link between the decline of festivity and the death of God can be fully substantiated'. Ritual and symbol are cut down in the secular culture; man is reduced to a disembodied mind and religion is about morals and beliefs. Secular man may recover his embodied existence in all its dimensions through a recovery of religion which also deals with ritual and celebration.

In this latest book Cox had obviously not become more 'radical' in a secular sense; it looked as if he had given up all political radicalism. And yet in a strange way this book, which could be simply romantic, nostalgic or effete, has within it a position which is of potential political significance. The title of the book refers to the medieval 'Feast of Fools' when for at least once each year it was tolerated that revered customs or persons, solemn institutions and dignitaries could be made objects of fun and ridicule. Such caricatures can have very important political truths to point. The book is 'A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy'. Such festivities can have political overtones. But recalling his essay on Bloch we may say that fantasy also can have political importance, especially if it allows the imagination to conceive of things

as they might be. Religion can be the opiate which prevents new worlds appearing, but equally it can be the inspiration from which new societies emerge. 'Realism' and 'feasibility' provide 'the ideology of an inert society'.

Religion has always been associated with transcendence, and now there is a widespread quest for transcendence, even among political activists. 'Unlike those of the "Old left" who despised all forms of religion as the opiate of the masses, the new radicals exhibit a pervasive interest in theological questions and even in such occult topics as astrology and clairvoyance'. It is as if a line were drawn, finding on the same side the serious political figures who fight grimly alongside serious and secular believers who worship with determination and restraint. On the other side might be found the new politicians who celebrate now the victory of a new tomorrow and are accompanied by the ritual of that Christ who calls the poor to a feast. 'Celebration without politics becomes effete and empty. Politics without celebration becomes mean and small. The festive spirit knows how to toast the future, drink the wine and break the cup.'

In 1973, some eight years after *The Secular City* and a decade from the writing of *God's Revolution*, Harvey Cox published *The Seduction of the Spirit*. It is concerned with 'The Use and Misuse of People's Religion', but the theme of manipulation and distortion occupies a small place in the book. Instead it deals with two areas. The first area is the unexpected and very dramatic revival in religion through the Americas and to some extent in Europe. The second theme might be said to be the first in microcosm, for in this book we see a blossoming of Cox's own participation in the kind of religion described in *The Feast of Fools*. It is a religion which has bubbled up and flowed beyond the control of authorities and experts. Cox takes his place in this book rather with the crowds than with the experts—though the impression is still there that even as he attends some extravagant service of worship he is appraising what is going on, and savouring what he is experiencing.

The book is partly autobiographical and it is only now that we learn of his small town background, of his first visits to the city, of his apprehension in the intensity of the Baptist testimony meetings. It would seem that after sojourning in a secular land for a time he has now returned to his religious home. And yet it is not a return to the place of his beginning; the religion that now fascinates him is not the religion of the Baptists. Indeed—and choosing our words with care—we might say that the religion to which Cox now turns is not necessarily Christian at all.

Cox advocated secularisation and urbanisation with such enthusiasm that he seemed to have no need of any critical judgments on these developments. He so espoused the revolution that he needed no analysis by which to evaluate particular movements. And now why should we expect him to distinguish between Christian and non-Christian religion; truth and falsehood, myth and illusion, we are presented with an incredible global chop suey. It seems that there is no good or bad religion,

there is only religion and it is good—always provided it is not the kind of religion which belongs to that very secular and urban culture which was the subject of his first book. 'Viva Jesus, Quetzalcoatl and Zapata'. Apparently all religious phenomena are of equal value and bearing witness to some aspect of the great new enlightenment: the Great Spirit of the American Indians, the black Pentecostal churches, the religion of the Zulus or the Australian aborigines. The important thing seems to be to make no rational response whatsoever, but to hang on in there when the drums beat and the bodies sway. Don't even ask if this is religion or therapy because Cox sees the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California as an essentially religious phenomenon. 'The Human Potential, Sensitivity, Encounter Movement is the cultural successor and heir to the pietistic Christianity of my own and many other people's childhoods, with all its strengths and weaknesses, its warmth and intimacy and its excessive sentimentality'. The integration of therapy and religion is complete when this liberated Baptist has a mystical experience in the nude bathing session.

In each of his monographs Cox has set himself the task of correcting a popular prejudice. He advocated the secular/urban culture, the revolution, celebration and fantasy. In this latest book he has advocated what he calls 'people's religion'. As ever he makes a powerful defence of this particular phenomenon. As ever, were we to choose we should have to take his side, no matter the hesitations and qualifications. Even so, he moves so far from the rational tradition that he has decided not to ask about truth but about liberation. If religion is liberating, that is enough. Yet, finally, it is the truth that makes us free: there is more to religion than therapy. All this may be underlined by considering perhaps two of the most interesting religious occasions described in the book. The first is a 'Byzantine Easter', celebrated in 'The Boston Tea Party' disco; the second is the Feast of the Assumption of our Lady, in the cathedral of Cuernavaca.

Having learned a great deal from participating in various rites and festivals, Cox and some friends decided to organise their own religious happening. Since secular objects stand out in a dramatic way when introduced into a religious setting, Cox decided that if the reverse process worked they should arrange their religious occasion (a Byzantine Mass) in a huge discothèque. It took place at the unlikely hour of 4 a.m. The altar in the centre of the dance floor was heaped high with 'pump-ernickel, cinnamon buns, doughnuts, twinkies, long French loaves, matzos, scones, heavy black bread and raisin tarts'. The two thousand people were painting signs of the cross, fishes 'and assorted graffiti on one another's faces and bodies'. In preparation for the mass, 'the human clusters swayed, hugged, moaned and clung together as people lifted each other and reached out toward the flickering pictures on the walls'. As the benediction was said the sun rose over the Massachusetts Turnpike. The first visitors were two Boston policemen. 'You told us this was going to be a religious service but it looks to me like a debauch'. And



Cox, indulgently letting him go on, winks to his readers and invites them to draw their own conclusions.

And what might the conclusions be? If we are speaking about 'people's religion' are we to side with two Boston policemen or with 2,000 son et lumière freaks? I asked for the bread of life—and you gave me pumpernickel, doughnuts and raisin tarts. At least this kind of tea party is not dangerous to health: it may be consciousness expanding, but is it more than an esthetic experience?

The second religious event which may be used to illustrate the problematic character of Cox's new enthusiasm for religion is the mass of the Feast of the Assumption of our Lady. Cox jots down his impressions (compare taking one's spiritual temperature). 'The church is jammed. Everyone seems to be listening. Don Sergio speaks vigorously but simply: Mary is poor like the oppressed people of the Third World. The "Assumption" does not mean she "goes up" (he's read Tillich, Robinson, et al.) but that she is now united with Christ, who is "the liberator in our midst". Together at this very moment they are "tearing the imperial powers from their thrones" (our older version says "casting down the mighty"), sending the rich away empty, lifting up the downtrodden, supporting "us" in our fight against dependency and imperialism. Therefore, on with the battle. He crosses himself. The sermon is over. Banks of incense swirl. Bells chime. Broken bread is distributed. Mass over'.

Yes, people's religion. But is it Cox's religion? At first we might think that he is caught up in the rebirth of an ancient rite, and yet he goes on with such explicit remarks about Mariology as to make it quite clear that he is worlds apart from the peasants of Cuernavaca. 'Mary is so obviously an aggregate of human fantasy, myth making, projection and all the rest that it seems beside the point to worry about whether she really was conceived immaculately, is Theotokos, or went bodily to heaven'.

The most dramatic form of religious revival today is the neo-pentecostal or charismatic movement. In it people find themselves grasped and compelled in, much as those unsuspecting wedding guests in the parable. Yet on reading *The Seduction of the Spirit* it is difficult to avoid the feeling that for Cox the opposite movement is taking place. It is he who has grasped religion, for his own purposes. Perhaps he uses it as a corrective against the dehumanizing effects of the secular-urban culture; perhaps people's religion redresses the balance of mind and body. Either way he seems to be impressed by the usefulness of religion rather than its truth, its effect rather than its content. But when this is said we come to a surprising and paradoxical conclusion; Cox's current interest in religion displays the secular man's appraisal of its therapeutic value. On the advice of its technical experts, the secular city has decided to acquire a soul, for the sake of its health. And Harvey Cox, who warns against the manipulation of people's religion may himself be guilty of just that.