

Opera Omnia

Volume XI Sacred Secularity

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ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

INTRODUCTION

*What a transformed life is his,
who finds the sacred in the world,
and creates the hidden path
along which the wise in the world
do walk!*¹

This volume is dedicated to a secularity that is defined as “sacred” inasmuch as it represents the lifestyle to which we are called, thus overcoming the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane.

It is not a question of escaping from the world, but of transfiguring it, which means more than redeeming it; it means resurrecting it. We must “find” the sacred and “create” the secular way. The discovery of *sacred secularity* seems to be the catalyst by which this transformation is not merely a change of habits or a new fad but a historical change. The task is not easy, but it is urgent and also fascinating.

This book is a call to transformation. The transformation of buzzing into silence, of the murmuring of fretful trepidation into the quietening of outer and inner noise is part of the art of living or, in other words, of wisdom. This book aims to present a vision of the world in which, without denying the possible transcendence of the divine, emphasis is placed on the immanence of the sacred in the very bowels of the world. For too long, so-called religion (*religio*) has sought to bind us (*religare*) with a transcendent Being at the expense of the immanence of Being that is within beings, thus causing a split between the being of Man and the Being of all reality. The defense of the world’s sacredness presents itself as the “reunification” of these two spheres—without, however, confusing the two. The crisis of an otherworldly religion cannot be resolved by absorbing the worldly into divinity, nor by confusing the divine with the worldly, but only by recognizing and experiencing the intrinsic relationship between these two “dimensions” of reality within Man himself as the point of contact between heaven and earth. I have called this the cosmotheandric vision.

After two centuries of dispute on the opposition between “secular” and “religious” (in a period of time that includes events ranging from the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution to Vatican II, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the science-versus-religion debates), the West is perhaps in a better position than ever before to reflect on the

¹ These verses were inspired, in juxtaposition, by a famous poem written by the great sixteenth-century Castilian poet and mystic Fray Luis de León, who speaks about the worldly din and the joy of retreating from it (“*Qué descansada vida / la que huye del mundanal ruido / y sigue la escondida / senda, por donde han ido / los pocos sabios que han sido en el mundo!*”). Here, however, the lines have been turned into an apology of secularity, emphasizing their complementary, rather than contradictory, attitude.

ultimate meaning of the phenomenon of secularity, taking into account the contributions of the sociology of knowledge and the perspective of a cross-cultural science of religions.² The perspective of this book is purely philosophical in the traditional sense of the term. Philosophy is related above all to wisdom, rather than merely the analysis of conceptual statements. We will, of course, also refer to the contributions of sociology, theology, and Western science, but we will place the issue in a much broader perspective—that of contemporary Man reflecting on his own experience over the last six thousand years of human history. I believe this is the perspective from which we need to begin today to tackle the problems that afflict mankind. If we narrow this perspective, the result will be superficial and incapable of comprehending the current degree of consciousness. If we extend it back to a more ancient prehistory, our inquiry will be more arduous and more controversial at its margins.³

Secularity represents a *novum relativo* in the life of Man on earth. It is bound to a particular experience of time as an *essential* ingredient of *reality*, and therefore also of Man. It is a *novum* that transcends chronologies and cultures and is transformed into a general myth. It is a *novum relativo* primarily because all change is relative,⁴ but also because this experience has existed since time immemorial in the deepest recesses of the human being and had already begun to manifest itself in traditional wisdom.⁵ As human traditions have developed over time, many processes of secularization have taken place, and throughout history there have been many sages (some call them mystics and poets, other scientists and thinkers) who have experienced that the true secular dimension of reality is something that is not transient but permanent, although they have not reduced everything to this dimension. The poets tell us,

We come to the question of time. Do timeless poems exist? “Timeless” is an abstraction, which does not correspond to reality. The two conditions, space and time, are unavoidable requisites of human life. . . . Time with dates, with collective, public history. There also exists time without dates, private, intimate, . . . For now, life constitutes a value on earth. And without time ever stopping.⁶

² It is significant that the anthology of H.-H. Schrey (ed.), *Säkularisierung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1981), one of the best on the subject, begins with the following sentence by the editor: “The question of secularization is basically a question of the relationship between Christianity and the world.” Although he recognizes that this is a general problem, most cases occur through contact with the West. As regards the question from a broader perspective, see D. C. Mulder (ed.), *Secularization in Global Perspective* (Amsterdam: VU Boekhandel/Uitgeverij, 1981), which deals with Africa, Brazil, South India, and the Muslim world. We should bear in mind that, although the problem is intercultural, most of the writers are Westerners. To understand better the current situation, it is very important that we begin from a broader perspective. For the history of the word itself, see the still indispensable book by H. Lübke, *Säkularisierung: Geschichte eines ideenpolitischen Begriffs* (Freiburg: Alber, 1965). For a more complete bibliography, see that compiled by G. Anders, in Schrey, *Säkularisierung*, 415–37.

³ See R. Panikkar, “Is History the Measure of Man? Three Kairological Moments of Human Consciousness,” *Teilhard Review* 16, no. 1–2 (London) (1981/10): 39–45.

⁴ See the statement made by Diadochos of Photiki in the fifth century: “Man does not transform himself into what he was not. He renews himself gloriously into what he (already) was,” in M.-M. Davy, *Le Désert intérieur* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1983), 199. This human capacity (*capax Dei*, the Scholastics called it) allows continuity in metamorphosis (which is not a *kata-morphosis*). Transformation is not deformation.

⁵ See A. Mendelson, *Secular Education in Philo of Alexandria* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1982), and the classic W. Jaeger, *Paideia. Die Formung des griechischen Menschen* (Berlin-Leipzig: de Gruyter, 1936–1947), 3 vols.

⁶ J. Guillén, *Guillén on Guillén: The Poetry and the Poet* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 152–53.

But up until today the phenomenon of secularity had not had such a far-reaching effect.⁷ Secularity alone would suffocate Man, but the secular dimension of reality cannot remain in the background if we are to give a true picture of the emerging culture of our time and a more complete idea of what human life is.

Does the man who recognizes that bread for himself is a material question and bread for his neighbour is a spiritual one (N. Berdjaev) belong to a secularized world or to a world that is not secularized but unqualifiable?⁸

Is feeding the hungry (whatever type of hunger it may be) solely either a profane task or a responsibility of “religious” institutions, or is it not rather a task of sacred secularity? In other words, if we reduce the whole of reality to mere secularity (a term as yet to be defined) we suffocate reality by depriving it of its character of infinitude and freedom. At the same time, however, by denying secularity its true and ultimate character, human life is reduced to a mere game with no real importance and with no dignity. Perhaps one of the reasons for the apparently universal crisis of mankind today is that we have failed to create a synthesis between the sacred and the secular.

Perhaps we are coming to another “axial age,” but this time it concerns not history, as described by Karl Jaspers, but human life on earth.⁹ The historical age, that is, the human age of predominantly historical consciousness, is coming to an end. Its archetypes, however, remain among us and within us, but other forms of consciousness are destined to gradually replace the period spanning the last six thousand years. I believe, in fact, that historical consciousness, or the myth of history, has begun to be replaced kairologically (not chronologically) by transhistorical consciousness.¹⁰ The phenomenon of secularity is a manifestation of this transformation. The essence of secularity is a peculiar experience of time as a constitutive dimension of *tempiternal* reality.¹¹

I am not referring here to the religiosity of the West from a sociological point of view. Besides the fact that there already numerous studies on this subject, the situation changes almost every ten years and from one country to another. We have an excessive tendency to judge the world according to the parameters of our own particular province.¹² Throughout history there have been many movements of secularity, but in its present form we must not forget that it is a fundamentally Western phenomenon.

Secularity is a cross-cultural phenomenon that is characteristic of our era. Respectfully paraphrasing the term *saeculum senescens* (an ageing world) coined by St. Augustine in *De civitate Dei* at the time of the Roman Empire, we might refer today to a *saeculum emergens*

⁷ M. J. Adler (ed.) makes no mention of the word in all the 102 topics of *The Great Ideas: A Syntopicon of Great Books of the Western World* (London: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 2 vols.

⁸ E. Castelli (ed.), *Herméneutique de la sécularisation* (Paris: Aubier, 1976), 15.

⁹ See K. Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1956), 14–32.

¹⁰ See R. Panikkar, “El fin de la historia,” in *La intuición cosmoteándrica: Las tres dimensiones de la realidad* (Madrid: Trotta, 1999/XXXIII), 103–63.

¹¹ See R. Panikkar, “La Misa como ‘consecratio temporis’: La tempiternidad,” *Sanctum Sacrificium* (Zaragoza) 1961/6: 75–93.

¹² See, for example, the analysis of the North American situation of some years ago in R. N. Bellah and Ch. Y. Gloch, eds., *The New Religious Consciousness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); J. Needleman and G. Baker, eds., *Understanding the New Religions* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978); H. Cox, *Religion in the Secular City: Toward a Postmodern Theology* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), etc.

(emerging world), but we must also add, perhaps paradoxically, *et necans seipsum* (and self-destructive) if we fail to neutralize the lethal tendencies of the current dominant civilization.¹³

This secularity, which corresponds to ordinary life, has been called “sacred,” thereby overcoming the still widespread dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. Of course, the sacred is not the profane, but it can belong equally to secular and to religious life.

* * *

Organizing this book into different themes has proved quite difficult, since they touch on various aspects of secular reality while, however, forming a harmonious whole.

The first section (from which the title of the book is taken) is dedicated to the philosophy of secularity. Here the description of secularity is developed, the sacredness of the secular is analyzed, and some considerations are outlined on the challenge that secularity represents for traditional religions. This is followed by a chapter on the secularity of hermeneutics.

The second section is dedicated to politics as an aspect of life that is not without significance: Man, as we said in the volume dedicated to spirituality, is *sôma, psychê, polis*, and *kosmos*. As *polis*, it is essential for him to belong to a (political) community. This section includes various articles relating to a sociology that also embraces university education.

The third section, dedicated to peace, includes two books: *Concordia and Harmony*, a collection of articles illustrating how peace can only be the result of secularity lived in sacredness; *Peace and Cultural Disarmament*; and a short unpublished text, *The Church as a Council*, which is highly evocative and extremely relevant for today: a recurring theme in the author’s religious vision of the role that the church can and must fulfill in its realization.

The section closes with some writings on *ecosophy*, which, as the word suggests, is the wisdom of the Earth that we must listen to and with which we must make peace. The call to peace, as the key to a harmonious life among the various peoples of the Earth, is a goal that can be achieved individually by overcoming the *ego* and collectively by accepting the plurality of cultures and traditions without any abusing their own position by imposing a single economy, political system, or religion. Is variety, in fact, not the greatest gift we find in nature, and even more so among peoples?

¹³ See the many political, economic, and ecological studies on the current world situation. We live in a world where 80 percent of mankind is forced to make do with less than 5 percent of the worldwide income—and this difference is growing every year.