

Doctor Cox's Revolution

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This report is an amalgam of topics discussed by Harvey Cox, author of The Secular City, with a group of seminarians in the Washington, D.C. area in December of 1965, a private discussion held after the conference, and the reflections of the author of this report. Page numbers in parentheses refer to Dr. Cox's book, The Secular City (New York: MacMillan, 1965).

The Secular City has taken the theological community in the United States by storm. The sudden popularity of this theological tractate, especially among Catholic readers, seems to baffle its modest author, Doctor Harvey Cox. The Baptist minister and professor at the Harvard Divinity School expressed this astonishment in his introductory remarks made to a large and friendly audience of clerics and religious in the nation's capital. Originally written as a study book for the National Student Christian Federation at their request, *The Secular City* has become in a short time a best-seller, quoted in such varying discussions as those on peace, civil rights and the liturgy. Why this popularity?

As an attempt to solve a particularly important problem facing the Church in modern society, Harvey Cox's approach is a challenge to the modern Christian community, precisely because it represents a call to Christian maturity, a call to take risks in confronting the secular age. Rather than flee from the world, the author urges us to enter the secular age with enthusiasm. As a result of this challenge, Doctor Cox's theology is a revolutionary theology, optimistic in facing problems, American in its pragmatic point of view.

This report is like a still-frame of a motion picture, since Doctor Cox's thought is in continual evolution and development. The report serves a twofold purpose: first, to show the areas wherein Harvey Cox's thought has altered, partly because of the natural evolution of thought, and partly because of the response of the open-minded author to critiques of his work; and second, to enlarge and deepen some of the issues facing the common cause of the Christian faith as it enters more fully into the secular world.

Before subjecting himself to the questions of six panel members, Harvey Cox indicated in his talk the areas in which his thinking had changed since the publication of *The Secular City*. There were two points on which he would express himself differently than in the book, and three of which he had become even more convinced than previously.

In his lectures and speaking tours, perhaps the most frequently asked question was whether or not he has been too severe with metaphysics and its place in the new age. Will not metaphysics, too, have a place in the secular city, the technopolis? The author's answer is a definite "yes," for he did not mean to say that the New Society would completely demolish all other types of thinking. Every new society will have "a residue of its tribal and town past." After an initial rejection, we will appropriate our past traditions.

However, the metaphysics of the secular age will be a metaphysics with a difference. The new inquiries will be radically different from the inquiries of the great metaphysicians, Aristotle, Thomas, and Kant; they will not have the same tenor because of the factor of historicization. "I don't believe that this enterprise can continue in the same way that these worthies pursued it, because the great difference between us and them is the fact of historicization." We are now able to view our conceptions and our cultural traditions against the backdrop of this process. Consequently we will not be able comfortably to view the world out of the windows of any closed system, since we will recognize the relativity of our point of view in relation to that of other cultures.

Metaphysics will continue, since there will always be a place for it in the deep inner need man has for its outlook, yet there is a danger that we might content ourselves with this world-view which we ourselves have continued to construct. Instead, we must be willing to meet the resurrected Christ as He appears in the center of any culture. The center of every culture is the place where the Church must take its stand.

As a result, Doctor Cox holds that the Church should not be content, as it has so often in the past, to address the Gospel only to the moments of personal trial in the life of her members, the great and tragic moments of life. Events such as birth, marriage and death certainly do not exhaust the power of the "good news"! "Isn't there a role for theology also, in those long moments and years through

which we live between the great focal moments of life?" To address men not only in their moments of weakness, but also in their moments of *strength*, political, social, economic—this is the motive force behind the theology of *The Secular City*.

The second point on which Cox's thinking had changed concerned the coming age of secularity. He would not express so positively and assuredly that we live in an age which is quickly approaching no religion at all, as he did in his book. The reason is that he has become more aware of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer meant by "religion" when he made this observation shortly before his death. For Bonhoeffer, "religion" was a kind of metaphysical dualism, growing out of German Lutheran Pietism. Somewhat similar to American revivalism, the "religion" of his time addressed itself to the weaknesses of man. In this sense, "religion" is that doctrine wherein "people literally have to be frightened, almost to death, before they can be persuaded to accept the good news of the Gospel."

Rather than argue, as he did in *The Secular City*, that the age we are approaching will be religionless, Cox would prefer to state that this age must hear the Gospel, and not that type of "religion" mentioned above. Religion is the garb which the Gospel has worn in the past, but is not the Gospel itself. We need a "non-religious" formulation of the Gospel (precisely the aim of his book). Shortly before he was executed, Bonhoeffer asked in anguish: "How can we speak to the secular man about God?" This is the problematic facing the Church today. As Doctor Cox himself put it: "I submit to you that this is our question, that is, the question which all theologians must deal with; and if we don't deal with it, we contribute to our own peril. If we insist that all people must become "religious" in one sense or another, before they can listen to, or respond to, the Gospel, then we have merely introduced the kind of prerequisite which Bonhoeffer compared to the circumcision." The obvious danger here is that this new prerequisite, like the circumcision, will be rejected as standing in the way of salvation.

It seems then that "religion," as defined above, has no place in the new age. Harvey Cox would distinguish: "It is only when we become secular enough so that we can see the distinction between religion and the Gospel, that we are able to go back and to appropriate those elements of religion [piety] which contribute to the Gospel. I am interested, deeply interested, in how a secular society can rediscover its

tribal past and use that tribal past as a source of renewal." He used the example of how today we have re-appropriated part of our tribal past in the modern dance. Previously the town culture had to reject it as too sensuous, perhaps because the dance was too much like the culture newly superseded. But today, in the secular age, we are able to appreciate the tribal past with a certain detachment. In sum, then, his book is not discarding the past at all, as some interpreters have misunderstood it, but is really a call for willingness to move beyond the past, into the present and future age.

The first of the areas wherein Cox has become even more convinced since the publication of *The Secular City*, is speaking about God in the political idiom. (See pp. 241-69.) This is the positive side of his non-religious approach, a suggested idiom which pushes beyond the mythological, metaphysical, and existentialist idiom in which the Gospel has been presented to this day. His rejection of existentialist idioms is perhaps one reason for his popularity in the United States, for we have to "import" the anguish and dejection of the continent after two world wars before we can actually indulge in the existentialist categories of thought. "I do not think that existentialism is the proper idiom, the exclusive idiom for expressing the Gospel. We need much more exploration of the political and social idiom." All Churches seem to have retreated to abstract and abstruse sayings and generalizations, to vague-sounding phrases. "What we need is a kind of solid particularity which names names and places, and which says in no uncertain terms what it means that Jesus Christ summons you and you and you—the concrete obedience, the concrete repentance, and the concrete hope of the secular age." Secular man demands hard specifics, whether in the area of social justice, poverty, peace or family ethics. Admittedly there is a danger in particularity. "I realize all too well that there is a danger in specificity and in particularity; that danger of perhaps ideologizing unduly the Gospel of Christ. I'm willing to take that risk. I think a far more dangerous risk is in the abstruse generalism in which the Gospel is now phrased, along with the deadly and perilous separation of systematic theology and ethics." The "risk" mentioned here will be further explained in the section on communicating the Gospel.

In the second place he has become more convinced that the process of secularization, the process of disenchantment mentioned in the first chapter of the book, is not a cultural backslide. Rather it

could be defined as "a coming to institutional expression of certain impulses planted there by the Christian Gospel." Not all secularization is good, of course, but there is more good in it than bad, especially in the realm of responsibility. For example, we are the first culture which can literally fulfill the command to feed all men, to fulfill Christian charity on a world-wide scale. Hence secularization becomes a process wherein there is a "raising of the state of man's responsibility as God's stewards for this created world." Cox's vision here is related to that of *Genesis* and Teilhard. Man's increased responsibility comes with the powers now within his grasp.

Finally, Doctor Cox commented upon the death of God controversy, for he has falsely been identified with those who say that God is dead. Why had the "death of God" come in our time? "Can it be said that with the disappearance of that enormous cultural apparatus called Christendom, the self-evident understanding of God's existence as being somehow part of the psychological and cultural apparatus of Christendom also disappeared?" The secular theology needs rather an emphasis, not upon the death of God, but upon the *Deus absconditus* of the Bible. In this approach, man must have for the first time the privilege of seeing the hiddenness of God, which is after all the most important thing that we can say about Him. "The God who reveals Himself is in fact the very God who hides Himself from us! He tells us that He is not available for the kind of cheap religious practices for which He was abused by us and others in the past. He won't water our corn for us anymore; He won't bring down fire upon our enemies anymore; He won't solve our moral dilemmas any more; and He won't direct for us some kind of inclusive intellectual system. This is indeed for man to do, and to this extent, He remains hidden." Following Barth's habit of paradoxical proclamations, what Cox is saying here is that the very experience of God as the Hidden One reveals the most about Him to us. Consequently, mankind is seen to be like the stewards in the Gospel who are responsible for the world to our hidden master. In our day, above all, we are responsible for the city! It is in the city where we are placed to love, live and die, that man must exercise his talents, so that it does not become an urban concentration camp. In Cox's theology of discernment we are called to see Christ as He is in man living in the city where we are Christians, and to suffer and celebrate with Christ in His victory.

Panel Questions and Reflections

The various questions addressed to Dr. Cox can be conveniently grouped into three categories: the problem of ultimates; speaking about God; and communicating the Gospel through the liturgy and the Word.

a. The Problem of Ultimates

The first question asked Harvey Cox was by Joseph Foy, a seminarian at the Theological College of Catholic University, and it concerned Cox's notion of metaphysics. Foy pointed out that the Catholic traditional metaphysics has never lost its function of interpreting reality, even the city, and of influencing that reality by speaking to it in its own idiom, in this case, the idiom of city life. What then is Cox's notion of metaphysics?

Cox explained that he did not mean to reject any particular philosopher from the pre-Socratics to Kant, but to reject the notion that a system could be constructed today in the same way. The reason is that we are now aware, through the conception of historicization, that each system is a product of its own culture. But our culture has changed! It no longer looks for systems. Rather, modern society is filled with admiration for the scientific method—for facts and particulars. This is the secular outlook. Therefore, just as the metaphysics of today must think differently than that of old, due to the difference in culture, so, too, must theology. Cox's theology is one suggested approach.

Foy then observed that actually the function of metaphysics in the past was largely misconstrued. What it is at ground is asking about the most fundamental reality which we contact. Today it might ask such basic questions about war and justice, and in this sense would contribute to our culture. Cox agreed wholeheartedly that we should ask these pointed questions.

The next question was formulated by Albert J. Zangrelli, C.S.C. and dealt with the metaphysical basis of ultimates and guides for Christian behavior. Cox seems to question the metaphysical basis of ethics and legal philosophy when he refers to human rights as based upon a consensus, like that formulated by the United Nations (p. 35). Zangrelli continued: "The problem I have with this approach is that it opens the door to a legal philosophy or social ethic

based on the will of the majority (reflecting the value-system of that majority) which could change in any given period of time to the extent that basic fundamental rights might be denied certain classes of men." On the other hand, Dr. Cox seems to imply some metaphysical point of reference when he makes the judgment about the Mississippi cafe proprietor (p. 36). Zangrelli added: "I am willing to recognize certain rights of man, that man has meaning in himself, without bringing God in to support my conviction." Would Cox agree?

Dr. Cox prefaced his answer with the precaution that he was not sufficiently exposed to natural law philosophy to make a definite statement. However, he did say that he would not be so willing to stamp the consensus of opinion of one culture upon the whole world. Natural law is a part of the Western tradition of looking at morality, but not of other cultures. Our culture says that there are certain natural, inalienable, God-given rights in man. We disagree on what these rights are, but not on the fact that they exist. But when we speak to other cultures we must be careful to respect their consensus as well. The charter of the United Nations, then, was used as a suggested hard-core beginning for any meeting of cultures. Perhaps this is the way that natural law reveals itself, as a consensus of all the varying cultures. In this way we can determine what is of natural law and what is of evolving historical experience.

b. Speaking About God

The problem of speaking about God to modern secular man is not an academic one. As Dr. Cox indicated in his opening remarks, this is the central problem of the theologian today. The age we live in might be characterized negatively as an age of "reaction to Hegel". Both positivism and existentialism are in some way associated with this reaction to rationalistic idealism, and both profoundly influence our time. With their thought embodied in the tenets of this reaction, many theologians today have swung to what might be considered the other extreme in speaking about God. They maintain that He is so immanent that we can only speak about Him by using myth (e.g., Reinhold Niebuhr). However, to theologize in reaction to any other point of view is to place oneself on the borders of error.

Against this background, the present writer asked Harvey Cox the following question about his way of speaking of God in political

terms: "I wonder if you would expand somewhat your disagreement with Bultmann on how to speak about God (p. 252). In the early sections of your book you rightly point out that any *ism*, any closed system of thought is harmful to the Christian message. This is especially true in the light of your purpose to speak to a demythologized culture. From this fact it seems that you would agree with Bultmann when he says: 'Faith demands to be freed from any world-view produced by man's thought, whether mythological or scientific.' (See: *Jesus Christ and Mythology* [New York: Scribner, 1958], p. 83.) Yet Bultmann explicitly rejects speaking about God in political or social terms, as you do, as being just another mythology. Do you think your view is of the type criticized by Bultmann, and if so, how would you escape the problem of speaking mythologically about God to a demythologized culture?"

Harvey Cox answered this question by emphasizing the dipolar Bultmannian method. The first pole is the demythologizing of a text by understanding its background, and the second pole is to present it in the form of a command in the idiom of existentialism. Cox agreed with the first pole, for he does wish to understand the text, but disagreed with the second, since it is, in his view, predicated upon a view of man which is existentialist and not biblical. Rather, man has the power to accept manhood offered by God and to change his milieu. Yet actually, to speak of God in political terms is the same measure of myth as to speak of Him in existential terms as Bultmann does. In the use of myth, then, "we both go down together."

Noting that Cox would seem to agree with Niebuhr that we can only speak of God today in some mythological terminology, the writer agreed with Cox that speaking of God to men of different cultures and different philosophical outlooks entails the use of myth, since it reflects what man can know about God. However, this writer maintained that God has *revealed* to us how to speak about Him in Scripture, and this is *not* myth in many cases. "If you agree with this, then, where in the Scriptures does God tell us to speak about Him as political?" Denying that God tells us how to speak about Him, Cox went on to say that the Gospels perform the function of continually questioning our own formulations, which are always subject to historical reality.

c. Communicating the Gospel Through the Liturgy and the Word

Conrad L'Heureux, C.S.P., asked Dr. Cox a question which

concerned the problem of justification. Much of the success of the preaching of the Gospel in the past depended upon the need people felt for justification. But today, man no longer seems to feel this need. "Do we have to make them ask these questions before we can preach to them?"

Cox answered: "I do not think that the preaching of damnation precedes the preaching of the Gospel at all." Actually, the reverse is just as true; once man has accepted the Gospel, he is able to realize how good God has been to him. Since fewer and fewer people today can be persuaded to listen to our engineered techniques to make them listen to questions they haven't asked, we must take a new approach. Today, a resurrection of the meaning of life should be preached. Cox's idea is that we should address ourselves to the sin of pride (not knowing one's place, a kind of insurrectionary spirit, overextension). Man today already has the feeling of powerlessness and smallness in facing the "mass" world about him; if we were to harp on sinfulness, he might descend into despair. Rather, positively attacking pride, we could stress working together and encouragement.

L'Heureux then asked if there might not be a danger in becoming too secular, so that we become more secular and less evangelical. Cox answered again in terms of the risk of specificity, which even Christ took, since He spoke differently to the rich young man, the woman at the well, the bleeding woman. In answer to a question from the floor about the nature of "secular preaching", Cox described it as specific messages addressed to groups with common problems. Today most preaching is directed to large audiences and is therefore of necessity too general to reach every individual. Rather, our preaching must answer and encourage someone with a personal set of problems. "Taking the risk of particularity means sometimes being *wrong* on a certain point. You are never going to preach relevantly unless you are wrong sometimes. That is the real test of relevancy. You will always be right if you are abstract enough!"

A further question was raised. Does not one neglect help from the other world in taking Cox's view? Cox admitted that the Bible contains open references to the "other world", yet the problem he is confronting is the traditional Christian attitude which he has often met in conferences with missionaries: the attitude of the "escape

hatch". Christians are criticized for being untrustworthy because when the going gets rough in any cause they have joined, they quit, resigning themselves to the situation with the pat "escape hatch" reference to the other world. Cox is convinced that the true Christian is totally committed to God *and* to the world of which God has made him custodian.

David M. Thomas, a student at Catholic University's Religious Education Department, asked Dr. Cox about the relationship between the notion of I-You which he advanced in the book, and real Christian love. "Is there a call in the secular city to a new and unique form of Christian love which is different from that of an I-Thou relationship?" The Harvard Divinity professor answered that he did not believe it is the task of the Christian to *change* the functional relationships existing in the city. Setting up warm personal relationships with people we really do not want in our hair, the garbage man, for instance, would make urban life come to a standstill. We have many useful, productive, happy relationships with people in the city; but we are not thereby absolved from our responsibility to others.

A final question was asked of Cox by Kenneth Keenan, O. Carm., concerning the place of the liturgy and the formation of modern man. It seems that the Church might lose its identity in approaching the modern man. Is there a source in the liturgy whereby the Church's effort is regenerated so that it does not become purely secular?

Dr. Cox in his response admitted that this area, namely, that of the contribution of the liturgy, was largely deficient in his book, and that he is working to remedy this at the present. He would like to emphasize the rhythm of the Church between gathering and scattering: it gathers around the Word and the Sacraments, and then scatters to the world. We go into the world to recognize Christ, who is already there! What the liturgy does is prepare us to see Him. "Formation" is the word and conception needed, already widely used in Catholic circles, but not among Protestants. The liturgy contributes to the whole formation of the being of the Christian, not the mind alone, but the whole life of the secular order as well. Cox therefore is defending a theology of discernment which requires a concentrated life in the Christian community, a life of "togetherness" around the liturgy. The result will be a deep involvement in the

world. "If you are a spectator in the liturgy, you will be a spectator in politics!" Furthermore, one who grows up participating in the liturgy will be involved in what God is doing in the world as well.

Conclusion

Dr. Cox's thesis, in brief, might possibly be expressed as follows: Where Christ is, there shall His servant also be. But Christ is in the secular city (the burden of the theology of discernment is to find Him there). Therefore the Christian, his servant, must also be "in" the secular city.

The "secular theology" which results will have to answer at least two sharp criticisms. The first is that the concept of God has been watered down too much by trying to fit God into a man-centered culture. The second is that there is no *scandalon*, no scandal of Christianity in a theology which has become too conformed to the secular age. Where in the theology of Cox is the challenge and witness to the modern world? Exactly what does the Christian witness?

It would be unfair to Dr. Cox not to offer at least some suggestion in answer to the second objection from his own point of view. It could be suggested that the *scandalon* of the Cross be translated into a conception of "yes, but more" to the world's values. This seems to be what the Christian *in* the world must say *to* it. He totally serves the world indeed, but has something more to add! The Christian does not destroy the world, but like Christ (to whom he is conformed), he comes to fulfill and complete it, to transform it. The Christian therefore adds something extra to the service of the world, namely the service of the Father through Christ. This is the very expression of Christian charity; we serve others because God is also *within* them, thereby serving both God and man in the same act. The scandal consists precisely in this, that the Christian believes in the operation of God in the midst of evidence to the contrary, so that he continually confirms and confesses (as Cox says, celebrates) this mystery in the face of what the world would consider absurd and empty values.

Many more inferences and problems arise in reading through *The Secular City*, yet we can be confident that any living, vital theology in dialogue with others will be able to confront these problems and offer increasingly valid answers to them.