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# Social Theory, Theology, Secularization and World Youth Day

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## **Abstract**

John Milbank has examined the interconnections between social theory and theological thought on social issues, finding in both domains since the mid-twentieth century a common patrimony in the philosophical work of Kant, Nietzsche and Heidegger. Milbank, however, contends that the social sciences have sought to frame theology within social scientific methods and discourses. This paper will examine the work of John Robinson on religion and modernity, and Harvey Cox on secularization, to assess to what extent these two classic accounts of life under modern conditions, both of which use social theory to address theological research, undermine or support Milbank's contention. This paper will also consider debates concerning secularization theory and processes of de-secularization that have sought to address secularization under modern conditions. World Youth Day will be examined as an example of Peter L. Berger's theory of counter-secularization.

## **Introduction**

In this paper I will outline John Milbank's critique that social theory has sought to frame theological analysis into positivistic and atheistic parameters. I will assess Milbank's claims by outlining two classical accounts of theological contributions to sociological thinking. The first is the work of John Robinson in the 'Honest to God' debate, which took place in the 1960s when the English Anglican Church confronted the impacts of modernity; and the second will be Harvey Cox's account of secularization. After outlining these theories each will be followed by an appraisal of how their work fares in light of Milbank's critique. This paper will also analyse these issues through considering secularization theory, and its current state. In doing so, there will be included in what follows an examination of World Youth Day in Sydney, 2008, as an example of the continuing struggles between secularization and religious practise and belief. It is important to point out that in what follows, Christianity and secularism are not substitutes for theism and atheism respectively. Christianity is one form of belief among many, and theism has many dimensions beyond the faith structures of organised churches and established religions. Similarly, secularism and secularisation are defined as states and processes which challenge religious belief because they emphasis a material perspective on reality. However, they should not be interpreted as completely supplanting religious belief wherever they are found. As will be revealed below, secularisation and religious belief often co-exist in society, with a relationship of mutual awareness between them.

## **Sociology and theology**

In his book *Theology and Social Theory* (2006) John Milbank gives an account of how theology and the social sciences often share similar research agendas in their respective searches for explanations of the social world and its disorders. However, although common ground has been shared by these disciplines, it has very much been contested ground. Milbank puts forward the thesis that social theory has placed a series of coercive demands on theology. First of all, social theorists have positioned theology as a discipline, claiming that theology has developed out of a series of social conditions to study a topic that is both arbitrary and culturally and historically specific (Milbank, 2006, pp. 1-2). Anselm's definition of theology as faith seeking understanding is, for the social sciences, the theologians way of making the claim that theology studies things of ultimate Truth. For social theory, however, theology is the social scientific branch of an area of human inquiry that has arisen over the course of history, born out of a particular set of social events, including the birth of Christianity and the conversion of Rome. Milbank considers this to be, if anything, a healthy critique for theology to take on board. Problems begin for theology, according to Milbank, when “what is to be known about social processes in general and the socio-historical ‘aspects’ of Christianity in particular, must be learned from social scientists” (Milbank, 2006, p. 2). Although critique about theology is welcome for Milbank, theology has become dependent on social theory's conclusions about social life.

Secondly, and in consequence of this first development, social theory has introduced to theology a sociological definition of the social, and the problems and challenges that the social world faces. To do this, social theorists have identified and written much on the idea of the secular, and the process of secularization, wherein the religious consciousness of social agents has been displaced by one where religious and spiritual ideas matter less and less. Milbank contends that social theory, however, did not discover the realm of the secular, but created it. Milbank suggests that the secular was never in existence prior to the birth of the modern world, but was created in an effort to mark a divide between theology and other areas of life and inquiry, and to make a specific space for theology and its subject of study (Milbank, 2006, pp. 9-10). Moreover, Milbank writes that not only has social theory given theology the definition of the social that it should follow, it has also applied to it a range of solutions that theology can use to assist it in the overcoming of these challenges. This, especially from the 1960s until the end of the twentieth century, is the theory of the young Marx and his work on alienation, which is central to the New Left which emerged in the 1960s (Gosse 2005: 194ff; Milbank, 2006, p. 3). This issue provides a specific challenge to the theological tradition, however, as some positions in theology sees the atheistic foundations of the Marxist approach unusable for its outlook.

For Milbank, another part of the social theory package that has been placed upon theology is that of positivism. As Milbank sees it, Western modernity was marred somewhat in its formation by an inward looking gaze to the individual with the writings of Kant, and this inward looking gaze has manifested itself in a culture of consumption and individualism. Moreover, Milbank sees social theory as a collection of disciplines now unsure about its own project, as the modern has turned to the postmodern, and as Marxist perspectives have given way to post-Nietzschean analyses of the social.

Milbank traces the creation of the secular from two sources. One is the Machiavellian idea of individual militarised rulers acting on the world. To obtain the freedom to do this, the political and the religious realms are separated to give such rulers room to act. Their actions are then defined as the virtue of the individual carrying out his or her talents to their end. The other line of development of the secular is the political and economic space created by philosophers, including Hume and Hobbes, who mark a line of demarcation between the worlds of religion and civil society, in which trade, contracts, and negotiations between sovereign rulers and individuals can take place:

‘The New Science of Politics’ was concerned with *creation*, or the institution of a new, secular space. Hobbesian politics dealt in absolute beginnings, the original will of consciously contracting parties and of the sovereign ruler; Machiavellian politics dealt with the short-lived and tragic fate of a military and political *virtu*, sporadically surmounting the tide of fortune (Milbank, 2006, p. 26, italics in original).

What Milbank finds important about both of these attempts to create the secular is that they have their origins in a theological view of the world and social agents. They are for Milbank a “redefinition of Christian virtue” (Milbank, 2006, p. 47), along humanist lines.

However, Milbank’s argument regarding sociology’s effects on theology reveals a perception about the sociological enterprise that overemphasizes its positivist heritage. Sociology is a diverse and multifaceted discipline, which contributes to knowledge in multifarious ways. Milbank’s analysis of sociology and social theory focuses on its positivist traits at the expense of taking into account the variety of theoretical perspectives and research methodologies which the discipline engages with. Milbank’s positioning of sociology, therefore, is open to similar criticisms that he has formulated for sociology. I will now turn to an analysis of the work of Robinson and Cox to assess to what extent Milbank's contentions hold water.

## **Modernity**

In his book *Honest to God* (1963) John Robinson attempts to challenge Anglican believers by positing God as a local and everyday presence in people's lives, rather than a God that is “out

there” beyond the skies. Robinson's premise for his contention is that people living in modern times are sceptical of conceptions about God that resemble myth and story.

For Robinson, rewriting Christian creeds and dogma for a modern audience is only a short-term solution to the challenges that modernity poses for the Christian faith. Robinson believes that modernity produces critical views of the world, which interpret the Christian message as overlaid with myth and cultural accretions. For Robinson, the way in which God and his action in human affairs is presented, remains essentially medieval, and is therefore confusing to the modern mind. Robinson calls not only for an updating of the Anglican Church's practices to bring it into step with the modern world, but also for transformations in how God is conceptualised:

I believe we are being called, over the years ahead, to far more than a restating of traditional orthodoxy in modern terms. Indeed, if our defence of the Faith is limited to this, we shall find in all likelihood that we have lost out to all but a tiny religious remnant. A much more radical recasting, I would judge, is demanded, in the process of which the most fundamental categories of our theology - of God, of the supernatural, and of religion itself - must go into the melting (Robinson, 1963, p. 7).

To assist with this remoulding effort, Robinson draws on the work of a number of theologians, including Rudolf Bultmann, who have examined how the modern self is able to understand God in a rational and scientific culture. From Bultmann (1960), Robinson adopts the theory that the New Testament, as a collection of texts, is influenced by mythology (Bultmann, 1960, p. 15). Bultmann believes that such mythological underpinnings have imbued the New Testament with a cosmology that is difficult to interpret for people living in the modern age.

Via Bultmann, Robinson is questioning the compatibility of first century cosmological imagery, and twentieth century conceptions of the universe. For Robinson, if Christianity is not 'modernised,' and made more understandable to social agents living in the age of modernity, it is open to the danger of being set aside altogether:

It will doubtless seem to some that I have by implication abandoned the Christian faith and practice altogether. On the contrary, I believe that *unless* we are prepared for the kind of revolution of which I have spoken it *will come* to be abandoned (Robinson, 1963, p. 123, emphasis in original).

Foreseeing the line of argument by some of his critics (see below), Robinson claims that he is not moving away from the basis of Christianity by his re-interpretation of the Gospel message, but is outlining a programme that will benefit Christianity in the long term.

Robinson's theory regarding the perception of God and religion in modern times encouraged a range of differing views to emerge from critics, a discourse that was summed up as the “Honest to God Debate” (see Edwards, 1963). For MacIntyre (cited in Edwards, 1963, p. 215), Robinson's thesis leads to a new form of atheism, and MacIntyre claims that Robinson is expounding atheistic principles. Such atheism springs, MacIntyre contends, from Robinson's reliance on the work of the Protestant

theologians Bultmann, Tillich and Bonhoeffer. MacIntyre sees Protestant theology as: [R]ooted in catastrophe. The liberal idealism which easily confused a secular faith in uninterrupted progress with belief in the actions of a divine providence could not survive the trenches of World War I (MacIntyre, cited in Edwards, 1963, p. 217).

Here MacIntyre situates the Protestant theological project within the framework of modernity. However, for MacIntyre, faith has failed to retain its place as the modern condition has pushed rationality, technology and scientific principles further into social life (MacIntyre, cited in Edwards, 1963, p. 226). Robinson's project in *Honest to God*, as MacIntyre interprets it, is to develop a Protestant theology and spiritual practices that are relevant to modernity. However, to do this, MacIntyre believes that Robinson has emptied out the essential attributes of God, and in doing so presents a God that does not exist in any real way (MacIntyre, cited in Edwards, 1963, p. 228).

To what degree is Milbank's critique of how theology has been positioned justified in Robinson's work? Robinson's aim in *Honest to God* is to bring the Anglican Church into a dialogue with modernity and its institutions. Robinson's concerns about the incompatibility of modern thought with ancient Christian beliefs and practices emerges from the dilemmas that he sees unfolding in Anglicanism, including falling Church attendance and a feeling among congregants of confusion between the competing demands of church doctrine and modern social life (see Brown, 2002, p. 145). Although Robinson has been criticised for his use of sociological categories that can be interpreted as devoid of a spiritual dimension, his purpose has been to join sociological categories such as modernity with the work of theologians such as Bultmann, to open new perspectives for Anglicans. For Robinson, therefore, the use of sociology in his theology is to achieve *praxis*, so that the Anglican Church is not overcome by the social changes that Robinson sees as attributable to modernity.

However, a reading of Robinson's solutions for the Anglican faith, which is to present the faith in contemporary idioms and through concepts understandable to those living in the present, reveals an acceptance of the positioning of theology which Milbank sees being carried out by social theory. Brown (2002), echoing Milbank's hypothesis, sums up this problem again:

The problem is social science itself and its definition of religion. The social-scientific study of religion has been one of the great projects of Enlightenment modernity. From the late eighteenth century to the present, religion has been defined, measured and 'understood' through 'empirical' evidence spawned by the supposed 'neutrality' of social science (Brown, 2002, p. 11).

To achieve a more authentic *praxis* of faith through a merger of Christianity and modern thought, Robinson's thesis may well benefit from a discussion of the social scientific paradigm that is contributing to his theory.

## **Secularization**

In *The Secular City* (1967, see also Callahan, 1967) Harvey Cox attempts to examine the gospel message of Christianity through an analysis of secularization. Rather than defining secularization as specific to modernity, Cox traces the process back to what he contends are its Biblical roots. These roots include the separation of religion from the worship of a state deity in ancient times, through to the rejection of the cult of the Emperor-gods of the Roman Empire by the early Christians (see Cox, 1967, p. 25ff). Cox, following this historical method of tracing secularization, seeks to turn the argument about the secularization process on its head, claiming that rather than being a threat to the survival of Christianity, secularization is in fact a process that has its origins in the Judeo-Christian tradition:

Secularization arises in large measure from the formative influence of biblical faith on the world, an influence mediated first by the Christian church and later by movements deriving from it" (Cox, 1967, p. 21).

Furthermore, Cox contends that secularization should be welcomed by Christians and Christian churches because it frees religion from the constraints of the state and enables Christians to see the social world in perspective. Cox argues that what is required in a secular society is a theology of social change and revolution (Cox, 1967, pp. 105ff; 114ff).

For Cox, secularization is central to contemporary social life, and urbanization is the social space in which daily social life is carried out. Cox traces a development in human society from a tribal environment, to town life, and then to the city as the place of residence and social interaction for most people in the modern world (Cox, 1967, pp 4-6; 38-54). Along with these social environments, Cox sees a shift in people's views about religion and the role it plays in social life, as people move from one social space to the next. Consequently, Cox contends, new theologies spring up to explain life in these social spaces (Cox, 1967, pp. 46-49; 54-58). For tribal populations, religious views that were based on kinship become dominant. When a shift to town life occurs, religious views become increasingly pastoral. Now that a transition to city living has occurred, religious practices and theologies need to be developed that explain the Gospel message to people living in an urban, industrial and information based society. If such practices and theologies are not developed, Cox warns of the modern subject finding little in the Christian message to associate or identify with (Cox, 1967, p. 241).

Cox outlines a number of social problems evident from the 1960s as the modern self attempts to navigate a modern secular society while relying on outmoded and inadequate theologies. These challenges include the commodification of sex in the form of the Miss America ideal of femininity and the Playboy attitudes of masculinity (Cox, 1967, p. 192ff); the displacement of employees by technology in the workplace (Cox, 1967, p. 184); and the

misalignment between an education system dating back to the nineteenth century and the realities of an information economy (Cox, 1967, p. 217ff).

Cox's use of secularization is reflexive. Rather than employ a sociological category to assist with theological interpretations, Cox reveals that some sociological theories can be traced back to theological thought or religious history. His view that secularisation has a biblical history is an example here. However, here Cox clashes with Milbank, who sees secularization's roots not in biblical texts, but in the Renaissance. Cox's theory of secularization challenges Milbank's assertion that the social sciences have imposed categories of thought onto theology, claiming instead that theology as the more senior discipline, in terms of tenure, has, like philosophy, made key contributions that the social sciences are indebted to. For Cox, furthermore, secularization and its discontents must be overcome through social processes of revolution and social change, and such change will seek to create a new social order that is akin to a spiritualised modernity. Here we see Cox incorporating into his work not only the social theory of the modern condition, but also some of its utopian ideals, with an optimistic attitude regarding their ability to be realised.

### **Secularization today**

The prediction that secularization would supersede religion in the social arena has not been fulfilled, especially with the resurgence of interest in religion and its impact on social life. However, secularization theory is still informing debate about the challenges that modernity is having on religious practice and belief. Wallis and Bruce (1992) comment that secularization theory “is one of sociology's most enduring research programmes” (Wallis and Bruce, 1992, p. 8). The theory is still one of debate among theorists, undergoing revision as it is studied in the light of recent developments such as globalisation. As Pecora (2006) writes, it is still accepted that modernization and its consequences leads to secularizing tendencies:

In the common idiom (whether scholarly or popular), modernization is still generally believed to entail secularization to a very large extent, though this belief is often colored [*sic*] by quite different moral or political valuations depending on one's cultural location in an increasingly unified world economy” (Pecora, 2006, pp. 6-7).

As Dobbelaere (2004) points out, secularization theories are now examining the extent to which individuals themselves, as well as the society in which they live, are becoming increasingly secularized (Dobbelaere, 2004, p. 173). Pecora (2006) states that secularization is a process that continues to challenge religious belief within the context of (post)modern conditions:

[T]he developmental perspective that has shaped much of the political and philosophical discourse of the West since the Enlightenment has assumed the inexorability of the process by which religious beliefs are subordinated to nominally secular ones, such as a

desire for individual self-determination, affiliation with one's occupational identity, and political allegiance to the nation-state (Pecora, 2006, p. 7).

Although religion has not disappeared from the social discourse, religious bodies and churches continue to confront the challenges of modernity and the secular state, and repeatedly make their case for why belief and spiritual practices are of continuing importance. Although religious imagery continues to be a feature of the semiotic landscape of modern cities, it is often emptied of its spiritual content by being used in advertising, or as an iconic image of the past. Also, examples of religious practice in social contexts such as the law, where witnesses are required to swear on the Bible, or a prayer being said before the beginning of Parliament in some countries, have come to be seen as cultural traditions the true significance of which many people struggle to comprehend. For example, the act of swearing on the Bible in court before one gives evidence, an act which should remind one of the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment of the Decalogue (You shall not bear false witness), is only effectual if those giving evidence understand that commandment and its importance as both a spiritual and social guide. If social agents have had little exposure to this religious teaching, then it is an open question as to what degree they will feel bound to give true testimony.

Furthermore, in an increasingly multicultural (and multi-religious) society, an act such as swearing on the Bible before giving evidence becomes less meaningful if social agents are from religious traditions that do not place an emphasis on the Ten Commandments, or on the Bible. At best, the act can be said under such circumstances to provide an authoritative text which gives a legal witness a symbol to reveal the gravity of the situation that he or she is in, but if this is all that such a religious text such as the Bible is reduced to, then it is further evidence of the diminishing importance of such religious objects in a secular society.

However, this is not always the case. Pluralism may well be a factor that contributes to the persistence of religion. In Western nations, since the 1960s in particular, there has been a marked increase in the variety of religious experiences that people are exposed to. These include Eastern mysticism, which was introduced into the West and then given much publicity when taken up by many during the cultural changes of the 1960s (Isserman and Kazin, 2000, pp. 257-258); and Islam, which has increased in visibility in Western nations through immigration (Kepel, 2004, p. 8). On the other hand, the question must still be raised regarding how these faiths will fare under modern conditions. After its heyday in the 1960s, Eastern mysticism has become the religion of a very small number of Westerners, most followers of the Buddhist and Hindu faiths coming from countries and cultures where those faiths predominate. Islam, similarly, remains a faith largely followed by the migrants who have brought it with them to their new homelands, an estimated ten million of whom have settled in Western Europe

(Kepel, 2004, p. 249). As well as making its presence felt through immigration, however, Islam in Europe is also growing through the conversions of young people attracted to the faith as an alternative to their experiences of poverty and addiction. As Kepel points out, many European converts “found their way to Islam after having grown up in poor neighbourhoods,” or “were drawn to Islamist organizations after having been alcoholics or drug addicts” (Kepel, 2004, 272).

Another factor that has been at the forefront of debates about secularization, is the issue of the rise of evangelical forms of Christianity, especially in the United States, Latin America and Asia (Martin, 2005, p. 22). The persistence of religion, to use Andrew Greeley's (1973) term, has been identified in America especially. One possible reason for this, as Martin (2005) suggests, is that religion, and secularization also, are undergoing different processes in the United States and Europe. In the United States “religion flourished most luxuriantly under modern conditions where church and state were separated and where there was religious pluralism and competition” (Martin, 2005, p. 21). In Europe, on the other hand, and using Britain as a specific example, with its long history of interaction between church and state, and less religious pluralism until recent times, conditions have been more conducive to a flourishing of secularization (Martin, 2005, p. 21).

All of this points to the complexities of the secularization thesis. As Wallis and Bruce (1992) write, “secularization is a multi-faceted notion” (Wallis and Bruce, 1992, p. 9). They go on to point out that the thesis has at times been caricatured and misunderstood (Wallis and Bruce, 1992, p. 27). Moreover, the idea that secularization theory has been overturned because of a resurgence of religion in society must be viewed critically. Although religion is currently discussed, especially with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, this does not mean that secularization tendencies are no longer at work. In the case of Islamic extremism, for example, it is worthwhile keeping in mind that it is the secularizing tendencies of modernity themselves which are one of the major factors which concern those who see the Islamic faith as being under threat (Kepel, 1994, p. 8; also Kepel, 2004, p. 246).

### **Secularization theory: is it dead or alive?**

Peter Berger (1999), an advocate of secularization theory in the 1960s, now believes that the theory is incorrect. He has come to this conclusion based on the observation that the world is “as furiously religious as it ever was, and in places more so than ever” (Berger, 1999, p. 2). Such a position, however, raises two questions. Firstly, if the world is more religious than ever, then why is this the case? Secondly, what kind of religion is the world furiously practising? The

first question, why is there so much evidence of religion in the world today, can be, in part, answered by a process of de-secularization that has been engaged in by major churches and world religions. Berger concedes that forces have been at work to address secularization, writing that secularization has “provoked powerful movements of counter-secularization” (Berger, 1999, p. 3). What is of importance about processes of counter-secularization, however, is that they would indicate by their very presence that secularization has in fact taken place in the modern world, and that it can be reversed. Such a theory appears to do little to support the conclusion that secularization theory itself is incorrect. The theory of counter-secularization, or what Kepel (1994) also refers to as ‘re-Christianisation’ in the Christian religions, will be examined in more detail below in the section on World Youth Day. Firstly, some comments will be made to address the second question raised by Berger’s counter-secularization thesis – that is, what kind of religion is the world involved in?

The United States is often cited as an example of how central religion is for people living in modern democratic states. Figures are cited to support this, including the number of those who claim to believe in God being 96% of the American population (Law, 2007, p. 80). However, in a nation with high crime rates and few policies to help its poorest citizens because of a desire to protect free market capitalism, the question can be asked of what quality is the religious belief of many Americans. As Himmelfarb writes, many Americans “believe in God, but they believe even more in the autonomy of the individual” (Himmelfarb, cited in Law, 2007, p. 81). A key problem with holding up the United States as a model of the importance of religion in society, is that religion there is stated as being a mile wide, but an inch thick, meaning that religious views are held by many, but are not influencing a number of citizens into acts of virtuous behaviour (Law, 2007, p. 162). Another form of counter-, or de-secularization, is the deliberate processes established by some religions to bring faith into social life. The Catholic Church’s World Youth Day is such a process.

### **World Youth Day**

In July 2008 Sydney, Australia, hosted the Catholic Church’s World Youth Day, with Pope Benedict XVI in attendance. The city was overhauled for the event, with heightened security, road closures, and the provision of extra public transport. The event raised millions of dollars for the city, and has found support from a large consensus, including leaders of other Christian denominations, politicians, and leaders from other religions. The event brought 130,000 visitors to the city, with 500,000 pilgrims and locals attending the Papal Mass (WYD08, 2008, pp. 5; 13), dwarfing the numbers in attendance for the Olympic Games in 2000.

It is possible to interpret World Youth Day as evidence of the resurgence of religion in Western society, and as further evidence that the predictions of the secularization thesis is based on erroneous foundations. A closer examination of the origins of the event, however, reveals that it is in fact linked very closely with secularization. This is evident when the origins of the event are analysed. World Youth Day was begun by the recent pope John Paul II (r. 1978-2005), and his intention for making the day a tri-annual event was to provide a vehicle through which young Catholics could be more deeply involved in their faith. A key element stressed when World Youth Day was launched, was that young people needed to be provided with an event that would make their faith meaningful in a world where religion was under threat. Pope John Paul II, aware of the many stresses that faith was under in secular social life, sought to provide an environment, albeit if only for a few days during this event, in which Catholic young people could live their faith in total immersion, alongside other young people from across the globe who share similar beliefs.

The origins of World Youth Day, therefore, are closely linked to the threat of a continuing secularization of modern society. World Youth Day as a mobilization of youth on a mass scale to give witness to the faith fits in with Kepel's (1994) theory of a 're-Christianization from below' carried out by the Catholic Church. Responding to secularized societies in Europe (Kepel, 1994, p. 58), the Church set out to develop a range of strategies designed to bring Christian practice back into everyday life through the assistance of lay (non-clerical) Catholics. Such movements included "the charismatic movement, whose adherents live in separate communities, and the restoration of Catholic influence over particular institutions such as the school, which is an interface between the family and civil society, between private and public spheres" (Kepel, 1994, p. 60). It can be argued that World Youth Day has its conceptual origins in an organization created by the Italian priest Luigi Giussani:

The group that Father Giussani founded in the 1950s was named Student Youth and most of its members were recruited among the schoolchildren and students of Milan, the industrialized, secular capital of Northern Italy. Its avowed enemy was the 'secularism' which had adulterated people's sense of Catholic identity and given birth to atheistic Marxism (Kepel, 1994, p. 62).

Giussani's movement became an important component of re-Christianization from below. What is evident, therefore, is that like Giussani's Student Youth movement, World Youth Day may appear as an example of the resurgence, or persistence of, religion in modern society, but has its roots in a resistance to secularization. Dobbelaere (2004) refers to such processes of resisting secularization as attempts at re-sacralizing and de-secularizing the social world (Dobbelaere, 2004, p. 173).

All of this, however, may be undermined by Milbank's contention that the social sciences have sought to frame theology in a specific way, with empirically based definitions of what constitutes religion. To suggest that an event such as World Youth Day is a reaction to secularization is to make a conclusion about it based on the very positioning that social theory provides theology. Such a view, on the other hand, should not preclude the ability of social theory to investigate religion in society. What should be taken, ultimately, from Milbank's view, is recognition of how social theory is interpreting religion in society. A potential goal, therefore, is a dialogic interaction between theological and sociological thought, in which the social sciences are aided by theology, and vice versa.

## **Conclusions**

What can be discerned from Robinson and Cox's use of sociological categories is that these authors have a much more optimistic perspective on the contributions that social theory can make to theology. Unlike Milbank, who feels that social theory has constrained theology and framed it into a corner, Robinson and Cox, in putting social theory to work in theology, have attempted to show that theology and sociology have much to share. Furthermore, both of these authors, and especially Cox, have provided a reflexive use of social theory, where categories such as secularization are not emptied of theological content, but are instead given theological interpretations which social theorists have benefited from.

Robinson and Cox are seeking to address theological problems through an analysis of modern conditions. As Cady (2001) expresses it, the category of religion is now the *modern* category of religion. Moreover, as forms of Pentecostal Christianity are identified as the foundation for the hegemonic and aggressive foreign policy interventions of the United States, especially through the current Bush administration, a theory of strict demarcation between religion and political life may no longer be a safe operating assumption for social theory (Cady, 2001, p. 32). Furthermore, recent debates on the secularization thesis suggest that the issue of religion under modern conditions is extremely complex. The simplistic version of the secularization model, that suggests that modernization will displace religion, rests on flawed theoretical foundations. On the other hand, however, the idea that secularization theories are erroneous because of a perceived resurgence in religion should also be viewed critically, as much of this religious resurgence is uneven across the globe, and can also be attributed to political and economic shifts.

Australia's hosting of World Youth Day in 2008 provides an empirical example of how the threat of secularization, and perceptions of religious resurgence, continue to be relevant topics of debate in the contemporary world. Examined through the frame of reference of the

secularization thesis, World Youth Day can be interpreted as an example of attempts to address the further encroachment of secularizing tendencies in everyday life, and particularly in the religious beliefs and practices of social agents. However, what must also be remembered is that such a definition of the role of World Youth Day has its roots in a theoretical perspective heavily reliant on social theory's positioning of theology and religion as the subjects of modernising processes. Such a positioning should not undermine an analysis of the event, but rather, should be utilised in developing further theoretical insights into events such as World Youth Day. Perhaps what can be learned, in the long run, from Milbank's thesis, is that it lays the foundations for further research for the sociology of religion, and for social theory in general, in critically examining its approach to its subject matter.

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