JOÃO DE PINA-CABRAL

Three points on secularism and anthropology

Charles Stewart asked us to respond to the following challenge: 'Are the majority of anthropologists virtually card-carrying secularists?' At first, this might seem the sort of outdated question that historians debated heatedly thirty years ago. On further elaboration, however, it turns out to be centrally tied up with the issues that have been puzzling so many of us over the past decade, concerning modernity and the role of anthropology in the negotiation of global hegemonies.

First of all, a definition: 'secularists' are those who believe that 'secularisation' has been occurring and will continue to occur. Secularisation, in Owen Chadwick's classical formulation, is 'a growing tendency in mankind to do without religion, or to try to do without religion' (1975: 17). This definition, however, leaves open the question of what it is 'to do without religion'. Thus, as our debate in Krakow plainly showed, we have first to establish that 'secularism' is not the same as 'atheism'.[1] One may be a secularist and believe in some sort of god. In fact, as Bruno Latour has convincingly argued, modernity is centrally characterised by the withdrawal of the gods from both nature and society into a kind of inner centrality, which is both absolutely distant and awesomely intimate (1991). Secularism would, therefore, be that aspect of modernity by which questions of divinity were separated both from the way in which the material world is seen to operate and the way in which society is regulated.

As I pondered over our question, I could not come up with a simple yes/no answer, as I found myself involved in three distinct lines of debate. The first concerns secularisation as a theory about the future. The notion that, in Charles Stewart's words, 'the further we proceed into modernity the less significance religion will have for people'. To this I answer 'no'. The second concerns secularisation as a historical fact. Specifically, the apparently unchallenged notion that it is somehow a specific outcrop of European Christendom.[2] To this I answer: 'Watch out – there's an insidious Eurocentric trap in that notion.' The third concerns secularisation as a political ideal. Specifically, the implications for the practice of anthropology of the adoption of secularism or anti-secularism as political hegemonies at the global level. To this I answer, 'Yes' – when considering the globe as a political system, anthropologists need perforce be in favour of secularism.

1 Or, for that matter, 'agnosticism'.

2 Or, as John Keane states, that the concept of 'secular' is something 'peculiar to European civilisation' (1998: 12).

Secularism and anthropological theory

Let us now briefly develop the first issue, concerning anthropological theory. Most of us no longer believe that secularisation is the inevitable path to the future of humanity, for the simple reason that very few of us still believe that the future is somehow predictable. But, to be interesting, the questioning must go deeper. Most of us have been surprised over the past few decades about the way in which religion has played a continued or even increased role in global politics and culture. Of course, the stereotypical example, when the aim is paranoia, is Islam. When the aim is puzzled amusement, we call forth all the gamut of New Age religions that have sprung up everywhere.

But why are we surprised? Did we expect atheism to become consensual by the end of the twentieth century? Of course not. Some of the more influential anthropologists of our century have been religious people. Rather, because we implicitly believed in secularism – that people would 'do without religion', that is, they might well hold some notion of divinity but that should not affect their external daily life, both socially and materially. We are surprised because we come to discover that the modern world has finally arrived but it is not so modern after all.

The problem goes deeper, though. The concept of secularisation implies the concept of *religion*. Now, up until the sixties, most of us were reasonably sure as to what that word meant. According to Tambiah, anthropology used "a narrow rationalist definition of religion, born of the European Enlightenment, which … constructed it primarily as a doctrine of beliefs and a system of intellectualistic constructs' (1990: 3). To my mind this all came tumbling down when Rodney Needham committed yet another of his justly famous grand acts of modernist suicide by declaring he could not determine the exact meaning of the word 'belief' (1972).

This was hardly the tolling of the bells for religious studies, however. In fact, some of our colleagues even think the whole debate was vacuous. That is precisely why I am puzzled with the fact that one should find today such an evident, albeit silent, consensus in the discipline. Studies of religion have shifted away from the consideration of rationalised, externalised, neatly structured systems of symbols towards a preoccupation with, again in Tambiah's words, 'that central subjective essence that lies deep within any culture' (1990: 51). A shift occurred towards analyses of the performative experience of symbolic acts and statements in terms of embodiment and subjectivity. Thus, the issue of whether a subject of study can be said to hold a specific religion or not is no longer of central relevance. Religion, it would seem, became mostly relevant to anthropologists as part of a politics of identity. In other words, it is as if we have chosen to resolve the problem by avoiding it. We have opted to focus on those inner, personal aspects of religion that least challenge our secularist expectations about the modern world.

Secularism and the West

I will present the second aspect by means of an anecdote. Long ago I was at a seminar given by Peter Rivière. When he finished, a lady in the audience asked him whether he had found it difficult to understand the beliefs of the South American Indians he studied. He responded that he did not – it was all fairly much recognisable stuff held in clear-headed ways by reasonably tolerant people. To the contrary, what he never

managed to understand was the sort of intolerant Biblical literalism that American Baptist missionaries were trying to impose on the Trio.

Is secularism really a western product? Is there really a gap 'between "our" secularism and "their" religion', as Charles Stewart asks in his debate proposal? To my mind, there is not. If we accept the use of the word 'secularism' in a less restrictive fashion, we soon realise that the Judeo-Christian tradition is hardly the best example of secularism.

For example, the humanist rationalism, religious scepticism, and liberal spirit of the philosophy of Hsün-tzu (third century BC, cf. Granet 1968:456ff.), have been at the source of humanity's most ambitious project of self-improvement, the Confucian pedagogic tradition (de Bary 1988:9–10). Commentators have noted that, if we take into consideration how populous China is and the length of its written history, Hsün-tzu was 'one of the most influential philosophers the world has ever known'. Is he not a better advocate of secularism than most of Europe's present political leaders? As Theodore de Bary has brilliantly argued (1988), it is about time that academics stopped playing into the hands of authoritarian politicians by taking for granted that such things as tolerance, secularism or civil rights do not suit the Eastern, the African or the whatever-else mind.

Furthermore, modern European secularism was not invented in a closed world, but in a world of deepening global interconnection. In this matter, we must not forget that one of the great formulators of modern western secularism – G.W. Leibniz – dialogues with the Confucian tradition in one of the texts where he most clearly discusses the matter. Taking recourse to the critical references about Confucianism provided by the Jesuit and Franciscan priests based in Macao, Leibniz finds in Confucian thought some clear parallelisms to his own form of modern deism (see his *Letter to de Rémond*, 1991 [1716]:70).

Thus, I do not deny that 'secularism' is a central part of the notions of modernity that came into existence in western Europe and that so deeply moulded our social and material lives. What must be emphasised is (a) that other styles of secularism have been known to exist in the past and continue to exist in the present; and (b) that modernity should no longer be seen as a western phenomenon (Tu Wei-Ming 1996). We would be both factually wrong and politically ill-advised to continue to do so.

Secularism as a political ideal

Finally, the third issue, secularism as a political ideal – that is, the ideal of absolute freedom of expression and of the equality of rights independently of religious affiliation. If we consider that anthropology's main task is the pursuit of the rational analysis of human social and cultural life, then Chadwick's declaration concerning history fully applies to our discipline: 'there is no history which is not secular. If it is not secular it is not history: or, to put it thus, no statement that a fact of the past is "sacred" can exempt it from the ordinary process of historical enquiry' (1975:194).

To my mind the issue presents itself more starkly at the international rather than at the local or national levels, where local idiosyncrasies can prevail without affecting the discipline as a whole. The important fact is that we are presently living through a moment in which the integration of the globe in cultural and political terms is very openly negotiated. Academics like us are involved in numberless contexts of negotiation of the terms that permit global communication. We do not do this as citizens,

for there is no global state; neither do we do this as members of a culture in the traditional anthropological sense, for there is no such thing as a global culture in that sense. However, when I cross a Sudanese man on his way to Mecca in the airport of Dubai, we both know what to do, where to go and how to behave; there is even a place for him to say his prayers, just as there are many bottles in the duty-free shop that he would never consider buying. We go past each other with a comfortable sense of predictability, much in the same way as I go past my colleagues in the halls of my institute. In order for such things to happen, do we not have to share some kind of culture?

My point is that, in internet exchanges, airport halls, G8 meetings, United Nations debates and so on, in all of these contexts of global communication we are negotiating a culture of sorts. But it is not a culture of the same nature as the cultures that people are born into and that shape their primary solidarities. Rather, it is a kind of metaculture – much like the Judeo-Christian tradition or the neo-Confucian tradition, but not incompatible with them.

For the sake of the argument, however, what needs to be stressed is that this airport culture must be secular for anthropology to survive. In other words, if it comes to happen at global level as it happens in my country, that the state heavily subsidises private universities but only on condition that they be controlled by the Vatican, then the task of anthropologists will soon be hindered.[3]

So it happens with secularism as happens with human rights: anthropologists do not really have strong enough theoretical reasons to argue for the necessity of these norms, but if they do not come to be adopted as a kind of global ground-rule, then the free pursuit of the rational analysis of human social and cultural life, as should ideally define our discipline, will be seriously hindered.

To conclude, in terms of anthropological theory, secularisation does not make much sense today; in terms of historical observation, it has been dangerously open to insidious identity politics; in terms of political ideals, anthropology as an intellectual pursuit will suffer greatly if secularism does not come to be adopted as a basic ground-rule for international politics.

João de Pina-Cabral
Institute of Social Sciences
University of Lisbon
Portugal

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3 Since I wrote this a courageous Minister of Education (a sociologist) has decided to stop the secret flow of funds to the Catholic University. This brought out this whole issue into the open and gave rise to a bitter media debate in which, to my surprise, a large number of previously secularist social scientists have come out with pseudo-historicist arguments in favour of the Vatican's privilege.

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