

Orthodoxy and Social Change

-by Avery Dulles, S.J.

To prevent the secularization of society, the Church can practice certain measures: First, maintain the hierarchical structures of the Church so that it is not shaped by public opinion. Second, the Church must hold to doctrinal firmness and condemn heretical teachings. Third, the Church must establish vigorous educational programs to teach the faith and form the minds and consciences of the young. Fourth, the Church must evangelize and be inclusive, bringing the light and riches of the Catholic faith to all races and cultures.

The question whether the secularization of society normally brings about a decline of religion has been much debated. The renowned sociologist Peter Berger during the 1960s answered this question in the affirmative, but soon he changed his mind. Since the 1970s he has maintained that the sociological process of secularization is not necessarily detrimental to religious faith and practice. His prime example is the United States, which remains a highly religious country even though secularization has gone as far here as anywhere else in the world.

Political Secularization

It may be helpful to make a distinction between two types of secularization--political and cultural. In the political sense it means recognition of the state as a purely secular entity. The disestablishment of religion in the American system involves obvious problems, but on the whole it has worked out well both for religion and for secular society. To have a lively religious community it is important that the members belong to it for religious motives, not because of any kind of social constraint or legal penalties. The churches thrive better in the United States than in countries where some form of Christianity is the official religion of the state. Religious groups are free not only to hold services of worship (as they can in some totalitarian states) but also to publish their views and to conduct schools, hospitals, and charitable organizations. Many Americans devote a large portion of their time, energy, and income to religious causes. Church attendance remains relatively high. It is a blessing for civil society as well to have a situation in which people of different religious faiths can live together peaceably in mutual respect and friendship.

In Western Europe the process of secularization has not worked out so favorably for religion. This is partly because it is seen as a setback for the church, which in the past relied on the backing of the state. The people have not been prepared for a situation in which religion is a matter of choice. The national memory in most European countries is burdened by the involvement of the churches in struggles for political power. The history of religious wars has severely damaged the cause of religion, especially in those countries in which the church relied upon the state to enforce its standards of belief and conduct.

In the long run, I would conclude, political secularization, far from being harmful to religious faith, is beneficial to it. Provided that its free exercise is safeguarded, religion can survive and prosper in a secularized state. But the kind of religion that will prosper depends to a large degree on the impact of cultural secularization, to which our consideration must now turn.

Cultural Secularization

Cultural secularization goes hand in hand with what sociologists describe as modernization, a phenomenon that can be clarified by several points of contrast between traditional or premodern cultures and those that are characteristically modern.

In traditional societies the religion, occupation, and customs of individuals are determined not by personal choice but by the family and neighborhood in which they were born and raised. Modern society, by contrast, is highly mobile. People change their residence and occupation very freely, according to their personal inclination and the opportunities of the job market. The son of a fisherman from New Orleans can become a lawyer in New York; the daughter of an oil tycoon from Tulsa can become a movie actress in Hollywood.

Individual choice enters likewise into the sphere of religion. In parts of Southern Asia one almost has to be a Buddhist or a Hindu, depending on the region where one lives. In much of the Middle East, Islam is the law of the land. But nothing similar obtains in the United States. The church becomes for all practical purposes a voluntary association. People belong to a church if they want to, not because they feel they have to. There are few if any social pressures to belong to one religion rather than another, or even to any organized religion. Religion is considered a private matter, about which people can make their own choices. Many opt out of the church and the religion in which they were raised. Sometimes they come back to it; sometimes they join another religious body. This situation is not wholly bad because, in the words of the Second Vatican Council's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," it demands from individual persons "a more personal and explicit adherence to faith" (No. 7).

A further aspect of modernization has to do with the division of life into separate spheres. Religion is seen as having a certain limited competence. It governs people's relationship to God, their prayer life, and their Sunday worship. But most believers do not want religion to interfere with the autonomy of their other activities. The various spheres--business, politics, social life, entertainment, etc.--are relatively independent of one another. It is unusual to choose one's business partners, one's political allegiances, or one's recreational activities primarily on religious grounds.

In the modern situation religion tends to get marginalized, some would say trivialized. It has a very hard time maintaining itself in the public square or the market place. Any effort by a church to say what is morally permitted, required, or prohibited by the law of God in the spheres of politics, medicine, business, or family life is resented as an intrusion into alien territory. It is considered improper for any private association to impose its morality on people who do not belong to it. Thus religion is progressively excluded from areas in which it formerly played a decisive role. It has difficulty keeping a significant presence in education. Even in domestic life, religion plays a diminished part. As all these spheres get progressively secularized, religion retreats into its own corner. It survives as something one might decide to do with one's leisure time--almost as a hobby for people who want to be religious. Anyone who sees religion as determinative for secular activities is likely to be regarded as a fanatic. Teachers, businessmen, politicians, or judges who let religion impinge in a major way on their professional activities are considered eccentric.

In the kind of modern society I have described, people tend to be selective in their adherence to their heritage, in the religious as in other spheres. They will be reluctant to commit themselves to a whole "package" of doctrines and moral standards handed to them by tradition or by the official teachers. The role of authority is greatly diminished. Even Christians who belong to a particular church want to scrutinize the directives coming from its office-bearers. Top-down management arouses anger and irritation. Church members feel that they have a right to be consulted and that they may choose for themselves which doctrines they will accept.

The Situation of Orthodoxy

Orthodoxy, in Christian terms, means adherence to a definite body of truth certified by the church as being consonant with revelation. Like Muslims and Jews, Christians of various denominations have their own brands of orthodoxy, based on the confessional documents approved in their respective traditions. For Catholics the principal criterion and judge of orthodoxy is the magisterium, consisting of the pope and the bishops who are in communion with him. The magisterium functions most authoritatively in the teachings of ecumenical

councils in which the pope and the universal episcopate act in unison.

The presupposition of Christian orthodoxy is that God has made a definite revelation that can, at least in part, be expressed in conceptual language. Creedal and dogmatic propositions articulate particular aspects or implications of divine revelation. Religious language, of course, is historically and culturally conditioned, and may have to be translated for different times and places, but the truths expressed by it, inasmuch as they are warranted by God, transcend that conditioning. Admittedly, words like "Incarnation" and "Trinity" have highly technical meanings that have developed through centuries of discussion and are subject to further modification, but the reality to which these words refer is held to be objectively given in revelation.

The revelation of God in Christ, according to Christian faith, is permanently and universally true. It is addressed to all men and women and to all future generations. The church has an obligation to preserve and transmit the deposit of faith. The magisterium has the responsibility of overseeing the whole process and enjoys the divine assistance needed to perform this indispensable function.

If the social analysis in the opening section of this article is correct, it should be evident that to be orthodox in our society it is necessary to be countercultural, at least in the sphere of religion. In the cultural situation that has developed in the United States and in great parts of the Western world, any kind of orthodoxy, and perhaps especially Catholic orthodoxy, is under enormous pressure. To indicate this, it may suffice to allude to five aspects of the contemporary mentality: relativism, historicism, individualism, subjectivism, and egalitarianism.

1. *Relativism* in extreme form maintains that truth is relative to the person who holds it: what is true for me may not be true for you. In a more moderate form, it maintains that we cannot know truth except in a manner conditioned by the particular environment in which we have been raised and educated. The logical consequence is that one should not profess to be certain of any religious belief that is contested in another social setting. In the face of religious pluralism, we should be modest enough to admit that our own faith is valid only within our limited horizons. The doctrines may be true for us, insofar as they work in our lives, but we cannot say that they ought to be believed and professed by those raised in other cultural environments. Because it runs directly counter to the universalism of Christian truth claims, relativism is incompatible with orthodoxy.

2. *Historicism* is simply a further specification of relativism. It means relativism in time. In extreme form it holds that what is true in one age can become false in another. In more moderate form it holds that ideas regarded as true and certain in one period of time may be seen as false or doubtful by a later age in light of further discoveries. For this reason, say the historicists, we

should always be tentative in affirming religious truths and prepared to surrender them if the evidence runs against them. We can never be sure that they will not be overthrown by future intellectual progress. Historicism undermines the view of orthodox Christianity that the revelation given in Christ, and the articles of Christian faith are permanently valid.

3. *Subjectivism*. According to the prevalent mentality of our day, there is no objective rule for determining religious truth. Religious knowledge does not arise through mathematical deductions from self-evident principles, as does geometry (according to the popular conception), nor can it be publicly verified by experimentation, as can scientific discoveries. Religion, according to this view, is essentially a matter of feeling and the heart. We are advised to adhere to the religion in which we find emotional satisfaction and growth experiences. By failing to acknowledge the objective truth-value of creedal and dogmatic statements, subjectivism opposes itself to orthodoxy.

4. *Individualism*. The reigning mentality of our age denies that we can make any institution or collectivity responsible for what we believe. Although we may join a church and accept its belief-system, we have a right to choose the religious body, if any, to which we wish to belong. We also have a right to opt out of the body if its teaching seems incompatible with our own convictions. Individualism subordinates the faith of the church to that of each particular member. It minimizes the duty to adhere to some divinely established way of salvation and to conform one's beliefs, as orthodoxy requires, to the teaching of a "true church."

5. *Egalitarianism*. In civil society it has become practically a matter of dogma that all men and women are created equal, and that popularly elected government is necessary to protect the rights of all. Democracy may indeed be the best form of government for human societies that are set up by the people to secure the blessings of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but it is quite another question whether democratic principles can prevail in the church, as a divinely established society that has a definite faith to preserve and propagate.

Egalitarianism, as applied to Christianity, seeks to refashion the church in the image of democratic society. It denies that there is any order or class that has privileged access to the truth. Those who govern in the church, it maintains, should be accountable to the membership at large and operate according to the rule of consensus. The officers of the church, it is held, should adjust their teaching and precepts in light of the findings of public opinion polls or the results of a democratic vote. Democratization thus tends to subvert the teaching authority of the hierarchy.

The net result of these five pressures is to place Catholic orthodoxy in a difficult and highly unpopular position. Terms associated with orthodoxy, such as dogma, hierarchy, priesthood, and infallibility evoke negative reactions. To

cherish any of the four is considered to be a sign that one is not a really modern person but a survivor from some past era in which little value was placed on freedom, equality, and progress.

Two Christian Mentalities

The whole trend of modernization may be seen as eroding the foundations of orthodoxy. The ebullient secularity of our culture would seem to favor the more liberal and progressive styles of religion. Many, in fact, accept religion only on the terms set by the secular culture. For cultural Christians the church is a voluntary society, comparable to the Masons or the Elks. They adhere to religion for its therapeutic and social value. It provides a way of celebrating certain occasions in secular life, such as baptisms (seen as ritual celebrations of birth rather than rebirth), weddings, and funerals. Some like to mark Sundays and holidays such as Christmas with attendance at church services.

For these secular Christians the church does not function as an unquestioned authority governing their ideas or conduct. The church, in their view, should not intrude into matters of domestic life, business, politics, and the like. They may be aware that ecclesiastical leaders and church bodies sometimes make pronouncements on these subjects, but they do not feel bound by these directives. In their religious life cultural Christians rely heavily on their personal experience and give very limited scope to authority.

Orthodoxy is not a high priority for cultural Christians. If they recite the creed, they do so without deep conviction. They are acutely conscious that Christianity is a minority religion in the world and that each particular denomination is a minority within that minority. They are not sure that the minority to which they belong has any infallible access to the truth. They expect the church to modify its doctrines as necessary to accommodate other points of view and keep pace with historical progress.

Such cultural Catholics do not adhere to the church as it defines itself through its highest teaching organs. They do not accept its teaching at face value. They treat creedal and dogmatic statements as metaphors or vague approximations of a transcendent truth that remains elusive. Faith gives them a set of symbols by which to imagine the world. But for them it does not have any clear and definite content that is permanently and universally binding. Dissent appears to them as an acceptable option. Some, holding that the magisterium inhibits the church from updating itself, are inclined to esteem dissenters as exemplary Catholics.

The phenomenon of dissent has increased exponentially in the thirty-odd years since Vatican II. In the church that I remember from my youth, Catholics could be counted upon to support the teaching of the pope; public criticism of the magisterium by Catholics was almost unheard of. But if one goes back a little in history, dissent seems to be almost normal. In the English-speaking

world at the time of the American Revolution, many educated Catholics had an Enlightenment mentality. In France and elsewhere on the continent, Jansenism and Gallicanism were rife well into the 19th century. If Gallup polls had existed in the 13th century, it might have been possible to show that many of the laity failed to adhere to the teaching of the councils even on basic points of faith. Through long experience the church has learned to live with dissent even while opposing it.

The Appeal of Orthodoxy

The prognosis for orthodoxy would seem to be dim if we looked only at the modern secular situation. But sociologists of religion report that the most vigorous branches of Christianity tend to be orthodox. Dean M. Kelley in his well-known *Why the Conservative Churches Are Growing* (1972) set forth three main characteristics of the model religious group: First, its members are wholeheartedly committed to its ideals, to the extent that they are ready to suffer persecution and make great sacrifices for the organization and its goals. Second, the members willingly submit to the discipline of the group, obeying the decisions of the leadership without cavil. Third, the members exhibit an irrepressible missionary zeal, bathing the new members and the young with a nurturing stream of communications about the goals and life of the group. Dean Kelley's general thesis has been confirmed by many subsequent studies.

The very difference of these dynamic groups from the dominant culture makes them interesting and captivating. By contrast, the progressive and culture-friendly institutions are flabby and colorless. The world has no need of a religious body that simply mirrors the dominant values of the society. A religion that lays claim to a divine revelation ceases to be credible if it teaches only what people would be inclined to believe without it.

In their hearts people long for something more than is offered by the secular order, with its passing pleasures and fluctuating opinions. They reach out for something higher, something universally and eternally good and true, to which they can give themselves permanently and totally. This is precisely what revealed religion has to offer. It tells us that God, the uncreated source of all truth and goodness, has freely communicated himself and his divine life by bestowing himself in his divine Son and his Holy Spirit. God has established in Christ a sacred order, a way of salvation. The church, founded upon Christ, and secondarily upon Peter and the apostles, has been established in the world to give permanent testimony to the saving truth and to nourish the faithful with holy rites that put them in contact with the saving realities. The church has been equipped by God with hierarchical structures to preserve its apostolic heritage and to prevent it from succumbing to the shifting tides of popular opinion. Faith, as a way to salvation, involves submission to the authoritative teaching that comes from God through the church. Faith therefore cherishes orthodoxy.

Because of the deep hungers of the human spirit and the high claims of Catholic Christianity, there will continue to be countercultural Catholics. For them religion is not simply one department of life. It has an impact on everything they think, say and do. They are not against culture as such, but they refuse to let their religion be defined by the culture in which they find themselves. For them it is axiomatic that faith rests on a divine revelation with a definite content that does not change to suit the culture or the times. Faith provides a basis for criticizing and even reforming the culture.

Some members of this countercultural group are persons who had a strong religious upbringing and are alarmed at the gulf between the mores of our society and traditional Christian principles. Other countercultural Christians are individuals who have been converted or reconverted to the faith at great personal cost and as a result of long and honest searching. Converts do not take their faith for granted; still less do they chafe at it as something forced upon them. For them it is the treasure hidden in the field, the pearl of great price, for which they joyfully sacrifice all lesser goods. Converts tend to remain very self-motivated even within the church. They are so used to swimming against the tide that they sometimes become almost sectarian in their practice of Catholicism. They can be severely critical of other Catholics for conforming too much to the dominant culture.

With respect to orthodoxy, therefore, we have, and will continue to have, two basic tendencies. Cultural Christians tend to take anti-dogmatic stances. Only the countercultural Catholic can really embrace orthodoxy.

Prospects for the Future

In a secularized society such as our own, consistently orthodox Catholics will constitute a minority, not only in the society at large but even, I would say, within their religious community. The majority are carried along by the tide of public opinion, which they receive daily in large doses through the popular media of communication. Although they are relatively few, these countercultural believers, because of the strength of their commitment, have an importance disproportionate to their numbers.

Revealed religion, beleaguered though it may be, has an indispensable role to play in the modern world. The secular relativism of our day stands on very weak grounds, and holds no attraction for people looking for light and clarity. Many hear in a confused way the call to a higher life and feel in their hearts a craving for abiding truth. They welcome the word of God because it comes from beyond and transcends the vicissitudes of time and culture. A religion that firmly adheres to its sacred heritage can make itself a sign of hope and a beacon of truth to the multitudes who are repelled by the easy relativism and cheap hedonism of popular culture. For these reasons I am convinced that orthodoxy rather than accommodationism offers greater promise for the future.

With the progressive de-Christianization of society it is inevitable, I think, that the church will suffer some defections and a measure of disaffection on the part of many who remain. Some of those who leave will join churches whose teaching seems more consonant with modern secular thinking. Others will find Catholicism too complicated, and will embrace severer styles of Christianity, such as those found in biblicist sects. These negative developments will have to be countered by measures designed to increase the numbers and the loyalty of the Catholic faithful. Four particular steps occur to me as promising.

1. *Hierarchical Governance.* The hierarchical structures of the Church must be maintained and even strengthened so as to protect the teaching body from being unduly pressured by public opinion. Only the hierarchical form of government gives the official leadership the apostolic freedom that it needs to make decisions prayerfully in light of the Gospel and tradition.

For the unity of the church it is essential for the bishops of each nation to be kept in close contact with the Holy See. Very careful screening of future bishops is needed to make sure that they adhere staunchly to the deposit of faith as officially interpreted and who have the courage to stand up against the secular mentality. Stronger efforts must be made to recruit talented and loyal aspirants to the priesthood who will be able to exercise strong leadership in communion with the hierarchy while at the same time preserving good relations with their congregations.

2. *Doctrinal Firmness.* Jesus confronted his hearers with a stark choice between serving God and mammon, between accepting his "hard sayings" and withdrawing from his company. Paul taught that there could be no communion between Christ and Belial. Without unnecessarily alienating people of good will, the church must clearly condemn unorthodox teaching.

In the face of dissent it might seem that the magisterium should mute its voice. Does it not weaken its own authority when it teaches doctrines that many practicing Catholics will predictably reject? The magisterium was never intended to seek popularity. It would forfeit all credibility if it taught only what people wanted to hear. The first and indispensable task of the hierarchical leadership is to bear witness to the deposit of faith so that the church may always be "the pillar and the ground of truth." This the magisterium has done in the past and will continue to do. Its charism is to adhere constantly to the Gospel of Christ, to discern its implications for the present day, and to proclaim it confidently, insistently, in season and out of season, even at the cost of becoming a sign of contradiction. In view of the divine promises to be with the apostolic leadership to the end of the age, I am convinced that the magisterium will not waver in this task.

3. *Formation.* In the secularized society of our day it is imperative for the church to mount vigorous educational programs so that its members may be nourished in their faith. Such an educational effort will require an active and

forceful clergy assisted by a large body of well trained and committed lay associates. Instruments such as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) may profitably be used as norms for the revision of catechetical materials.

Parents must accept their role as the first educators of their children, not least in matters of religion. Educational institutions with a clear religious orientation can effectively supplement the formation received at home. Catholic schools, colleges, and universities should be supported and strengthened in their service to the Church. In addition to these academic endeavors, groups of laity should be encouraged to make days of recollection and retreats so that they can capture the full vision of the Gospel. Just as Jesus trained his apostles by taking them apart for prayer and special instruction, so must the church do in our time. Jesus sought to arm the disciples against what he called "the leaven of the Pharisees." The church must try to inoculate its members against the prevailing errors of our day.

Devout members of the laity should be encouraged to join organizations that support and intensify their life of faith--for example, third orders of religious congregations, and movements such as Christian Life Communities, Communion and Liberation, the Focolare movement, and other comparable associations.

4. *Evangelization.* Although it must stand for definite principles, the church is not intended to become a pious remnant of faithful souls. It is called to be catholic and inclusive. The Gospel is intended for all men and women, whatever be their race, language, nationality, or social status.

To compensate for the inevitable losses the church must carry on a vigorous plan of evangelization. Every parish must become a vibrant center of communication, and every believer should feel the impulse to spread the amazing good news of God's redemptive plan. By sharing our faith with others we can do them an immense favor and strengthen our own faith in the process. As John Paul II has said, faith is strengthened by being given away.

Whether these four steps will in fact be taken and will be successful is a matter for prophets to decide. It is not really important to know what the future holds. It is enough to know what we are called to do and what the church is called to become. All of us can contribute to that end by striving to hear and internalize the Word of God as it has been handed down to us, so that we can pass it on to others. There will of course be struggles and setbacks, as there have been in every generation. But the assistance of the Holy Spirit will be given until the day when the Lord returns in glory.

[This article is based on the 1998 Monsignor James Barta Distinguished Lecture at Loras College, Dubuque, Iowa, given on March 19, 1998. Reprinted with the permission of Rev. Avery Dulles, S.J., and America Press, Inc., 106 West 56th Street, New York, N.Y., 10019. Originally published in *America* June 20-27, 1998.]