

A Response to “Secularism in America:
A Brief History of Non-Religion Movement”
by Shoji Ippei

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Introduction

Shoji Ippei’s paper on “Secularism in America” is a brief but very suggestive summary of the history of one of the ideological parties who participated in “cultural wars” in the United States. I particularly appreciate this paper for providing me historical information on non/anti-religion movement in America, a realm that I am not very familiar with. So-called cultural wars has rather long and highly complex history and thus cannot be over-simplified to the ideological struggle between religious conservatives and secularists, as Shoji is well aware of. To clarify the issue, however, it is useful to have a brief sketch of the nature and the historical development of each party. Shoji’s paper is a fine introduction to the secularism that has taken certain roles in the cultural wars in the U.S.

Shoji begins with his definition on the term “secularism” in American context. Then, he introduces us to a couple of concrete examples of the developments of secularist movements in America. He briefly summarizes the historical process of de-Christianization of two humanist movements, which originally had strong influence of liberal monotheistic denominations. His conclusion is that the secularism “became non-religious alternative way of intellectual and social—especially urban—life, and this explains the indistinctness of religious life and secularists’ one.” It is a very insightful description of the unique socio-political and religious reality of America today.

I. Three Comments on the Paper

Now let me make brief comments on the following points:

A. Secularism As a Result of Liberalism

Shoji focuses on the historical process of secularism in America, that has shifted from religion oriented humanism to non/anti-religious secular humanism. He correctly points out that the rise of secularism was the result of a whole process of modernization, since the Enlightenment Era (though Shoji does not

refer to the Enlightenment, probably because of his concentration on the U.S. history). It was the Protestant Christians who were to interpret the Christian faith in terms of the new intellectual trends and modern scientific technologies since eighteenth century, while Catholics had tended to deny such modernism up to the middle of twentieth century.¹ The rise of liberalism in Christian traditions, mostly among Protestants, produced a whole bunch of new interpretations on the traditional symbols of faith and ethics. The process of modernization in the western society was, to a large extent, also paralleled to the process of secularization of the society. Protestant liberal theology too followed the path to the secularization. Its symbolic destiny was the radical theologies like the Death of God theology which shortly flourished in nineteen sixties in America.

The secularization of ethics and humanism went along with the secularization of Protestant Christianity, at least among theologians and intellectuals of the mainline churches in the U.S., as Peter L. Berger put it:

Increasingly, Protestant theology has oriented itself by changing coteries of “cultured despisers” of religion, that is, by shifting groups of secularized intellectuals whose respect it solicited and whose cognitive presuppositions it accepted as binding.²

We must also notice that the rise of liberalism among mainline churches has caused the numerical decline of the mainline churches, the rise of fundamentalism, and the emergence of evangelicals.

B. Civil Religion and Humanism

The very last and ironical sentence in Shoji’s conclusion is highly poignant.

Each camp of “culture wars” is fighting for different causes of “common good,” but it also appears at times for the achievement of the greater Common Good and Justice for American people, who all love the country.

Shoji does not clarify what “the greater Common Good and Justice for American people” would stand for. If Shoji means by it, the moral value system of the U.S. which are symbolically represented by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, then we must take the “civil religion” into account. Martin E. Marty quoted a paragraph from Gilbert Keith Chesterton’s comment on America.

America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence... It enunciates that all men are equal in their claim to justice, and that governments exist to give them that justice, and that their authority is for that reason just. It certainly does condemn anarchism, and it does also by inference condemn atheism, since it clearly names the Creator as the ultimate authority from whom these equal rights are derived.³

Then, Martin Marty raises a question that has been asked by the Americans themselves since the days of the Declaration until this day, i.e., “whose Declaration, whose Constitution?”⁴ There is a long history of struggles by and for

various kind of minorities to win the recognition of their Constitutional rights. The history of non-religious movements that Shoji describes is one of the histories of such struggles for public recognition of their rights. Through that process, the civil religion of America became a trans-religious religion that can go across all kind of religious affiliations, including the non-religious, rather than a quasi-religion subordinate to the Christian faith and hope.

C. One from Many (*E pluribus unum*)⁵

Shoji’s final comment, “all love the country” reminds me of the Great Seal of the United States, *E pluribus unum*. There are two fundamental symbols in Shoji’s phrase, “all” and “the country” which seem to correspond to the symbols of the American Seal, “many” and “one.” What would the symbol “many” would stand for then? Originally it signified thirteen colonies constituted by the immigrants from Europe. Through the course of the U.S. history, various immigrants from the Continent, Afro-Americans, Native Americans, and immigrants from non-western countries all over the world were to be included.

By “many,” the diversity of Christian denominations was in the scope but non-religious and anti-religious people struggled not only for the public recognition of their rights but also for the de-Christianization of the public offices. These kinds of movements have socio-politically activated the conservative Christians. Besides, new immigrants all over the world have brought their own traditional religions into America. Today, the U.S. is the world’s most religiously diverse nation, as Diana L. Eck has dramatically presented in her impressive book.⁶ The connotation of the symbol “many” has been drastically broadened and enriched. This reality would automatically recall us the second symbol “one” in relation to Shoji’s terminology, “the country.” What would the symbol “one” imply? How could ethnically, religiously, socially and culturally diverse groups become “one” to constitute a single country? Should it be the “civil religion” of America? I would say yes. No matter how diverse they are, they can be united as long as they share the trans-religious dreams and visions that are crystallized in the sacred Scriptures of America, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Notes

1. Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 2, Harper San Francisco, 1985, p. 282.
2. Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, New York: Doubleday, 1969, p. 11.
3. Martin E. Marty, *The One and the Many: America’s Struggle for the Common Good*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 181.
4. Marty, p. 182.
5. Marty, p. 3.
6. Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the*

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World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation, HarperSanfransisco, 2001.