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The Return of the Sacred: What African Chiefs Teach Us about Secularization[*]

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The modern sociology of religion is founded on the fundamental tension between Weber's and Durkheim's approaches to religion. In this article, I want to use the tension between Weber and Durkheim to address fundamental problems in understanding religious modernity, both in the modern West and in contemporary Africa.

Weber sought to explain differences in the social effects of the world religions—in Bellah's (1964, forthcoming) or Eisenstadt's (1986) terms (going back to Karl Jaspers 1953), the "axial" or "historic" religions: Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, Hinduism, and their successors. He focused on the ideas that shape individuals' understandings of the paths to salvation as the key to explaining those differences:

> Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the "world images" that have been created by "ideas" created by ideas have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest. "From what" and "for what" one wished to be redeemed and, let us not forget, "could be" redeemed depended upon one's image of the world. (Weber 1946a:280, emphasis added)

In his essay on "Religious Groups" in *Economy and Society* (1968), Weber then projected the axial religions' focus on individual salvation back into the "elementary" forms of religion, which he imagined as driven by the desire for practical "salvation" from hunger, disease, and suffering, with magicians as the primordial religious figures and religious symbolism as their major achievement.

Durkheim (1995 [1912]) also wrote of the creation of a vast religious symbolism, but he saw that symbolism as enacting and thus recreating the fundamental dependence of human life upon the social group, with human beings dependent on the collectivity for life (vitality, energy, "collective effervescence") and for constraint (categories and laws, integration, and regulation). Durkheim's powerful reading of the sacred as a source of constraint, but also of vitality, however much it emphasized communal life as in fundamental ways prior to the very existence of individuals, nonetheless saw the collective sacred in terms of what it did to sustain individual functioning, rather than what it did to sustain the collectivity itself.

Durkheim's consistent theme (1951 [1897], 1995 [1912]) was that without the constraint provided by the collectivity, the individual would be a disorganized mass of sensation and perception, morally incoherent, lacking purpose and direction. Geertz (1973) followed this tradition of analysis, noting that without culture a human being would be "a kind of formless monster with neither sense of direction nor power of self control, a chaos of spasmodic impulses and vague emotions" (99), so that religion arises at the "points where chaos—a tumult of events which lack not just interpretations but *interpretability*— threatens to break in upon man" (100).

Despite their differences, then, both Weber and Durkheim built into their definitions of religion fundamental assumptions that confound our attempts to think about religious modernity. One is Durkheim assumes that "societies" have a single, unified "religion," or rather that to the degree that social groups become "societies," they do so by ritually enacting their commitment to common symbols and a shared understanding of the sacred (see Bellah 1973). The other assumption, derived largely from Weber, is that religious modernity, whatever forms it takes, is a matter of changed symbols through which individuals address the world and their own place within it. Because we stand at the intersection of Weber's and Durkheim's great sociologies, we assume that these two sets of phenomena go together—that new collective capacities and new ways of orienting individuals to the ultimate conditions of their existence develop hand in hand. In Malawi, where people in obvious ways participate in multiple religious modernities, we can see more clearly than we otherwise might how religious realities are tied to collective capacities and to the efforts of individuals to attach themselves to (and sometimes detach themselves from) sources of social power. In Malawi, we can see multiple forms of religious organization

operating simultaneously, each of which teaches something about the nature of religious modernity.

The inspiration for this paper comes from my research on responses to the AIDS epidemic in Malawi, a small, densely populated, very poor country in southeast Africa. Nestled in a thumb of western Mozambique, bordered by Zambia to the west, and Tanzania to the north, Malawi is still about 85 percent rural, with a large proportion of its population of about 14 million engaged in subsistence agriculture supplemented by petty trading (World Factbook 2010). Malawi is near the bottom of the world's countries in GDP per capita, ranking 215th out of 228, with Purchasing Power Parity GDP of $900 per capita. It is also among the countries most affected by HIV and AIDS with almost 12 percent of the population estimated to be HIV+ (UNAIDS and WHO 2009).

Malawi of special interest because, as is much of Africa, religion exists there in three (perhaps more) distinct forms, one more Durkheimian, the other two more Weberian. The contrast of these differing modes of religious experience suggests the limitation of our usual ways of thinking about religious modernity.

First, I discuss the religious meanings that support and sustain the power of chiefs; second, the powerful modern religious missionary activity of the international human rights regime; and third, the religions that most of us would recognize as modern religions, Christianity and Islam, especially the African Independent Churches and the Pentecostal groups that have such wide influence in Malawi.

CHIEFS AND THE CREATION OF COLLECTIVE GOODS

An analysis of chiefs in Malawi highlights how the sacred is connected directly to the power of the collectivity—to the production of "collective goods."

In Malawi, as in much of the rest of Africa, despite the perversion of the institution by colonial systems of indirect rule (Mamdani 1996), chiefs still retain much of their "traditional" legitimacy. Even in places like the South African homelands, where chiefs were seen as collaborators with the hated apartheid regime, in the post-apartheid period, chiefly systems have rebounded, growing in importance and influence (for South Africa, see Ntsebeza 2008; Oomen 2008; for Mozambique, see West and Kloeck-Jensen 1999).

What Do Chiefs Do?

Chiefs play a direct role in the provision of collective goods, in the sense that if villagers are to act collectively in their own behalf, it is the chief who organizes that cooperation. If a village's paths need to be cleared (or in Tanzania, "brushed," meaning cleared of brush), the chief calls villagers

together and requires them to contribute a day's work to the collective task. The same is true if the village needs to provide bricks or labor as their share of an NGO project, to build a house for a Peace Corps volunteer, to repair a communal well, or to repair a school building.[1]

Anyone who has worked in an NGO project, in the Peace Corps, or for a Faith-Based Organization in Sub-Saharan Africa will recognize that one cannot even begin a project without clearing it with the local chief (or in West Africa, perhaps with the Président des Jeunes, the leader of the adult men), and it will be the chief who calls the villagers together for a public meeting at which the benefits of the project, the procedure for electing leaders, or any other features of the project will be laid out (for a recent example, see Fearon et al. 2009). One simply cannot have access to the village community without going through the chief.

Second, the chief, or the "royal family," literally embodies the name that gives the village its collective identity. In Malawi, the village does not exist as a village except insofar as it has a chief. In this sense, the chief is something like a Durkheimian totem, symbolically embodying in his (or occasionally her) own person the very existence of the community. So, in Malawi, the sentence "Traditional Authority Zulu is the Traditional Authority of Traditional Authority Zulu" is a perfectly coherent sentence, true by definition.[2] The village, or the group of villages, or the Traditional Authority (a key

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[1]Chiweza (2007:69–70) writes of chiefs in Malawi: "The planning system's stress on projects having "community contributions" of at least 25 percent has been interpreted by village chiefs and many state officials as their having to have a cache of bricks to show when the project team arrives, so that they can be considered fit for funding." In a study of "Town Chiefs" in Malawi (who are less important and influential than rural village chiefs), Cammack et al. (2009:18) describe the traits sought in a chief, suggesting that chiefs are chosen for their ability to provide collective goods:

> Town chiefs are consistently chosen for having certain characteristics. Specifically, they are reportedly of "good character," "hard working," "respectable," and "quiet" people of "good standing," who know "how to stay with people," "should understand the problems of the people," will "help them," be "good to them" and "keep them well." They have "lived there a long time" and are well settled in an area, often making them "homeowners." They are neither quarrelsome, nor known "drunkards" or "womanisers." They appear to be among the local economic elite—that is, they "are self-reliant" or "self-sufficient." For instance, they are (retired) civil servants, teachers, civil society leaders (and heads of churches) or are businessmen (e.g., a building contractor, a restauranteur, a money-lender, a kiosk owner). Interestingly, we found that several town chiefs who were (s)elected are also members of (hereditary) chiefly families in their home areas, though they claim that their "royal" status was likely unknown to those who chose them to lead in town.

TCs are selected because they can represent the interests of their communities—that is, they are good "public speakers" and "influential."

[2]David Maxwell (1999) notes the same taken-for-granted reality on the first page of his classic study of the Hwesa of Zimbabwe: "The territory which, like the dynasty and its chief, is also known as Katerere is the stage for an extraordinary social history" (1). Writing of southern Malawi (then Nyasaland) in the 1940s, J. Clyde Mitchell (1956:110) remarks that, " . . . the village headman is a representative of a corporate group, the village."

administrative unit) has its existence—and its name—because of its chief (and of course the chief has his name because it is the name of the administrative unit). Since southern Malawi is largely matrilocal, I once asked a youngish village-level chief whether he would move to his wife's village when he married. His cousin, standing next to him, cried out in horror, "Move? Move! He can't move! No chief, no village! No chief, no village!"

Third, chiefs may provide justice in chiefly courts, advising, cajoling, and sometimes adjudicating matters ranging from marriage and divorce, to a lost or stolen goat, to inheritance claims. The power of chiefs to some degree rests on their role in chief's courts and the absence or expense of other legal routes for resolving disputes.[3] To varying degrees chiefs may also have authority over land, especially where land remains under communal control rather than having become alienable private property.

Chiefs, Status, and Collective Goods

Chiefs also operate as reservoirs of pooled collective obligations and as informal account-keepers in the many ties of reciprocal interdependence that are so central to African societies (Chabal 2009; Kaler and Watkins 2001; Smith 2004; Swidler and Watkins 2007). The indirect ways that chiefs contribute to collective goods are thus even more important than their direct, formal roles. And these informal ways of providing collective goods continually recreate the link between a chief's status, his spiritual powers, and the well being of the community.

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[3]Baldwin (2007:7–8) describes the role and powers of chiefs in Zambia:

The power of chiefs stems from their control of land and law. Chiefs are the "custodians" of the land in Zambia: they are responsible for overseeing the distribution of customary land within their chiefdoms and they must give approval before land can be converted from customary tenure to leasehold tenure (Cap 83(8)(2)). In addition, they play an important role in law enforcement: they are empowered to "take reasonable measures to quell any riot, affray or similar disorder which may occur" (Cap 287(11)(1)) and to have their assistants "arrest without warrant any person upon reasonable suspicion of his having committed an offense in connection with [a] riot, affray or disorder and detain any person so arrested until he can be delivered into the custody of a police officer or brought before a competent jurisdiction to be dealt with according to law." (Cap 287)

In addition to these officially sanctioned powers, chiefs have a number of unofficial sources of influence. For example, almost every chief in Zambia has a traditional court to settle disputes between subjects. Although these courts are not officially recognized within the Zambian legal system, they are tolerated because the formal court system does not have the capacity to deal with all cases. In addition, the officially recognized courts are geographically and financially inaccessible to most rural residents, who have no real alternative but to take disputes to the chief's court. Finally, chiefs have influence in their communities by virtue of the trust people have in them. According to the 2003 Afrobarometer survey, 52% of Zambians trust traditional leaders a lot or a great deal; in contrast, only 32% of Zambians have this degree of trust in the ruling party and only 18% have this amount of trust in opposition parties. Furthermore, this figure masks the degree of trust in chiefs in some rural areas; for example, in Eastern and Luapula Province, more than 75% of people trust traditional leaders a lot or a great deal.

Chiefs reward those who contribute to community life, and informally they keep the accounts about who has (or has not) been public spirited. Chiefs then redistribute both spiritual and material goods to reward those who have helped their fellows (Collier 2004).[4] Chiefs thus reinforce the general obligation of those who have more to redistribute to those who have less. I was told by the director of a Zambian AIDS hospice that when the hospice asked families to take in AIDS orphans their requests succeeded only when the chief made the request. Taking in a relative's child may be obligatory, but it is the chief who often enforces, and perhaps later rewards, performance of that taken-for-granted obligation. A villager I knew in Malawi, who had a modest cash income to supplement her subsistence farming, was asked by her chief to found a youth club to discuss AIDS. When, later, the chief had government-subsidized fertilizer coupons to distribute, he gave this widow not one, but two.

A fascinating example of a chief who mobilized the natural leadership talents of one of his villagers (and in which, eventually, this young man's service to his fellows was rewarded) came from the story of a young Malawian villager—intelligent, cheerful, and with good mastery of English—who was encouraged by his chief first to be the liaison to a group of Peace Corps volunteers, and then to volunteer to form a Community-Based Organization (CBO). After the young man and a group of fellow volunteers succeeded in bringing a number of small projects to the village, the chief "realized the goodness of CBOs," and asked the young man to help other villages to found their own CBOs, bringing in badly needed donor money (Swidler and Watkins 2009). When, later, the young man's mother died and he went to his uncle to ask for land, his uncle was very generous, giving him five hectares to farm. His chief declared that "it was a very good thing [his] uncle had done." So, in Malawi as elsewhere, "what goes around, comes around," and the chief provides a critical link in that process.

The chief "recirculates" the collective capacity for creating public goods partly by recirculating status or honor. When a chief speaks at a funeral, for example, he can praise the deceased as having been a "worthy" man or woman, or indeed, as one informant described, he can make a point of giving the funeral oration himself—rather than sending an underling—and thus communicate the deceased's prestige (and thereby descendants' continuing claims on the community). Chiefs thus "store" and redistribute status and prestige, and they do so in proportion to contributions to the community.

Chiefs and the Sacred

Chiefs also store up—and in some sense embody—sacred power. Their sacred power is connected to what are, or were, at least in the indigenous

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[4]Chiefs thus solve the problem of collective action in a manner similar to that Willer (2009) suggests: they acquire prestige by contributing to the solution of communal problems and they use that prestige to create "selective incentives" for those who contribute to the provision of collective goods.

systems, specific ritual roles in communicating with the ancestors or ensuring the fertility of land, animals and people (Collier 2004; Mitchell 1956). It is difficult, however, to distinguish a chief's prestige, which comes in part from traditional cultural roles, from his sacred or spiritual powers, which in turn both reflect and protect the strength and health of his community. Chiefs' prestige in turn depends on their ability to access and contain sacred powers.

Chiefs in Malawi typically control burial grounds and thus connections to ancestors, in societies where ancestors are a central source of both danger and help. Indeed, to be forbidden to bury one's dead in the graveyard would in essence mean being expelled from the village. Chiefs control funerals and burials, and thus both relations with ancestors and the potentially dangerous relations that a death may reveal among the members of the community. The intertwining of the chief's practical responsibility for funerals and his spiritual responsibility for protecting the community against witchcraft and other malevolent spiritual forces is evident in Cammack et al.'s (2009:23) description of "Town Chiefs" in Malawi:

> The funereal tasks [chiefs] perform are social and economic in nature—they announce the death to the community and other chiefs, they "open the graveyard" and have the grave dug, they permit mourning to begin and ensure funds and ufa (maize flour) are collected for the wake.
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> Historically death has been perplexing, and blamed on the intervention of malevolent spirits. It is partly this continuing belief in the inexplicable nature of death that makes funerals so important.
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> Specifically, it is generally believed that the spirit (mzimu) of the dead survives the body and can cause misfortune for survivors. Therefore, "funeral rites are designed to make the mzimu depart so that the living may forget the dead." Immediately after a death the family reports to the chief. He will send young men to inform the population. No one is allowed to eat meat till after the burial as witches are thought to eat the flesh of the dead, so not eating meat is a way to show others you are not a witch. The chief must give permission for the body to be prepared for the grave, and he will lead discussions about the circumstances of the death. Is there anyone who caused the death? If relatives had not warned the chief that there was a serious illness in their family, a case might be brought and the burial cannot take place until the case is settled. A "diviner" can be brought in to determine if the person was killed through witchcraft, though this happens less frequently nowadays since practicing witchcraft is against the law. Only when the case is settled will the chief order the body to be buried.

We can see then that without the chief a death cannot be dealt with: practically—arranging the burial; spiritually—avoiding the potential danger that comes from the spirits of the dead; and intellectually—resolving what caused the death. Since village chiefs also control the burial grounds, their role in funerals, and in managing the critical relations with ancestors more generally, is central to their religious role.[5]

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[5]J. Clyde Mitchell, in *The Yao Village* (1956), describes how the founding of a new village depended on the chief's communication with the ancestors and on the chief's own sexual substance, and how the ritual for installing a new chief involved the symbolic "reincarnation" of the former chief, with the "important implication that the headman is immortal. He shares this characteristic with the group of which he is the leader" (121).

I attended a rural funeral in Botswana, and as three pastors from different denominations conducted the burial service, the chief interrupted the funeral three times, cutting off the pastors in mid-sentence, to have his headman, speaking through a megaphone attached to his small white truck, demand that the assembled mourners press more closely around the grave side to comfort the bereaved mother, then that they sing with more verve, and the final time that they stop gossiping and attend to the proceedings with greater attention. While the pastors may have been responsible for the funeral ritual, the chief was responsible for the cohesiveness of the community, which, at least symbolically, took priority.

Finally, the chief also protects his community against witchcraft—an ever-present danger. In part this is direct: I was told that if a chief lacks spiritual power, his people will be more subject to witchcraft from surrounding villages. But the chief also contains witchcraft in a more direct way by trying to resolve sources of envy and resentment and damp down conflict within the community. Since witchcraft is particularly likely when there are unresolved sources of envy and resentment, or when people have failed to live up to their obligations to one another, the chief's role in trying to avoid or smooth over conflict is critical to the overall health of his community.

Thus the chief's prestige—his control of both spiritual and material resources (Collier 2004)—plays both practical and sacred roles. Indeed, these cannot really be separated, since a chief who does not watch out for the practical well-being of his community loses some of his spiritual power as well as his prestige. A chief who does not accumulate control over material and spiritual resources becomes less "sacred," less prestigious, and thus less able to provide collective goods for his community, both in the material and spiritual realms.

MALAWI'S COMPETING RELIGIONS

The chief system concerned with collective goods and individual and collective vulnerabilities (death, illness, and the ever-present danger of witchcraft) is not the only religion in Malawi or elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, if one asks Africans today, almost all will describe themselves as participants in one of the major "axial" faiths—believers in one God, and active members of either a Christian church or an Islamic mosque. Not to "believe in God" is almost unthinkable, and indeed, one of the matters of greatest interest to Malawians is a visitor's answer to questions about his or her own church.

The Christian and Muslim faiths—and their ritual practices, from regular attendance at congregational worship, to passionate prayer and song, to elaborate rituals surrounding the offering—make clear that commitment to the axial religions is strong and that it serves functions both similar to and different from those of the clan/village/chiefdom system. Pastors also seek both material

and spiritual benefits for their congregations (Englund 2003), and many prac-
tice faith healing and directly challenge the powers of traditional healers
(Miller and Yamamori 2007).[6] But at the same time, the axial faiths seem to
support a more individualized vision both of the terrifying spiritual dangers
that threaten and of the prosperity and health congregants seek.

The axial religions, especially their Evangelical and Pentecostal forms,
reinforce the autonomy of the individual self, provide inspiration and hope for
developing a personal life trajectory, and strengthen the self against the power
of potential assaults on one's health, one's personal discipline, or one's personal
and familial good fortune (van Dijk 2001; Marshall-Fratani 2001). Birgit
Meyer (1999) has argued that when middle-class Pentecostal converts in
Ghana mobilize the power of their faith to combat the devil and other evil
forces they are resisting the heavy obligations of family, clan, and village life.
Other Pentecostal groups, however, maintain ties to both village and urban
communities, while asserting a broader "cosmopolitanism" that allows them to
battle Satan's threat to their well-being (Englund 2004).

In a series of papers on African Conversion, Robin Horton and J. D. Y.
Peel (Horton 1971; Horton and Peel 1976) have argued that as Africans con-
fronted a more cosmopolitan world, in which they found their lives increas-
ingly controlled by forces beyond the local village, they were drawn to new
faiths that promised more powerful rituals and access to stronger, more unified
spiritual powers that might offer ways to influence these newly felt forces.

Global Human Rights Discourse

There is a third broad religious system operating in Sub-Saharan Africa,
one that would also be familiar to Durkheim (1995 [1912]): this is the global
discourse of "human rights," with its strong ethical assertion of a unitary
"humanity" that transcends political, racial, ethnic, or religious particularisms
and requires attention to universal claims for a certain liberal, modern human-
ity (Soysal 1994). This is surely the kind of universalizing solidarity Durkheim
envisioned as the "modern" form of the collective consciousness. The identifi-
cation of all other human beings (and perhaps the planet's animal and plant
species as well) as common inhabitants of a single globe, with an abstract
value requiring deference and respect, is as surely "religious" as anything an
earlier generation of missionaries promoted.[7]

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[6]There is an important distinction between traditional herbal healers, whose powers
are thought to reside directly in the herbs they prescribe, and the spiritual powers of witch
doctors. Many Africans see no conflict between these practical remedies and Christian or
Moslem faith. The spiritual healers—*sangomas* or "witch doctors" in Western parlance—are
quite another matter. Many pastors fight belief in the power of witches and witchcraft as a
direct threat to Christian faith, although of course, the power of that faith is precisely to
protect adherents from the power of witchcraft.

[7]Of course, the belief in universal human rights itself has Christian religious roots
(Hochschild 2006; Weber 1946b).

In Malawi, modern missionaries advocating global human rights are out in force (Englund 2006). UNICEF's assault on various "traditional cultural practices" provides a wonderful example. Since at least June 2008, UNICEF has been running eye-catching banners, in both Chichewa and English, first on the front (or back) pages of Malawi's major newspapers, *The Nation* and *The Daily Times*, and in 2009 on slickly produced, bright red banners at roadblocks and flying above city halls (I saw a bumper-sticker version on the inside of a mini-bus above the door, as well), proclaiming the right of every child to health and education, and warning against violence against children, sexual abuse, and other ills: "STOP Child Trafficking" with the tag line, "every child has a right to their childhood;" "STOP Sexual Abuse" with "every child has a right to be free from abuse and violence;" STOP Harmful Cultural Practices" with "every child has a right to good health;" "STOP Early Marriages" with "every girl has a right to complete her education;" "STOP Child Labour" with "every child has a right to go to school;" "STOP Sexual Exploitation" with "every child has the right to be free from sexual exploitation;" and "STOP Property Grabbing" with "every orphan has a right to inherit their parents' property."

This campaign against traditional practices is only one expression of a wider set of aspirations—stimulated by the propaganda of international organizations, but deeply shared by Malawians themselves—to be integrated with the global *ecumene*. These universalizing aspirations are felt most forcefully in the reverence for education (Frye 2010), the obsession with diplomas and credentials, and an absolute faith in what David Frank and John Meyer (2007:287) see as the universalizing culture of the University: "The university expands over recent centuries as it has from its religious origins—it casts cultural and human materials in universalistic terms."

In parts of Africa I have visited there is a painful, poignant, almost overwhelmingly powerful thirst for knowledge. This takes the form partly of a preoccupation with credentials. Everyone is longing to better him or herself by completing a two-year degree in accounting, taking a course of study to become a Rural Community Development Officer, or even taking a six-week course to become a VCT counselor (Voluntary Counseling and Testing for HIV). But this longing for official "knowledge" goes far beyond hopes for material betterment. People want not just knowledge, but "official" knowledge. As Frank and Meyer (2007:294) note, "the university is positioned to teach both students and society at large the meta-principle that all sorts of particulars can and/or could be understood, and should be understood, as instances of general abstractions." The prestige and influence of this officially sanctioned knowledge is directly connected to its claims to transcendent, universalized truth: "The Modern globalized knowledge system increasingly extends into the furthest reaches of daily life, spreading universalized understandings of all aspects of nature and every social institution worldwide" (289).

Thus both the increasingly authoritative human rights discourse and the pervasive "priesthood" of those with educational credentials assert the moral

primacy of a universalized realm of authoritative truths and a universalized moral category of the sacred individual (Meyer 1990).

SECULARIZATION AND THE SACRED

Now we return to our core problem, asking what theories of secularization might say about the religious situation in Malawi, or rather what the religious situation in Malawi might say about theories of secularization. Arguments that predicted some universal decline of religiosity have turned out to be inadequate, applying mainly to Western Europe, but not to the United States or to much of the rest of the world. Scholars also increasingly recognize that the focus of Western religions on belief and doctrine can mislead us about most of the rest of the world, where ritual practice is the essence of religious life (Bellah 1970). But the basic debate about "secularization" in the sense of what is changed (if not gained or lost) with various forms of religious "modernity" is still open.

Efforts to understand secularization as decline of belief or religious participation and/or membership have been replaced by superior formulations. Daniel Bell (1978) distinguished "secularization"—the "disengagement of religion from political life" (the restriction of its social authority)—from "profanation"—the abandonment of religious ideas in favor of the view that science and instrumental reason allow full mastery of the world. Bell (1978:31) defined secularization (which takes its American form as the separation of Church and State) as "the shrinkage of institutional authority over the spheres of public life, the retreat to a private world where religions have authority only over their followers, and not over any other section of the polity or society." "Profanation," in contrast, Bell sees as a consequence of cultural modernism, a "disenchantment" in which the aesthetic replaces the moral, release triumphs over restraint, and nihilism replaces religious teleology. At bottom, the modernist impulse casts aside religious belief as the ground for human life.

Following Bell and Bellah, Mark Chaves (1994) and Philip Gorski (2000) have come to a reasonable consensus: If secularization is really differentiation of the religious symbol system from other spheres of social life, if it is "declining religious authority," then there is no reason why religious vitality might not increase, even as the spheres of life in which religion is authoritative—authority over the nature of the ultimate truths of life (in Bell's sense of "profanation") or authority over practical aspects of life (marriage, morality, politics) diminish.

Secularization and the Sacred

Even this sophisticated understanding of secularization, however, fails to capture what is most striking about Malawi's religious situation, and what should be an essential element in thinking about secularization. That is the

power of the sacred to actuate (and activate) particular social formations. Instead of thinking about how individuals navigate among various sorts of religious authority (detaching themselves from witchcraft beliefs, for example, or adopting one of the axial faiths), or even how far the authority of specific religious actors and institutions extends (whether, for example, public morality, kingship, or marriage is under the jurisdiction of religious authorities), we need to focus on the various ways the sacred "enters the world" and animates collective capacities.[8] As long as chiefs are essential for establishing shared identities and providing collective goods in rural Africa, the religious understandings that constitute and make sense of their power will continue to flourish.

As people engage with a cosmopolitan world outside the local context, they feel compelled, attracted, and sometimes "made new" by the sacred power of the axial religions, joining religious congregations which both support personal transformation and create new collective capacities. Education and human rights—and the ability to partake in those universal discourses—may also seem to raise people's humanity to a new power, connecting it to a transcendent sphere of universal truths. The continuing presence of the sacred in the role and person of the chief, should remind us, however, that the sacred is where the power of collective life resides. In their ability to produce collective goods, to adjudicate claims to status, and to possess and redistribute sacred power, Malawi's chiefs demonstrate that the sacred operates as a reservoir of collective power and collective commitment. It is the power of the sacred that makes it worth fighting over. Without the insight that the sacred is a source of collective capacities—and that where collective energies are stored is inherently religious—we lose the fundamental element of an adequate theory of secularization. Secularization is not a matter of the differentiation of the religious sphere from other spheres (or even of the intensification of religious experience within the personal sphere), so much as it is about the creation and destruction of forms of collective power. In a place like Malawi, where we can see multiple forms of collective life co-existing, we can also understand religious change in new ways.

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[8]I am drawing on Geertz's (1968) wonderful imagery when he describes differences in forms of Islam as differences in "the way in which the divine appears in the world" or how "the sacred appears most directly in the world" (44).

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