

Sightings 7/3/06

"Religiosecular" Revisited

— Martin E. Marty

No, it has not been a slow week, and yes, there were plenty of religion-in-culture events on which to focus our "sightings." However, we have some catch-up work left over from when, two weeks ago, I asked, "Any takers?" ("Religiosecular Meditations," June 19). We got plenty of takers, whose contributions I respect. Subscribers and regular readers know that, while we are influenced by responses, this is not a format congenial to letters to the editor. We did ask, though, for comment on the concept of the "religiosecular."

Respondents agreed that what the term points to is an observable phenomenon. In late-modern America, contrary to what Enlightenment Rationalists thought (that religion would decline and disappear) or what Awakening Revivalists thought (that the world would become subject to the Kingdom of Christ — or, more expansively, that all religions would prosper), "religion" and the "secular" — whatever we mean by these terms — together seem to be booming. We document that surprising (to me, at least) reality in each issue of Sightings. The most consistent agreement with the "religiosecular" notion came from academics and especially campus pastors, who see signs of this phenomenon every day, but puzzle over how to minister in the face of its contradictory but intersecting realities.

One recommender thought that some version of "pagan" might be useful. It would encompass the worship of political power, the religiocification of patriotism on the one hand and "new age" spirituality on the other. Both of these are good illustrations of parts, but in no way the whole complex of phenomena. And the term's "loaded." We are looking for something more balancing, more neutral.

A psychologically oriented respondent pointed to "sacralized profanity" (pro + fano = "outside the temple") or "vulgarized transcendence" or some other term signaling our "schizophrenia." Good, but also loaded.

I really enjoyed contributions from some experts on "brain" and "mind," who discussed how individuals and societies receive and project signals. Another spoke of humans as "meaning-seeking" beings in ways that find overlaps and intersections involving what usually get too closely defined as "secular" and "religious."

From Hawaii and a Buddhist-Christian culture came some affirmation of the both/and, rather than either/or, dimensions of our too easily fractured culture.

A couple tried "pansecular," but doesn't this diminish the religious aspect? Wouldn't we then need "panreligious" to match it?

My old friend Franklin Sherman voted to amend the term with the insertion of a hyphen, rendering it "religio-secular" — and I think he made a good case. Visually it represents twofold-

ness, and prevents the little voice in one's mind from saying "religios" — as in "religiosity" plus "secular."

As both a meaning-seeker and a reporter on meaning-seekers, I am not a bit interested in finding a way to register a patent on this term, but want to keep refining it and its cognates and synonyms as heuristic devices. Thanks to all of you. And, for those who have not pushed the "delete" button, be assured that next week we'll be back at our usual task.

Meanwhile, U.S. citizens, have a meaningful Fourth of July. Canadians and others, have a meaningful... [fill in the blank].