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Secularizing Sunday and substituting the weekend

1. Introduction: A Tale of Two Places

Every Saturday evening at 7 or 8 PM in Bern, church bells ring. This weekly pealing of church bells in the Swiss capital, which a long-time resident of the city told me they call the “*Sonneneinleitung*,” reminds the citizens of Bern that Sunday is coming.

Sunday in Bern is different, too. As Saturday progresses, stores start closing. By 1 PM, some barbers and smaller establishments already conclude their business. By 5 PM—6 PM at the latest—most of the stores in the downtown business district (and in most business parks, like IKEA in nearby Lyssach) are shuttered. On Sunday mornings, one can buy necessities—bread, milk, and the like—at a few bakeries that are open until 1 PM; at gas stations; or at a 24-hour shop in the *Hauptbahnhof*. On Sunday afternoon, restaurants and theaters open, but the commercial side of life stays closed until Monday morning (or, in some cases, Tuesday morning if the establishment was open all day on Saturday).

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In terms of secularization, the Swiss are not really exceptions from the rest of their western European confrères. Church attendance is generally as anemic there as in neighboring countries. Nevertheless, Sunday in Protestant Bern is palpably different from the six other days of the week. You see people outdoors. You see families doing things together. You feel a sense of community formed on something other than a commercial or needs basis.

My experience of Bern stands in contrast to the general observance of Sunday commonplace in the United States. In America, Sunday is becoming just another day of the week. Granted, as a non-working day, it remains different from Monday to Friday, but its sacral character remains in tense competition with its growing commercial character. I say “in competition” because Americans themselves are divided. Americans are, on the one hand, unique among Westerners in the proportion of the population’s regular weekly participation in religious services. On the other hand, the official cultural and legal supports that made Sunday different, e.g., Sunday closing or “blue laws,” have largely disappeared. In her hit song, “Ka-Chink,” pop singer Shania Twain captured this tension between the religious and the money-making sides of the American character (as well as suggesting which side was winning): “our religion is making money/so we meet every Sunday at the mall.”

Even as the importance of Sunday has waned, however, the significance of the weekend has waxed. Friday night, especially among younger people, inaugurates the “weekend.” The popular expression associated with the advent of the weekend, “TGIF” (“thank God it’s Friday”) hardly echoes religious sentiments.

How did American society get this way? How is it that Sunday in a still relatively religiously observant America seems less important than Sunday in postmodern Bern? Why has the weekend eroded Sunday and what factors abetted that trend? What lessons might we draw from this phenomenon in terms of time and celebration?

2. Sunday in America with George ... Washington (*et al.*)

America has been described as “a country with the soul of a church.” To understand America, one has to understand those religious underpinnings because, whether one accepts them or rebels against them, those religious foundations lie at the base of the American project. A cursory survey of the history of the original thirteen colonies attests to the fact that both religion and business played roles in America’s founding.² In some places, the former was dominant. One could argue, for example, that the states of New England today trace their roots to religious divisions within American Puritanism. Because the Massachusetts’ Puritans’ “city on a hill”³ did not shine as theologically brightly as some Puritans thought it should, they went off and founded Connecticut. Both groups had little use for the religious dissenters they exiled to Rhode Island.⁴

² Religion and business also played roles in America’s founding when considered in a framework larger than the thirteen British colonies. America’s premier Church historian, Msgr. John Tracy Ellis, noted that the traditional Anglo-centric focus of U.S. history, starting with those thirteen British colonies, obscures the Catholic role in large swaths of what would become America, e.g., the far West then under Spain, where priests like Junipero Serra and Eusebio Kino brought the faith, or in the Ohio Basin/Mississippi Valley, where the French penetrated with, among others, priests like Pere Marquette. Indeed, priests played roles in the British colonies: the North American martyrs (e.g., Isaac Jogues, Jean de Brebeauf *et al.*) all died in what eventually became New York. On these issues, see John Tracey Ellis, *Catholics in Colonial America* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1965); Francis X. Talbot, *Saint among the Hurons* (New York: Harper, 1949). Although there were obviously money-making aspects to the Spanish and French settlements of the Americas, the interaction of business and religion in French and Spanish America took different forms from British America: the religious origins and economic consequences of the Protestant Work Ethic in British North America arose for *theological* reasons that were important to Puritan ecclesiology and had no counterpart (and, therefore, no reason to originate) in Catholic France’s or Spain’s North American colonies.

³ In explaining the reason for Puritan settlement in Massachusetts John Winthrop, in his 1630 sermon “A Modell [sic] of Christian Charity,” used Matthew 5:14 to describe their effort as building “a city upon a hill.” See the text of the sermon at <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html> (accessed May 31, 2013, 1100 GMT).

⁴ See Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (Garden City: Image/Doubleday, 1975).

In other places, business played a greater role, e.g., the founders of colonies in Jamestown, Virginia and later in the Carolinas wanted to show a profit in New World cash crops. Rarely, however, were the religious and entrepreneurial motives separable, either practically or theologically. William Penn may have wanted Pennsylvania to be a Quaker haven, but he acquired the colony in settlement of debts owed to his family. Even where religious motives may have driven founders, they could not ignore the need to make their colonies economically viable.

Remember, too, that in those Protestant American colonies, profit-making also had a theological dimension: the Calvinist (and, therefore, Puritan) preoccupation with Predestination and the Puritan ecclesiology of the church as a gathering of the elect required some way of knowing who the elect were, and material prosperity was as good an indication as any.⁵ The point is simple: in America's Protestant founding, religion and business often went in tandem.

The founders of America's religious "city on a hill" took their task seriously—and also their Sabbath. Rigorous religious observance of the Sabbath, with appropriate legal supports, dominated New England. Laws governing Sunday observance covered both sides of the coin: positively, they "kept holy the Lord's day" by requiring church attendance (and punishing non-attendance) and negatively by negatively proscribing activities that detracted from Sabbath observance, e.g., work and commerce. Even George Washington could not get away with breaking those laws. In 1789, already as President, he was charged with violating Connecticut's Sunday observance law, which prohibited unnecessary travel on the Sabbath. He managed to avoid punishment by noting that he was on his way to a Sunday service in a town in nearby New York, and by promising not to travel further.⁶

⁵ Max Weber, *The Protestant "Ethic" and the Spirit of Capitalism and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin, 2002).

⁶ David N. Laband and Deborah H. Heinbuch, *Blue Laws: The History, Economics, and Politics of Sunday-Closing Laws* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Co., 1987), p. 38.

By the 18th century, all the British North American colonies had Sunday observance laws in place, including “blue laws” that banned business and labor on the Sabbath. One should remember that many of the original 13 British colonies also had laws which established one church (e.g., the Anglican Church) as well as discriminated against other believers (e.g., prohibitions on Catholics). After the American Revolution and the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, efforts began in those first states (e.g., Virginia) to disestablish state churches, but the process of disestablishment and the removal of disabilities on others (e.g., Catholics) continued until about the time of American Civil War. In the debate over disestablishment, people understood that the U.S. Constitution did not directly affect the matters at hand: the First Amendment prohibited the federal government from establishing a national church, but had nothing to do with what individual states did. Not until after the Civil War did the U.S. Supreme Court begin to apply the First Amendment’s prohibitions directly to the individual States.

Although the process of disestablishing the privileges of particular churches was completed in American states basically by 1850, laws protecting the significance of Sunday and giving it special sanction remained in place. Individual states might not have remained legally Episcopalian or Congregational, but they did remain Christian, at least culturally. The law respected that American “civil religion” of generic Christianity by protecting Sunday’s status.

Subsequent large-scale immigration of Catholics, beginning with the Irish in the 1840s and 1850s, hardly changed that consensus about Sunday. post-Tridentine Catholicism’s focus on the avoidance of “servile work” on the Sabbath meshed well with protective Sunday legislation. The growing influx of eastern European Jews, starting in the 1880s, obviously stood outside that consensus, but neither their numbers, their influence, nor latent anti-Semitism, would change that consensus for many decades.

For more than a century, Sunday closing laws remained in place. Attacks on Sunday closing laws began earnestly in the 1960s, and took

two forms. One form was to oppose one religion against another. By requiring stores to close on Sundays, the argument went, blue laws supposedly discriminated against Jews by compelling them to observe Sundays, a day of no religious meaning to them, while giving no recognition to their Saturday Sabbath. An observant Jew would be doubly disadvantaged, it was claimed, by being forced to close on a day that he did not observe (Sunday) while also closing on the day that he did observe (Saturday) but that his competitors did not.

The other attack against Sunday closing laws took the form of opposition to any religiously-based foundation of public policy, an effort to equate religious freedom with rigid secularism. After World War II, the U.S. Supreme Court's First Amendment jurisprudence began shifting away from barring *one particular* religion from being legally or socially advantaged to barring *religion in general* from enjoying any legal or social privilege. One could argue that, starting with *McColum v. Board of Education*,⁷ the U.S. Supreme Court set out in earnest down the path of promoting a "naked public square," i.e., a society in which religion in general or religiously-based history would have no influence in framing public policy, even when that religion represented the majority consensus of the citizenry or an historically long tradition.⁸

While an aggressively secular interpretation of the Constitution contributed to undermining Sunday blue laws Constitutional theory alone, however, did not erode the legal protection of Sunday. Various postwar social factors also abetted this trend. These included: postwar prosperity; the exodus of Americans from urban centers and

⁷ 333 US 203 (1948).

⁸ See R.J. Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). In the view of this writer, the "religion versus religion" attack on Sunday closing laws, while ostensibly intended to protect Jews against Christian majoritarianism, in fact ultimately lead into the "religion versus secularism" result: if Sunday blue laws benefitted one religion's holy day, then the way to resolve the conflict was not to be inclusive of other religions but to banish any religion from affecting social or cultural practice.

the explosion of America's suburbs, facilitated by the automobile; and changes in American selling and shopping habits, which also replaced the individually-owned small store in the city with the suburban department store situated at highway crossroads (a practice first implemented by Sears and Roebuck). The growth of big business and the concomitant pressure to make more sales gradually resulted in a commercial push for shopping on Sundays, and by the 1970s, more and more American jurisdictions were repealing their restrictions on Sunday selling. That process had a snowball effect, as businesses located in more restrictive jurisdictions pressed to "even out the playing field" when they saw their customers driving to a nearby, more permissive jurisdictions.

The idea that the state should not privilege religion in general (or adopt a policy that some might brand "anti-Semitic"), coupled with growing commercial pressure, eventually overturned legal prohibitions restricting Sunday commercial activity. As we saw already in the American founding, religion and business were long interrelated in American history. Eventually the two might compromise over Sunday: Americans might go to Church Sunday morning, but they also would go to the mall Sunday afternoon.

3. The Rise of the Weekend

Concomitant with the displacement of Sunday came the rise of the weekend. Various scholars also attribute commercial reasons to the emergence of the weekend as an American social institution (which has progressively spread to other countries).

Among the key demands of the early American labor movement in the late 19th century was a limit on workweek hours. During that time (as was the case much later in Poland), Saturday was part of the workweek. As prosperity increased and as modern transportation gave people increased mobility (which required increased time), the Saturday workday gradually grew shorter. By the time of the Great Depression,

in order to spread out work opportunities,⁹ the government gradually discouraged Saturday employment. The American workweek thus became a “Monday to Friday” phenomenon, with Friday night inaugurating “the weekend.”

Later, the postwar automobile boom and growing prosperity gave people more opportunities for leisure, further requiring more leisure *time*. The weekend was in place. Prosperity opened up Friday evening opportunities, from eating out at restaurants to movies, dances, or other entertainment, which could run later in the night if one did not have to go to work Saturday morning. The ascendance of youth culture in the 1950s (including Friday night “dates”) also fostered this trend.

This theory thus holds that the weekend emerged from economic factors: the government wanted to expand work opportunities and, as prosperity spread, the weekend became a venue for leisure. But what the economy gave, the economy also took away. Changes in America’s economy would later also change the character of the weekend.

If a 1950s factory worker could provide for a family relatively well on a nine to five, Monday to Friday job (with occasional overtime), dislocations in the American economy in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in blue collar workers suffering a certain economic stagnation. Two incomes in a family became increasingly necessary not just to “keep up with the Joneses” but just to “keep up.” The trend towards dual incomes was also abetted by a “women’s liberation” movement that valued only paid employment, deprecating the work of traditional mothers at home.¹⁰

⁹ This approach obviously regarded work as a finite, zero sum commodity divisible among a growing pool of workers, an assumption that is disputable. On the history of the weekend, see Bill Bryson, *At Home: A Short History of the Private Life* (New York: Doubleday, 2010); Witold Rybczynski, *Waiting for the Weekend* (New York: Viking, 1991).

¹⁰ Consider Hilary Rosen’s attack during the 2012 U.S. presidential campaign on Ann Romney, the Republican nominee’s wife who chose to be a “stay-at-home” mother, whom Rosen deprecated as never “having worked a day in her life”: see, e.g., Hilary Rosen’s attack, described in Andrew Rosenthal, “Wars: Real and Imagined,” *The New York Times*, April 13, 2012, accessible at <http://takingnote.blogs.nytimes.com>.

Ever more rapid changes in America's economy since the 1980s-- manufacturing work going overseas, the disappearance of blue collar manufacturing jobs (often replaced by lower wage service jobs), and white collar/professional jobs becoming ever more subject to the mantra of "more efficiency," "more productivity," "do more with less"— rendered the average American's economic situation even more tenuous. The recession that began in 2008 is, in some ways, just the worst expression of economic and job trends that have been afoot for two or three decades.¹¹ Amidst such a situation, Americans have been gradually working longer and harder just to "keep up." Salaried white collar workers, especially, are often expected to put in long working hours – far beyond the limits of what their blue collar grandfathers won three generations ago – as supposed evidence of their "professionalism" and their "career commitment." 60 or more hour workweeks are not uncommon, especially in "more responsible" positions. When one factors in growing commuting time, the workweek toll is ever heavier.

With the untaming of the workweek, the weekend becomes ever more important as a time not just to break away and relax but even to do non-job related things necessary to daily life. An increasing number of stores are open "24/7," (24 hours per day, seven days a week, i.e., constantly) to enable people who go to work before dawn and come home after dusk to do basic shopping. Weekends are increasingly becoming the time to do shopping, run errands, connect with children (even if that only means shuttling them from one school event to another), etc. Originally intended as an enforced leisure time during a period of lower employment, the weekend seems to have become another victim of the American obsession with work, an aspect of the Puritan ambivalence towards rest: crammed with all sorts of activities

com/2012/04/13/wars-imagined-and-real/ (accessed May 11, 2013, 1300 GMT) and "The Left's War on Moms," *Washington Times*, April 12, 2012, accessible at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/apr/12/the-lefts-war-on-moms/> (accessed May 11, 2013, 1300 GMT).

¹¹ Obviously, there are questions of social justice and social ethics which deserve exploration here. They are beyond the subject of this paper.

that no longer fit within the ever-expanding workweek, we still pretend the weekend is a time of “rest.” In fact, there is very little “rest” on the weekend. “Rest” (scil. “exhaustion”), however, seems to have defaulted largely to Sunday mornings, where it pushes against Sunday worship. This “rest,” obviously, has nothing to do with the Dominical meaning of “rest in the Lord” that Christianity associates with the Sabbath.

Indeed, I would argue that the American expression “thank God it’s Friday” (TGIF) is, the language notwithstanding, a secularized counterpart to marking the Lord’s Day. “TGIF” acknowledges the weekend as something good, as a break from the demands of the workweek to do “my thing. But it acknowledges no religious content to the weekend. It declares that the weekend is a time to relax and enjoy oneself, to “eat, drink, and be merry.” Remember that the idiom TGIF doubles as the name of a popular restaurant chain. The message: rest and relax by going out to have a steak and beer.

If there was a commercial motive behind this notion of the secular weekend, I would also argue that the Catholic Church in the United States has in some ways abetted this trend. In the early 1970s, many American dioceses introduced a “Saturday evening Mass” to fulfill the Sunday obligation, a phenomenon that became broadly popular. Theologically, the practice was in some ways defensible: just as the Church begins celebrating Sunday with Evening Prayer I on Saturday Evening, so the Church would begin celebrating its Dominical Eucharistic liturgy on Saturday night. Pastorally, the practice tried to reckon with contemporary conditions of ever-greater competition for people’s time by enabling the faithful to fulfill their Sunday Mass obligation on Saturday. The result has been that, over the past forty years, the Saturday evening Mass is the best attended Mass in many parishes. Lots of people choose to attend that Mass in order to “free up Sunday.”

A solid case can be made, however, that this practice has in fact contributed to the secularization of Sunday. American Catholics have not understood Saturday evening Masses theologically, as the beginning of Sunday rest and worship. They have largely understood it

in a utilitarian fashion, with a minimalist spirituality: we “fulfill our duty to go to Mass” and “get it out of the way” so that we can do other things on Sunday. Saturday evening Mass has not become the inauguration of Sabbath rest; it became a means to cram more into the 63 hours between the end of work on Friday night and its resumption Monday morning.¹² Despite good intentions, it has abetted the secularization of Sunday. As a time of “rest,” however, the weekend is a tawdry substitute for Sunday.

4. Religion and Society

The regular, recurrent observation of Sunday as the “Lord’s Day” reminds people that “man does not live on bread alone,” but must also

¹² The Catholic Church in the United States, arguably, has also abetted a similar secularizing trend, albeit on a lower scale, in changing certain practices related to holy days of obligation. Canon 1246 § 2 allows bishops’ conferences to transfer some holy days of obligation from their traditional day of observance to a Sunday, with prior approval of the Holy See. In 1999, the U.S. Bishops agreed to transfer the holy day of obligation from Ascension Thursday to the Seventh Sunday of Easter, provided two-thirds of the bishops in a particular ecclesiastical province voted for that transfer. That means, in fact, that Ascension Thursday has remained a Thursday in many Northeast and Middle Atlantic American dioceses, but has migrated to Sunday in other parts of the country. This transfer, of course, undermines the traditional association of Ascension with the 40th day of Easter, Pentecost with the 50th day, and the intervening nine days (the Church’s first “novena”) being lost. Losing that preparatory “novena” tradition, of course, also reinforces the tendency, in some local churches, to undermine popular devotions.

The Catholic Church is not alone, however, in dissociating its holidays from concrete historical dates and circumstances. There is a counterpart in American secular society. In 1968, the U.S. Congress decided to move various civil holidays from their historical dates to a nearby Monday, subverting historical tradition to create “long weekends.” Americans thus no longer honor Columbus’ discovery of America on October 12 but on the second Monday of October, while George Washington celebrates a generic “Presidents’ Day” on the third Monday of February, rather than his birthday on February 22. The only civil holiday to be restored to its historic date, as a result of veterans’ pressure, has been Veterans Day, shifted from the fourth Monday of October back to November 11.

reckon with existential questions of his reason for being and his own personal destiny. “The Lord’s Day” reminds man every week that not everything belongs to Caesar (or at least can be bought with his coin).

The caricature of “religious” liberty promoted in some countries, however, seeks to declare man to be free of religion itself. Religious liberty, in this caricature, does not provide man with the opportunity freely to worship God according to the dictates of his conscience as much as it seeks to take God out of people’s lives (and how they order those lives). It confines religion to a realm so private that neither man’s fellow man nor his community is allowed to take cognizance of it. This individualized, privatized caricature of religion pretends that so basic a dimension of the person as his religious identity can exist without societal or cultural acknowledgement, much less its support.

In contrast, true religious liberty would recognize that, sometimes, on a regular basis, the demands of the secular must stop, must step aside, and yield to other aspects of the person. A truly democratic polity is one in which religion is free to exercise its role in the public square, where culture and even law gives acknowledgement and support to religion (at least generically). It does not pretend that society’s only interest lies in the commercial and the business, or even that society must feign agnosticism when it comes to promoting a role for religion within the life of man.

Ultimately, a 24/7 society is an inhumane society, both in terms of the person as an individual as well as a member of a family and society. A 24/7 society is one that denies man’s need for rest, his need for reflection, and ultimately his need for God. It pretends that an extremely privatized and individualized religion can flourish for people amidst a society that gives scant acknowledgement to that reality. But a society that pushes religion not just into the sacristy but into the individual, where it will be hopefully kept appropriately concealed and out of public view, will never adjust its work schedules to take cognizance of this “private” affair. The cost of a 24/7 society is that people—especially the most economically vulnerable and tenuous—must work, even on the Lord’s Day, despite their consciences, often just to

survive. The cost of a 24/7 society is to create and promote a vision of man as mere *homo oeconomicus*, a consumer whose *raison d'être* is to buy, to consume, and to buy some more. The cost of a 24/7 society carries with it global implications, including in the realm of social justice, as wages and living standards are driven down in the name of off-shoring work to the cheapest provider, so that the individual's greatest aspiration can be to be able to buy something he probably does not really need on-line at 2:53 AM Sunday morning, and have that unessential good delivered by Monday.

Of course, there are those who point out that the pace of modern society demands availability. But even here, one has to draw a line: the point was well made in a recent cartoon, where an orthodox rabbi is recording the message for his cell phone. "Hello, this is Rabbi X. Please leave me a message: I am available 24/6" (note the difference).

Pointing out the moral problems of demanding that people accommodate a 24/7 world is, ultimately, neither a question of economics nor of democracy nor of law. It is, ultimately, a question of whom do you say man is? Is man just an economic agent, whose opportunities for consumption need to be expanded at the cost of all other factors? Is he a being that needs to be insulated from every religious influence in the name of protecting his "human" rights? Is he a being who is only entitled to be "religious" if being so has no implications for his community or society and its policies?

Or is man a being whom, in the name of probing his own existential identity—and in support of that as an effort worthy of communal encouragement—his society regularly recognizes that, beyond its own temporal ends, he should rest in the Lord's Day? As Josef Piper reminded us, leisure is "the basis of culture,"¹³ not the basis of consumerism. If man's society is willing to acknowledge that level of his existential dignity, it should protect the dignity of Sunday, most of all

¹³ Josef Piper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*. Trans. Alexander Dru. Introduction by T.S. Eliot. New York: Pantheon, [1952].

out of respect for man, for whom the Sabbath was made (Mark 2:27). His society should ring in that Day with the *Sonneneinleitung*.

Secularizing Sunday and Substituting the Weekend

Summary

In this article we reflect on what has become with a Sunday in the U.S., with particular emphasis on the legal, economic, cultural, and even religious factors that contributed to the secularization of Sunday. The first part of the article considers the legal situation of the Sunday in America. It is noted here that the origins of America were two themes: religious, and economic and these two factors affect the social policy on Sunday. The increase of aggressive secular interpretation of „religious freedom” coincided with the economic pressures causing the disappearance of the law on the prohibition of Sunday trading and the tendency to regard Sunday as „every other day” . The second part of the article deals with the growing importance of the weekend. Initially, in order to reduce the economic pressure espoused free time, then, however, the deterioration of the situation of the workers in America even lead to longer working hours, flipped duty of „holiday” for the weekend. The relentless pressures of time then moved on Sunday as a religious holiday. The author states that society should restore the special protected status of Sunday as a day of rest and worship, because it is not right to bring human beings only to consumers.

Keywords: secularization, culture, religion, Catholic Church, society, Sunday, consumers.