

## Christianity and Secularism: Prospects and Possibilities

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'If society would not be Christian, at least the church could be'.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

In this paper I intend to argue that whereas civic secularism is not the preferred societal option for Christians, it may well represent the most realistic future shape of advanced societies and therefore has to be reckoned with. Moreover it both offers a number of political benefits that are advantageous to Christian faith and practice and should be maximised, and also presents a context which can assist the churches in maintaining authentic Christian witness. None of this is to minimise the genuine challenges to faith that such a society can pose.

A number of clarifications are helpful at this early stage. The first is to distinguish between church, society and state. By 'church' I shall be referring to the multiple gathered communities that define themselves as Christian by both faith and practice. The more important distinction to be made for our purposes is between 'society' and 'state'. Society is the phenomenon of organised and intentional communities that inhabit a territory. By and large it is not accurate to describe societies as wholly 'secular' since they inevitably embrace a variety of religious traditions and communities. There may be a range of persons and groups that are religiously non-aligned and these may well be described as secular, but societies as a whole are more likely to be plural than secular by reason of the presence of multiple religious movements within them. This may be illustrated by reference to the 2001 census in the United Kingdom as interpreted by Professor Paul Weller. The census revealed that at that time, of those who answered the relevant questions, 71.6% of the population self-defined as 'Christian', 15.5% as of 'no religion' and 5.2% as adherents of other religions. These figures justify his conclusion that UK society should be regarded as 'three-dimensional', that is to say as being 'Christian, secular and religiously plural'.<sup>2</sup>

Such analysis should give us pause before we claim that society is secular, and although the relevant figures in the UK undoubtedly shifted away from Christianity in the census of 2011, the claim that society is three-dimensional can be allowed to stand. Yet society is not the same as 'state'. According to Max Weber, 'a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory'.<sup>3</sup> The state therefore is the forceful hard edge of a society which exists primarily to preserve and to promote the interests of a society with ultimate recourse to force. The state may be religious in nature, promoting the interests of one religious monopoly, or it may be secular in nature without bias to any one religious interest. The upshot of this analysis is that it is possible to have a plural or even religious society which is served by a secular state, and part of the discussion that follows explores these realities.

It is equally possible, or course, to live in a society and a state that have, by reason of history, untidy and messy social and political arrangements, and this is certainly true of my own country of reference, the United Kingdom. Despite domestic claims that the UK is a secular society and a secular state, neither claim is straightforwardly true. British society, as we have

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<sup>1</sup> David Fergusson, *Church, State and Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Weller, *Time for a Change: Reconfiguring Religion, State and Society* (London: T. and T. Clark, 2005), pp.72-3.

<sup>3</sup> Max Weber, 'Politics as Vocation' in H.H. Gerth and C.W. Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948), p. 78.

seen, is three-dimensional rather than secular, and granted that there is in England an established Church of which the monarch is Supreme Governor as well as Head of State, and that in Scotland there is a national Church, which is Presbyterian in polity and of which the monarch is the First Member, it is clear that 'secular' does not begin to address the complexity. Like many countries, the legacy bequeathed by history is distinctive. Nonetheless this does not prevent people speaking and acting as though ours is a society with an agreed secular polity.

### **Towards a typology**

Clarifications attempted, we move then to explore that relationship between Christian churches and secularism both as an ideology and as a civic strategy. I intend to do this by developing a typology which sets out in broad terms the possible ways in which the churches and social reality might be understood. I wish to do this in distinction from two previous and highly influential attempts to generate typologies and which are associated with the names of Ernst Troeltsch and H. Richard Niebuhr and which at this point it becomes necessary to summarise.

Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) was both a theologian and philosopher and published in 1912 his work *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen*, translated into English in 1931 as *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* Volumes 1 and 2.<sup>4</sup> After surveying the history of Christian social teaching he concluded that there were to be found within it three broad types which he distinguished as the church-type, the sect-type and mysticism.<sup>5</sup> Each type appealed to scripture for justification, and only together did they exhaust the breadth of biblical teaching. Mysticism does not immediately concern us here. The church-type was characterised by the quality of universality, and the contrasting sect-type by that of intensity. 'Universality' is to be understood here as the desire to recognise that all things have been made by God and are to be brought under divine lordship, and this includes both culture and government, leading to a unified and integrated approach to the whole of human existence. By contrast 'intensity' refers to the desire to remain true to the Christ of the Gospels, to the way of the cross, to uncompromised obedience to the one who was 'crucified under Pontius Pilate'. Whereas the former gives impetus to the desire to annexe the secular in the service of the religious and so unites church and state, the latter leads to a degree of estrangement from worldly power and sets the church over against the state. The radical traditions, to which baptists<sup>6</sup> can be seen to belong, are to be placed firmly within the sectarian tradition.

It is here that we locate a problem with this typology. For a start, although the words 'church' and 'sect' may have been intended by Troeltsch in a purely sociological way, describing the social ways of existing that these types are deemed to represent, it is hard not to read them theologically, or even polemically. In which case the 'church' category emerges with much greater prestige, whereas the 'sect' type suggests something narrower, more limited, more self-concerned, perhaps even more bigoted in nature. Side-stepping the question of whether any of this could be fair criticism, the dice have definitely been loaded in a certain direction, and that is against the 'sectarian Protestantism'<sup>7</sup> to which baptists belong.

There can be no denying that this has been an enormously influential approach and that Troeltsch's work has classical status. A similar thing might be said about H. Richard Niebuhr's seminal work *Christ and Culture*.<sup>8</sup> Here again Niebuhr deals with ideal types, five in number, of the ways in which Christ has been deemed to relate to created but fallen human culture

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<sup>4</sup> London: George Allen and Unwin, 1931.

<sup>5</sup> *Social Teaching*, Volume 2, p. 993.

<sup>6</sup> I here adopt the convention of using 'baptist' to refer inclusively to the wide spectrum of radical movements that share baptistic values similar to those of Baptists.

<sup>7</sup> Franklin H. Littell, *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism* (New York: Macmillan, 1952, 1964), p. xvii.

<sup>8</sup> New York/London: Harper & Row, 1951, 1975.

throughout history. The 'Christ against Culture' type, which Niebuhr saw illustrated by the various Anabaptist movements deriving from the sixteenth century, but particularly by the Amish of North America, sets fidelity to Christ over against accommodation to culture in an intensification of Troeltsch's sect-type. This is a retreat from the public into the private. The 'Christ of Culture' type accommodates to culture to the point where no conflict between the two is experienced and so could be exemplified by Liberal Protestantism. This is a merging of the private with the public so that the church becomes a religious echo of public culture. The 'Christ above Culture' type is seen by Niebuhr as the centre ground occupied historically by the church according to which Christ makes sense not only of the church's story but of the whole of creation, which finds its true nature in the Logos from whom all things derive their rationality. Yet public culture is called to a fulfilment in the Christ who is most clearly known in the church and so judges culture at the same time as elevating it. 'Christ and Culture in Paradox', illustrated chiefly by Lutheranism, detects a kind of dualism between Christ and culture so that any relation between them is more likely to be derived through conflict rather than a smooth cohesion. Finally, Niebuhr is working towards what seems to be his preferred type, which is 'Christ the Transformer of Culture', illustrated, he believes, in history by such illustrious names as Augustine, Calvin and F.D. Maurice. Christ redeems and transforms the public culture.

Ideal types such as those we have encountered are meant to be broad categorisations rather than narrow pigeon-holes. Unfortunately this is precisely what they can become, being used to sideline certain ways of thinking. Polemically Niebuhr's approach can be used to nullify certain groups whom others might consider come into the 'Against Culture' category. Arguably those same groups might place themselves in the 'Transformation of Culture' ballpark, maintaining that they simply opt for a less-assimilated way of pursuing this goal. The Niebuhrian analysis begins to weaken once certain pertinent points are made. Is it possible, for instance, to be 'against culture' when those groups that are deemed to take this stance are themselves in process of creating their own culture? They may be in conflict with the *dominant* culture but cannot be against culture *per se*. More tellingly, culture, even dominant culture, is not monolithic. Within it there is a multiplicity of cultures some of which are to be welcomed and some not. It is not possible therefore to be for everything or in favour of nothing. Concerning the radical groups, David Fergusson puts it this way: 'Rather than forsaking the world as H.R. Niebuhr suggests in his famous typology, they serve the world by disclosing new possibilities. The radical position can be presented as not so much straight rejection of secular political rule as the adoption of an independent standpoint that provides a perspective from which to offer critical discrimination upon a broad range of cultural forms. It offers not withdrawal but criticism both positive and negative'.<sup>9</sup>

It seems then as though the world might be ready for a new typology, one that avoids the biases and the bluntness of those just considered. The typology I propose seeks to address the realities of the churches, society and the state and, in order to make good on the title of this paper, to address questions of Christian faith and secularism, in particular. I propose to address these questions and to develop the typology by means of a Hegelian dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, and so to propose the categories of:

Both participating and possessing

Not participating and not possessing

Participating without possessing

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<sup>9</sup> Fergusson, *Church, State and Civil Society*, p. 43.

Beneath each of these headings there will be a number of sub-categories sometimes requiring significant discussion.<sup>10</sup>

## The suggested typology

### *Both participating and possessing*

In this perspective the Christian church lays claim not only to participating in the public realm but also possessing it in the sense that it lays down the truths and the ideology which undergird, determine and shape that realm. In other words, Christianity offers itself and is accepted as the dominant worldview and metaphor by which the whole of life is to be negotiated in both public and private dimensions. Yet under this general heading there are distinctions to be made about how this is done and what its implications might be.

Epistemological optimism is the key: God's truth can be known through reason and revelation and can be authoritatively interpreted by the church. This truth should be applied to the public realm since it is beneficial for all: it is the truth of God. Within this overall heading I differentiate three approaches:

#### 1) Theocracy

Theocracy looks for the immediate rule of God on earth through the powers that be. In contradistinction to Islam, theocracy has been an uncharacteristic approach in Christianity perhaps because of its trenchant criticism of the fallen and disobedient nature of human powers, a criticism that tends towards a duality of church and state. It has been most closely approached in the 'Caesaro-papism' of the Eastern Church from the sixth to the tenth centuries, with remnants in the idea of the Holy Roman Empire, and in the rule of the Russian Czars. If there is a problem of the public and the private then according to theocracy it is easily solved: any distinction between the two is abolished. What is publically confessed by the ruler is to become the private faith of the subject. It is worth pointing out that the recent and shocking emergence on Syrian and Iraqi territory of the alleged Caliphate of the so-called 'Islamic state' is an extreme and profoundly alienating example of a theocratic principle, though plainly not from within a Christian framework.

#### 2) Constantinian Christendom

To be distinguished from theocracy is Constantinian Christendom for although the first Christian Roman Emperor wished to use the Christian religion as a means of legitimating his own rule, and was followed in this by some of his successors, not least Theodosius I, the Western Church by and large fell short of full-blown theocracy. There are, after all, two cities and according to Augustine the City of Man is not the same as the City of God. The latter as an other-worldly and future reality calls the former into question and exposes its self-seeking and rapacious powers. Augustine launched a remarkably robust critique of imperial power: kingdoms without justice are like criminal gangs.<sup>11</sup> Characteristically, the Western Church retained the binary language of Church and State: a tension existed between the two despite whatever partnership they had. Nevertheless, this is *Christendom* in that the church interprets and determines the public realm. And it is *Constantinian* in that the partnership between church and state led to the willingness of the church to enforce its truth as public truth through the use of the state's coercive powers. It is precisely here of course that the Anabaptists

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<sup>10</sup> I first proposed this typology in a published lecture to the Industrial Christian Fellowship in November 2003 entitled 'Participating without Possessing: The public and the private in Christian discipleship'. It received further attention in my *Free Church Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005), pp. 270-79. What follows both repeats and extends this material.

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *City of God* (London: Penguin, 1972), p.139.

located the Fall of the church. The church-state nexus has rightly been the object of much criticism and suggestion for reform.<sup>12</sup>

Although Constantinianism is associated with those state and established churches that have dominated western and eastern European history, it should be noted that the churches of the magisterial Reformation were content to continue in this tradition. Not only were they slow to put an end to religious persecution, they were willing to justify it on theological grounds. In Scotland, for instance, the Reformed Church established itself as the national Church and largely followed John Calvin in justifying its persecutory activities. As with the execution of Servetus on grounds of heresy, in 1697 the Edinburgh divinity student Thomas Aikenhead was executed for heresy. David Fergusson summarises those arguments in favour of religious repression as four-fold: (i) Intolerance was justified in order to maintain religious purity within a community and this was the responsibility of civil rulers; (ii) It was justified for the good of heretics themselves since temporal discipline was preferable to eternal punishment. Enforcing the faith was therefore in the long-term interests of those coerced if it saved them from hell; (iii) It was necessary in order to maintain divine honour, to avoid blasphemy and to fulfil the first commandment; and (iv) Since religion is a universal phenomenon and all societies must have a religious identity, a society must favour one religion over others.<sup>13</sup>

In enumerating these arguments we perhaps begin to see why it is that the desire for a secular rather than a religious state began to take hold. But there remains under this main heading a third option to consider.

### 3) Non-Constantinian Christendom

The term 'Christendom' is often used in an undifferentiated way which overlooks the complexity of the phenomenon. Yet there have been those who wished to ensure that society and state remained substantially Christian while unhooking religious belief from state power so as to permit freedom of conscience and toleration of religious diversity.<sup>14</sup> It did this for well-articulated theological reasons. David Fergusson has identified some of these as they began to emerge first in the sixteenth century from Erasmus onwards and then in the seventeenth, and so in advance of the emergence of any secular articulation of toleration and religious liberty in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These include the convictions: that Christ made no attempt to coerce men and women to embrace his doctrines or to join the church; that it was possible to embrace the essence of the Christian faith while disagreeing on non-essentials; that coercion is futile and counter-productive of genuine piety; that conversion is voluntary and cannot be forced; and that there is a need to listen to those who have opinions contrary to our own in order to foster growth in understanding. Tolerance can be productive.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to these arguments we may add two more: Firstly, the Christian doctrine of election, particularly characteristic of the Reformed tradition, affirms the freedom of God to choose those whom he purposes to gather into the elect community of the church. Whatever formulations of this doctrine we may prefer, and there are options, it is surely right to stress the freedom and initiative of God in the work of election. It is not for the state to usurp the divine freedom and to seek to do what only God can do. A religiously coercive state is preempting the work and grace of God in the work of salvation that is God's alone and is pursued through the witness and proclamation of the churches. Secondly, in persecuting people for their religious beliefs, or lack of them, the state alienates citizens who potentially have the power to enrich society and contribute to the wider well-being of the community. Religious

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<sup>12</sup> See not least here my own *Disavowing Constantine: Mission, Church and the Social Order in the Theologies of John Howard Yoder and Jürgen Moltmann* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Fergusson, *Church, State and Civil Society*, pp. 82-4.

<sup>14</sup> It might be observed that the constitution of the United States of America was framed in part in reaction to the religious oppression many migrants had endured in Europe.

<sup>15</sup> Fergusson, *Church, State and Civil Society*, pp.80-81, 84-7.

freedom therefore works for the good of society as a whole by valuing its citizens for their humanity irrespective of religious affiliation.

It should be clear by now that I am concerned to anchor the radical, baptist tradition within this particular emerging trajectory. It was not, so far as I can see, that the first baptists were arguing for a secular, far less a god-less or pagan state. Although they undoubtedly had concerns about the compromised state of Constantinian religion, their desire was not that society or state be de-Christianised but rather re-Christianised in the direction of the true example of Christ and the early church: the state was not to coerce in matters of religious conscience. Its concern was temporal, not spiritual. In these matters Christians owed it respect and obedience. Its duty was the maintenance of society for the free exercise of religion in non-coercive and non-persecutory form.

I might venture the thought that this remains the free church Christian vision. Our ideal is the Christianisation and consequently the humanisation of society and state, but precisely in such a way as to avoid the coercive methodologies that have been associated with this ideal in times past. These are inconsistent with the Christ whom Christians profess. Whether this continues to be a realisable vision is something to which we shall return. However the vision exists as an eschatological vision, a hope for the fullness of time in the light of which present reality is to be examined and found wanting and which guides the Christian community as to how to live and what to advocate.

We now turn to the dialectical opposite of the first type I have described.

#### *Not participating and not possessing*

If the rise of the Christian faith to fulfil the role of public truth is astonishing, it is equally amazing to chart that process by which it was displaced. This is generally attributed to the secularising effects of the post-Enlightenment period, the outcome of which was the gradual removal of Christian faith from its public role to the realm of private belief and a few vestigial and arcane cultural artefacts. If the concern of the advocates of non-Constantinian Christendom was that the public religious ideology should not be imposed within the private world of the religious conscience, the antithetical concern of post-Enlightenment secularism has been that the private religious conscience should not be allowed to lay claim to the public realm, which was to be the domain instead of a supposedly neutral 'reason'. Christian faith therefore did not only not possess the public realm, it was only to be taken seriously if it was prepared to submerge its identity, lay aside its own forms of moralising and reasoning and participate in the public realm by accommodating itself to the methodology of secular reasoning.

The real focus in this section concerns what I identify here as Hard Secularism. Hard secularism is more than a political theory. It is a metaphysics and takes its lead from scientism, which is more than a method of gaining knowledge and understanding. There is a difference between science as a methodology (which is to be applauded) and scientism as an ideology (which is to be resisted). The latter will often masquerade as the former. Scientism is a materialistic, atheistic worldview hostile to religion which it sees as a force for superstition and which it is only prepared to tolerate insofar as it does not have significant social or political effects upon public existence or other people. Privatisation of religion is, according to this account, a containment strategy since faith is perversely persistent and proceeding against it only strengthens it. The most effective strategy therefore is to ignore it, to hold it as of no significance, to draw attention wherever possible to its decline and marginality. Active faith and belief is 'fundamentalism' and religious practice is 'cultic' and possibly 'abusive'. Hard secularism would possess the public realm as its own territory and displace religion by allowing its participation only on the terms lay down for it by hard secularism itself.

Hard secularism has been most visible in the twentieth century in the various atheistic and communist regimes that have to a degree defined the century's history. It has shown itself to

be every bit as persecutory and hostile as any religious state up until the present century, and more so. It has also shown a notable lack of success in eradicating the religious instinct. Yet I shall shortly argue that it conceals itself behind other more benign forms of secularism and that it exists as a hostile impetus even in free societies. Christians can only resist this ideology and need to be equipped both intellectually and spiritually to identify when it is in operation and to unmask it as a substitute for authentic religious faith and as a potentially persecutory phenomenon. This kind of secularism can be as intolerant as any state religion and for many religions way beyond Christianity, 'a state which acknowledges the higher authority of spiritual and moral realities is one which is to be preferred to secular alternatives'.<sup>16</sup> This brings us to the third element of the typology and the one we intend to advocate:

### *Participating without possessing*

The Christendom vision of the whole of society as subject to the Lordship of Christ was never of itself wrong. What was wrong was the attempt to achieve this vision prematurely by means of coercion. I find myself in agreement here with a comment by Gerald W. Schlabach on that trenchant critic of Christendom, Stanley Hauerwas, when he says:

Anabaptists who reject historic Christendom may not actually be rejecting the vision of Christendom as a society in which all of life is integrated under the Lordship of Christ. On this reading, Christendom may actually be a vision of shalom, and our argument with Constantinianisms is not over the vision so much as the sinful effort to grasp at its fullness through violence, before its eschatological time. Hauerwas is quite consistent once you see that he does want to create a Christian society (*polis, societas*) - a community and way of life shaped fully by Christian convictions. He rejects Constantinianisms because the 'world' cannot be this society and we only distract ourselves from building a truly Christian society by trying to make our nation into that society, rather than be content with living as a community-in-exile.<sup>17</sup>

Since the gospel works by persuasion not coercion, the church must content itself with the rising and falling of its influence in any given society and culture since to employ other means than this would be to impose its truth prematurely and oppressively upon others, thus compromising the very nature of the church's mission. Participation in the public realm where this is possible can never be foregone since this would be to deny the public truth of Christ. But this witness is sustained with a view to the eschatological fulfilment of Christ's reign.

Of the positions I have explored, non-Constantinian Christendom is the nearest approximation to what I describe, reflecting the belief that the groundings of a healthy, tolerant and free society are more securely rooted in this theological soil than in reductionist and hostile secularism or some alien totalitarianism. But we now live after any form of Christendom, a perception that is widely acknowledged.<sup>18</sup> So there is a further item of the landscape to note and this is Soft Secularism. It might otherwise be classed as 'civic secularism'.

As distinct meanings of the term 'Christendom' needed to be differentiated, so with secularism. Like things might be said about Christianity as a whole: there is a variety of Christianities not just one monolithic version. Likewise it is now commonplace to note that there were Reformations not just one Reformation. As there is a difference between science as a methodology and scientism as an all encompassing metaphysics (or anti-metaphysics) requiring its own leap of faith so we are wise to distinguish between the hard secularism that

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<sup>16</sup> Fergusson, *Church, State and Civil Society*, p. 188.

<sup>17</sup> Cited by Hauerwas himself without reference in *After Christendom? How the church is to behave if freedom, justice and a Christian nation are bad ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2nd edition 1991), pp. 7-8.

<sup>18</sup> David Smith, *Mission After Christendom* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003); John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997); Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004).

is essentially an atheistic worldview and the soft secularism that is a political strategy designed to hold together religiously and ideologically diverse societies. The 'secular' is here portrayed as a common meeting ground for people of all faiths and none, that which may be held in common by all, a ground where all might meet without fear of persecution or discrimination and where the goods of a society are not subject to any form of religious or confessional test. This can be seen in direct contrast to the religious state against which it is a clear reaction. A society might remain highly religious whilst still being served by a secular state (examples: India and, historically, Turkey). People of religious conviction might quite consistently hold to their own convictions in the private sphere of conscience whilst advocating a secular, non-sectarian state. This approach would be rooted in the commitment to love one's neighbour as oneself, that is, to accord to others those same social and political benefits I would wish to claim for myself. There is therefore full religious/Christian participation in the life of both society and state, but not in a way that denies the same degree of participation to anyone else.

The distinction between hard and soft secularism can further be illuminated by differentiating between *programmatically* and *procedurally* secularisms or between *hostile* and *hospitable* secularisms. Soft secularism is simply a way of operating fairly and justly within plural societies. It aims at tolerance, temperance, hospitality and accommodation. It should be acknowledged that, with all this said, soft secularism can be applied with greater or lesser degrees of resolution: some forms of soft secularism are quite hard! French *laïcité*, for instance, is more resolute in excluding religion from the public sphere than is American secularism, which can include prayers in the ceremony for swearing in the President, which act actually takes place on the Bible. One approach is suspicious of the potentially divisive effect of religion, the other encouraging of its potential contributions. There is a range of civic secularisms and these will vary from country to country. Soft, or civic, secularism can value the public and societal role of religion while believing that for historical reasons rooted not least in the religious conflicts of previous centuries, religion itself is corrupted when what should be a matter of voluntary commitment becomes wedded to political power.

Granted that Christendom has passed and that the non-Constantinian vision remains an eschatological hope, soft secularism may be the best model for social existence currently on offer or potentially realisable within the European realm. Christians might prefer to 'possess' the public realm more comprehensively and benignly, but short of a long series of massive revivals of the Christian religion in its free-church variation this is not on offer. Soft secularism remains the best available option. It is a position with which we can do serious business. This is not to say that it is without its own dangers against which we must remain vigilantly on guard. Chief among these is the undoubted fact that hard secularism can use soft secularism as a cloak or disguise for pursuing its own agenda. Where this happens it needs to be unmasked, and this can be done by appealing to soft secularism's own declared aspirations of tolerance, respect for difference, and non-discrimination. A further danger is that soft secularism leads to the cultivation of a culture of disbelief, of agnosticism and potential indifference which undermines the obedience of faith. As a counter-point to this it should be pointed out that no society or state can operate without some shared vision of the good, and the search for such a vision compels us to pose questions about purpose and meaning, and thus to draw upon the elements of religion itself. Political liberalism is essentially a procedural ethic designed to provide the space in which individuals may negotiate their own meanings. When it comes to casting a substantive vision of the good it becomes parasitic.<sup>19</sup> There are challenges here. But I wish to conclude this paper by drawing attention to what seem to me to be the advantages for free church Christians and others of living in a secular state.

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<sup>19</sup> Two semi-humorous quotations are apposite here. G.K. Chesterton: 'Whatever the merits of torturing innocent children to death, and no doubt there is much to be said on both sides, I am sure we all agree that it should be done with sterilised instruments'. Irving Kristol: 'A liberal is a person who sees a fourteen year old girl performing live sex acts on stage and wonders if she's being paid the minimum wage'.

## Life in a secular state

### 1) Freedom to be the church

This paper began with a quotation: 'If society would not be Christian, at least the church could be'. I have taken it, and some other strands of thought, from Professor David Fergusson of the University of Edinburgh, and it comes from a discussion of the Anabaptists. It is preceded by the statement 'The success of this movement involved a renunciation of every attempt to master the world.'<sup>20</sup> The point is that once the church gives up the idea that it is its responsibility to maintain a national identity or manage the world, it is freed for its primary and unique task of witnessing to Christ: Fergusson puts it so: 'There is a sense of liberation in the realisation that the church no longer speaks for society, exercising a central role in promoting consensus and achieving social stability. This frees the representatives of the community to speak on distinctively Christian grounds, to fulfil the fundamental task of bearing witness to the faith, and to set aside the burden of being the state's major partner within civil society'.<sup>21</sup>

None of this precludes Christian individuals taking a full and active part in the political process or in the architecture of civil society. But when they do so they do so as competent persons who happen to be Christians rather than as formal representatives of the Christian church. Christian communities make their contribution and live out their witness when they are faithful in word and deed to the one who has called them and is at the centre of their gathered life.

### 2) Freedom to be authentic

One of the criticisms of Constantinian Christendom is that it succeeded in abolishing the category of the 'world' by co-opting the world into its own life. It failed thereby to sanctify the world but succeeded in corrupting its own life. It would seem therefore that reinstating the category of the 'world', the realm beyond the church that is not church, is a necessary step in fostering authentic Christian communities. The authenticity of the church depends paradoxically upon the existence of the 'world'. Some years ago I heard the then Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom and Commonwealth, Sir Jonathan Sacks (now Lord Sacks), give an address in which he referred to the *stetls* within the Jewish Pale of central Europe. He spoke of Jewish caution about the practice of excommunication. In a non-plural society, to be excommunicated from the synagogue was equivalent to a death sentence, since the excommunicated were shunned by the community and therefore deprived of the very means of life. The pressure to conform, to go through the motions of religious observance in order not to be put at risk, was therefore very considerable leading to the weakening of synagogue life. It struck me at the time that if people belong to our communities primarily because they are afraid not to, then authentic Christian communities would lie beyond our grasp. Societies in which it is acceptable to be secular allow people not to belong to the church without fear of retribution or discrimination and in this way increase the likelihood that those who do hold fast to the church will be sincere in doing so.

### 3) Freedom to worship and work

Secular states proclaim their commitment to comprehensive religious freedom and make it clear that they subscribe to the relevant international documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights. Article 18 of the former declares, 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.'<sup>22</sup> Article 9 of the Convention reiterates this and adds the further

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<sup>20</sup> *Church, State and Civil Society*, p.43.

<sup>21</sup> *Church, State and Civil Society*, p.96.

<sup>22</sup> Ian Brownlie, ed., *Basic Documents on Human Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp.18-19.

provision, 'Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others'.<sup>23</sup> Ostensibly therefore civic secularism protects and safeguards religious freedom in unambiguous terms. The fact that these safeguards are self-declared allows that whenever they are infringed those who are at risk can appeal to the self-definition of secular states in their own defence. The tension remains that different rights might on occasion come into conflict with each other (for instance 'gay rights' versus religious rights) in which case the criterion of 'reasonable accommodation' might be appealed to. However reasonable accommodation needs to be practised both by and towards religious groupings. And Christians safeguard their own freedoms not least by being vigilant for the freedoms of others.

#### 4) Freedom to participate

Although civic secularism precludes the possibility of Christianity possessing the public sphere, and the advantages of this have been noted under 1), it leaves the field open to Christian participation in all legitimate activities of both society and state. Acting as the salt of the earth, there is every reason why Christians should involve themselves in building up communities and nations. It is also understandable that given the force of the powers that oppose them, Christians should feel themselves prey from time to time to 'multiple overwhelmings'<sup>24</sup> and to 'chronic exasperation'.<sup>25</sup> A pessimistic note was struck by Alasdair MacIntyre in his justly famous book *After Virtue* when in view of the moral disintegration he noted in modern culture he prophesied that a new dark age was upon us: 'This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time'.<sup>26</sup> His call for communities of virtue and civility to keep the light shining certainly needs to be heard.

More optimistically however, the possibilities for conversation and common endeavour are not completely lost. We are still shaped by our Christian heritage to a considerable extent; there are men and women of goodwill beyond the boundaries of the church; there are common causes that may be made with those of other faiths; there remains an extensive consensus as to what constitutes moral action; and the doctrines of general revelation and common grace indicate that God has not left his world without a witness (Acts 14:17). Two themes in particular furnish ground on which Christians and their dialogue partners might meet: our shared humanity and the social quest for the common good. Believing that human beings are made in the image of God and that God in the incarnation of Christ has bestowed on humans the highest honour, Christians are the true humanists who can work with those of other religions and of none who care about humane and decent values. And it is generally considered that Catholic social teaching has bequeathed the concept of the common good to modern political thought. These twin ideas offer much scope for participation in the public realm for the good of all.

#### 5) Freedom to integrate and not to assimilate

Civic secularism provides for the Christian faith the opportunity to integrate into society without losing identity and distinctiveness through assimilation. Moreover, as a tradition of faith free church, believers church commitment should be well adapted to surviving and contributing under modern conditions. The commitments to voluntary affiliation exemplified in believers baptism, to strong congregational life and consensual government, to liberty of conscience and religious freedom count as strengths in such an environment, as does a history that has

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<sup>23</sup> Brownlie, *Basic Documents*, p.246.

<sup>24</sup> I owe this term to Professor David Ford of the University of Cambridge..

<sup>25</sup> A term coined by John Macmurray and cited by Fergusson, *Church, State and Civil Society*, p.108.

<sup>26</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A study in moral theory* (London: Duckworth, 1992, 2000), p.263.

avoided persecution of others and the rejection of religious compulsion. These qualities are surely those that belong to the future of Christianity even for those who have adopted other ways of being church in times past.

### **Conclusion**

Although churches of a baptist faith and order might as their highest preference work towards the formation of states and societies according to their own principles of obedience to Christ and grace towards all, such a state remains an unlikely prospect in any future that we are able currently to foresee. Soft or civic secularism remains the most likely alternative prospect and whatever its challenges it holds open considerable positive possibilities for life and mission.

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare (Jeremiah 29:7).

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