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FOREWORD

In this Faculty Bulletin Pat Graham's study of Chronicles reminds us of God's concern for congruence between faith and life--integrity. Rick Marrs tells us that Christian integrity expresses itself not merely in religious exercises but in just and merciful conduct. David Worley and James Thompson explore the relation between faith and specific areas of life. Worley looks at the relationship between Christianity and the marketplace within the frame of Pauline thought. Thompson recalls Tertullian's pointed question (What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?) with particular reference to the arts--specifically, literature and theater. The concluding article reminds us that character and conduct are formed by our communities. It raises the issue of the impact of modernity upon the Christian community.

A word of appreciation is due my colleagues on the faculty the Institute for Christian Studies for their cooperation in presenting these essays. Special thanks are due to Mrs. Nancy Tindel, faculty secretary, for her help in preparing this issue of the Faculty Bulletin.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

THE SECULARIZATION OF THE CHURCH : FROM TRANSCENDENCE TO TECHNIQUE

By Michael R. Weed

The visitor to Europe cannot fail to notice the many cathedrals and churches standing in the center of great cities, towns, and even small villages. Their majestic spires tower above surrounding buildings, pointing silently into the sky. Nor can the visitor fail to notice that these monumental structures are largely empty. Today they stand as mute but vivid reminders of the past, examples of medieval architecture, ecclesiastical museums of earlier centuries of Christendom. These empty buildings also stand as witnesses to the fact that the place of the church in society has undergone a gradual but far reaching process of change wherein religion has been displaced from the center of both public and private life.

The complex process whereby this change has come about is commonly referred to as that of secularization.¹ In essence this has meant a radical shift in consciousness affecting such matters as the self's view of time, history, society, and ultimate reality.²

Although the origins of secularization are variously traced to the Industrial Revolution, denominationalism, the Enlightenment, the Reformation, Nominalism, and even to the Judeo-Christian tradition itself, most social historians and social scientists would agree that Western civilization has largely become a secular civilization.³ In general terms this means that traditional religion no longer plays the central role it once played. More specifically, secularization involves at least two separable dimensions. First, it means a decay in the importance of religious institutions in the everyday life of society. Second, it signifies an erosion of religious consciousness in the minds and lives of individuals living in the secular society.

For Western civilization this has meant that traditional Judeo-Christian values, beliefs, and aspirations that formerly gave coherence, meaning, and direction to society have largely disappeared from the public arena. In turn, this has resulted in what Richard Neuhaus has aptly labeled “the naked public square,” i.e., a public arena with no consistent self-understanding nor accepted vocabulary, values, and vision to offer cohesion and direction to the whole.⁴ As a consequence, modern society largely ceases to depend upon an integrated consensus of values and tends toward becoming more of an agglomeration loosely held together by modern techniques and procedures.⁵ The result is that modern society is more of a balkanized and unstable hodgepodge (euphemistically

and naively called “pluralistic”) of jarring and clashing ideas and views than a society founded upon shared values and a clear vision of the human good.

Curiously, it is not in Europe but in America, where religion is apparently healthier, that the process of secularization is regarded by many as having advanced the furthest.⁶ This seeming contradiction, viz., a highly secular society and thriving religious institutions, is generally explained by the fact that secularization has followed different patterns in Europe and America. Whereas in Europe secularization has meant wholesale defection from the church, in the United States secularization means that although the churches and religious institutions tend to persist and even thrive, “their specifically religious character has become steadily attenuated.”⁷

Quite simply, this has meant that the churches in the United States have adapted themselves to survive by commending themselves to the secular society and the secular mind on their own terms. British sociologist Bryan Wilson argues that this means that

(w)ithin the ranks of traditional religion there are those who actively canvass, as the only prospect for success, the need to grasp modernity, to rationalize their own procedures, to reorganize and rebuild on the pattern of some secular institution . . .⁸

Thus by adapting to the pressures and demands of modernity, churches in the United States have been able to insure their survival in the midst of a highly secular society--at

least for the immediate future. Still, this adaptation has not been without high costs. Essentially, it has meant that religion has managed to survive in the United States by radically altering its role and function--both in the life of society and in the life of the individual church member. In short, it has meant the emergence of the "secular church."

The Secular Church

As the church adapts to its new role in a society where it is seen as increasingly marginal and in which religion is relegated to the realm of the private, the church undergoes many changes. Utility tends to become the guiding principle of the church as it commends itself as useful in the business of life (as well as in the business of business) in terms of society's own standards and values. This basic orientation makes its mark both on the organizational structure of the church and also in the church's understanding of its mission.

On the one hand, the church tends to take on the characteristics of a large contemporary organization or institution. The church becomes an assemblage of countless committees, meetings, questionnaires, memos, copy machines, and related procedures that maintain institutional momentum. In short, the church takes on and reflects the characteristics and tendencies of organizations in the society in which it exists--a technological, bureaucratic, and secular society.

On the other hand, the church maintains itself and redefines its mission by seeking to address the endless needs of the secular society's casualty list. Indeed, the cost of life in the secular society is one of failed marriages, soaring abortion rates,

. . . a high incidence of mental ill-health, widely diffused strain, addiction to drugs, high rates of suicide, crime and delinquency, the disorientation of youth in a social context increasingly bewildering and in which older moral and religious shibboleths no longer seem valid.⁹

Thus the "secular church" alters or jettisons traditional ministries (e.g., evangelism becomes "outreach") and proliferates a host of new ministries through which it seeks to "meet needs"--attract outsiders and involve insiders. The emerging secular church becomes a veritable beehive of busyness; its members are involved in a swelling number of activities and non-traditional ministries ranging from new member assimilation and stress reduction techniques, through assertiveness training and sensitivity training, to hiking and ski outings.

Further, in that the needs created by modernity's fast pace are continually changing, the secular church is committed to a constant monitoring of the latest shifts in disposition which announce the epiphany of a new "need." Consequently, the secular church requires and develops sensitive antennae to provide adequate market analysis to identify "affinity groups" and newly emerging ways by which it can further accommodate itself to society.

In all of this the secular church more nearly comes to resemble a religion emporium

or delicatessen--changing its offerings and samples in response to the appetites of consumers--than it resembles its historical namesake. Coherence in the secular church is rarely sought--and, in fact, it is frequently avoided because it curtails the freedom of expression and diversity necessitated by accommodating the disparate needs of a pluralistic society. Members are exhorted to be involved, to share, and even to serve; less frequently they are encouraged to discipleship, Bible study, and worship. The context in which this occurs is more nearly that of contemporary self-realization theories than of traditional concepts of salvation.

Clearly, as the self-understanding of the church shifts, so does that of those who serve within the institution. Not surprisingly, the role and self-understanding of the minister also undergo radical changes. The traditional role and associated tasks of the minister as representative of the Christian faith, interpreter of scripture, teacher of Christian doctrine, and exhorter of the faithful are no longer respected in society and are becoming increasingly irrelevant even within the emerging church. In order to survive within the organizational framework of the secular church, the minister is forced to give increasing attention to style and technique in pursuit of skills suitable to his changing persona. To paraphrase Bryan Wilson, ministers must now acquire new styles and learn to manipulate their images to conform to the expectations of a clientele marked by the

ideologies of secular modernity.¹⁰ Thus in an increasingly bureaucratic-technological, therapeutic, and politicized society, ministers develop managerial techniques, learn counseling skills, and--less frequently--become involved in political activism. In all of this, the minister's presence tends to become no more than a reflection and his voice an echo of society. Occasionally the minister achieves "relevance," but it is the relevance of the popular or the so-called prophetic relevance of the popular unpopular.

As the church alters its identity--its self-understanding and its mission--in society, it also takes on a different function in the life of the average church member. For older church members the secular church may retain some of its traditional functions. For younger and newer members, however, the secular church does not offer an inclusive vision of reality--much less a system of beliefs or doctrines. More nearly, the outlook of the average church member is reflective of modern secular pluralistic society--a society corroborated and legitimated by the emerging secular church. The religious consciousness of the average church member is an eclectic conglomeration; it consists largely of a subjective and highly unstable mixture of bits and pieces taken from such diverse sources as traditional religion, folk wisdom, horoscopes, "Dear Abby," and the latest version of pop psychology. Not surprisingly, in the life of the average member of the secular church, the church plays the same role it plays in society at large, viz., marginal.

It is a leisure-time pursuit. For the average church member the secular church becomes a “Christ club,” providing opportunities for conviviality, “meaningful personal relationships,” occasionally intellectual stimulation, and perhaps some recreation. The church does not, however, offer a coherent vision of the universe or a moral framework by which one may live.

In summary, the secular church survives and even thrives in a secular environment by adjusting and accommodating itself to secularism. In the process, however, the church undergoes radical redefinition, not only playing a different role in society but also performing a markedly different and diminished function in the lives of its individual members.

The Costs of Accommodation

In spite of its successes, both real and apparent, accommodation to the methods, procedures, and values of modernity exacts a high price upon the emerging secular church. It also creates fundamental problems in both practical and theological terms.

On a practical level, the secular church has committed itself to providing what the society also provides, in many cases as well as or better than the church. Further, the more successfully the church addresses and gratifies various needs of modern persons (e.g., belonging, meaningful personal relationships, involvement, recreation), the more it

legitimizes the pursuit of their satisfaction. It is simply a matter of time until many, guided by the pursuit of “need gratification,” find their needs more adequately addressed through alternatives such as health spas and service clubs and the like. (All of this reminds one of the dictum that whether or not Marx was correct in observing that religion was the opium of the people, it does appear that opium is the religion of the people.)

Further, the tactical calculation that the church may better get its message across to secular and even hostile audiences by adopting the standards of secular modernity may be a serious blunder. As sociologist Peter Berger points out, recalcitrant audiences may become more, not less, recalcitrant, demanding increasing degrees of accommodation.¹¹

Thus it is arguable that the secular church’s widespread adoption of the perspectives and methods of secular modernity, whether intentional or unintentional, may bring only apparent and short-lived successes. To the extent that this is true, the secular church more nearly represents not the victory of faith over the world but the seduction of the faith by the artful techniques of the world.¹² Or, as Berger more vividly pictures it, the secular church reminds one of the tragicomic plight of the drunkard who walks in the gutter in order to avoid falling off the curb.¹³

The secular church’s adaptation to modernity, and particularly its near wholesale adoption (if not also adulation) of the utility principle, leads directly to several

fundamental theological problems. Perhaps the most far-reaching of these is the secular church's loss of transcendence. Ultimately, religious concerns are neither reducible to nor compatible with the vision, methods, and techniques of secular modernity. "Religion necessarily speaks another language, offers itself in different terms and by different criteria, from those that prevail in the technological world of modern society."¹⁴ Consequently, however innocent the intent, the endorsement of the utility principle inevitably diminishes and eventually eliminates the sphere of the transcendent.

To be certain, the language of traditional religion and piety still abound in the secular church. The language of transcendence, however, maintains an illusion--it masks a false transcendence. In an insightful critique of modern religiosity, theologian James Gustafson contends that

(r)eligion is put into the service not of gratitude, reverence, and service to God but of human interests, morally both trivial and serious. Religion--its theologies, its cultic practices, its rhetoric, its symbols, its devotions, becomes unwittingly justified for its utility value.

For Gustafson the result of this process is that

God is denied as God; God becomes an instrument in the service of human beings rather than human beings instruments in the service of God.¹⁵

Thus the loss of transcendence amounts to the emergence of an immanentist theology--or, rather, an anthropocentric theology. The human perspective, both of the

individual self and of humanity as a whole, becomes the sole measure and goal of theology. Not surprisingly, this shift from transcendence to anthropocentric perspective radically marks the secular church's understanding of such central activities as worship and of such concepts as salvation. Worship tends to become a quasi-entertaining media event providing an "emotional outlet" and promoting self-esteem and conviviality ("fellowship"). It is decidedly not an occasion marked by reverence, awe, and an awareness of the mystery and majesty of God.

Salvation or redemption inevitably and necessarily remains an imprecise concept in the secular church. It tends, however, to be loosely equated with the promotion and gratification of the needs and interests of the self, narrowly defined. Frequently, therapeutic terminology may be employed to define God's role in salvation as that of promoting "self-realization."¹⁶ Regardless of the many variations, however, salvation comes to be understood as attained by and apparently equated with self-indulgence.

To be sure, visions of salvation may occasionally extend beyond the boundaries of self-gratification to the more inclusive social and political goals as evidenced in the various "cause theologies" (e.g., black theology, feminist theology, moral majorityism, and liberation theology). As diverse as these different theologies may appear, however, underlying their differences is a common tendency, viz., a highly selective use of God and biblical motifs to legitimate and promote various personal and moral goals.

Regardless of one's personal sympathies, there is little significant theological difference between persons using prayer and piety to achieve personal business success and persons using prayer at political demonstrations or sit-ins.¹⁷ Either way, religion becomes a utilitarian value.

Finally, the loss of transcendence and the radical shifts this loss occasions also give rise to additional practical problems of enormous dimensions. Leaders in the secular church repeatedly will encounter difficulty on occasions when, for whatever reasons, it is necessary to call for humility, patience, and sacrifice. The secular church, built around the promotion of self-esteem, gratification of needs, and self-fulfillment, simply cannot, in any consistent or convincing manner, call for self-discipline, self-restraint, or selflessness. The theology of the cross can have no real place in the "Christ club."

Recovering the Way

It has always been a difficult task for the church to be in the world and yet not of the world. In this regard, the secularization of the church is but one more example of that ongoing struggle. And yet, whether the church succumbs to the lure of power and prestige or more innocently seeks only a temporary and tactical alliance with modernity, the secularization of the church is a particularly insidious form of conformation to the world. This is true for at least two reasons. First, the secular church can point to its many very real and tangible successes. Second, the methods of secularism mask themselves as

merely neutral tools or instruments no better and certainly no worse than their users and the goals they serve. As indicated, however, hidden assumptions ride in the wake of secular techniques and methods which the church may innocently (and naively) seek to use in managing and promoting “kingdom business.”

“Recovering the way” will depend, in the first instance, on recognition of the dimensions of the problem. While such recognition must remain partial and incomplete this side of a transcendent perspective, it appears that the de-secularization of the church is a fundamental task. This, in turn, can entail nothing short of a recovery of transcendence. By the very nature of the task, however, there can be no formula, much less a technique or strategy for such a recovery. The very attempt to seek such a solution would in itself be symptomatic of the problem of the secular church. And, even if it were apparently successful, such a solution would only be another form of false or domesticated transcendence. A true recovery of transcendence cannot be managed--either by traditional piety or by the mirrors and pulleys (or computers) of modern methods and techniques. Nor can there be any assurance that a true recovery of transcendence will eventuate in “successful programs” and efficient institutions.

Although, strictly speaking, a “recovery” of transcendence would be impossible, an openness to transcendence may begin with a return to the biblical records of God’s shattering and unpredictable incursions into human history. Standing alongside Abraham,

Moses, or Isaiah, we may encounter God's irreducible "otherness"--his unfathomable mysteriousness, and his incalculable majesty. Such an awareness may evoke a sense of awe and rekindle near-forgotten memories that "his ways are not our ways." It may remind us that God is worshiped not because he is useful; he is not the guarantor of our hopes for something else, but he himself is the ultimate goal of all our hopes.

Only such an encounter with the God above our countless gods can release us from our self-encapsulation within a web of anthropocentric illusions and fantasies. Only such an awareness can expose and restrain the bloating human ego, swollen by countless forms of self-delusion.* In short, an openness to the Transcendent One will occasion an awareness of our own sinfulness and our rebellion against our Creator, Judge, and Redeemer. We will confess with Isaiah:

Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts! (Isaiah 6:5)

It is only in light of such an encounter that we can receive a clear vision of our true nature and destiny.

Additionally, such a vision is critical if the church is to make any meaningful and faithful attempt at "meeting needs." It is only in this attitude that the church may recognize and re-direct false needs and identify secondary needs idolatrously masquerading as ultimate ones. Only from this perspective can it be grasped that true human freedom is freedom in limitation and that human dignity is that alien dignity

appropriate to those who are capable of reflecting the character and purpose of the Transcendent One. For the Christian this character is given its fullest expression in the Incarnation--not as a “celebration of humanity”; much less as a sanction of human ambitions--but culminating in the uncalculating selflessness of the cross. For the church, the community of the cross, this rich symbol must remain at the center of worship and life as a constant reminder of what we are and as a guide to who we are called to be.

Notes

- ¹ The term “secularization” originally designated the removal of land from ecclesiastical control in 16th century Germany. In sociological theory it designates a lessening of the significance of religious institutions and beliefs in society. Secularization as a modern social phenomenon is generally linked to the advance of industrialization and technology. While it has a distinctive shape and unique interaction with features of Western civilization, it is by no means confined to the West and may in fact be detected in Eastern cultures subject to the impact of modernity. Cf. Peter Berger, “Secularity, West and East,” This World, Winter 1983, No. 4, 49-62.
- ² For a succinct and insightful assessment of key components of modern secular consciousness see Peter Berger, “Toward a Critique of Modernity,” Facing Up to Modernity (New York: Harper, 1977) 70-80.
- ³ It should be noted that there are many different versions of secularization theory. These differ regarding such matters as the origins of secularization, whether it is evolutionary or cyclical, and whether it is confined to the West or global. For a criticism of secularization theory see Andrew M. Greeley, The Denominational Society: A Sociological Approach to Religion in America (London: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1972) 127-155.

- ⁴ Cf. Richard John Neuhaus, The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).
- ⁵ Bryan Wilson, Contemporary Transformations of Religion (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976) 102.
- ⁶ Bryan Wilson, Religion in Secular Society: A Sociological Comment (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1969). “Superficially, . . . and in contrast to the evidence from Europe, the United States manifests a high degree of religious activity. And yet, on this evidence, no one is prepared to suggest that America is other than a secularized country. By all sorts of other indicators it might be argued that the United States was a country in which instrumental values, rational procedures and technical methods have gone furthest, and the country in which the sense of the sacred, the sense of the sanctity of life, and deep religiosity are most conspicuously absent. The travelers of the past who commented on the apparent extensiveness of Church membership, rarely omitted to say that they found religion in America to be very superficial. Sociologists generally hold that the dominant values of American society are not religious” (112).
- ⁷ Bryan Wilson, Religion in Sociological Perspective (New York: Oxford, 1982) 152.
- ⁸ Ibid., 174.
- ⁹ Wilson, Religion in Secular Society, 94.
- ¹⁰ Wilson, Contemporary Transformations of Religion, 91.
- ¹¹ Peter Berger, “A Sociological View of the Secularization of Theology,” Facing Up To Modernity (New York: Harper, 1977) 177.
- ¹² Wilson, Contemporary Transformations of Religion, 86.
- ¹³ Berger, 178.
- ¹⁴ Wilson, Religion in Sociological Perspective, 45.

- ¹⁵ James Gustafson, Ethics From a Theocentric Perspective (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1981), Vol. 1, 25.
- ¹⁶ Brooks Holifield's fascinating study of the pastoral counseling movement in American Protestantism traces the manner in which therapeutic terminology and concepts have tended to replace traditional theological terminology and concepts and the tendency to equate salvation and spiritual growth with self-realization. See E. Brooks Holifield, A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983).
- ¹⁷ Gustafson, 22, 23.
- ¹⁸ Ironically, but not surprisingly, repentance is not a dominant theme in the emerging secular church. It is the non-Christian philosopher Iris Murdoch who has called for a philosophical version of recovery of both transcendence and repentance as necessary to puncture the inflated ego and return the self to reality. Murdoch's thesis is interesting to compare with the thought of Robert H. Schuller who contends that the church has been "too theocentric" and proceeds to define sin as "anything that diminishes self-esteem." Cf. Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'," Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983) 68-91; Robert H. Schuller, Self-Esteem: The New Reformation (Waco: Word, 1982).

CONTRIBUTORS

The contributors to this issue are all faculty members of the Institute for Christian Studies.

Graham, M. Patrick, B.A., M.A., M.Div., Abilene Christian University; Ph.D., Emory University.

Marrs, Rick R., B.A., M.Div., Abilene Christian University; Ph.D., The Johns Hopkins University.

Thompson, James W., B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Union Theological Seminary; Ph.D., Vanderbilt University.

Weed, Michael R., B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary; Ph.D., Emory University.

Worley, David, B.A., Abilene Christian University; M.Div., Ph.D., Yale University.