

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

Secret Faith in the Public Square: An Argument for the Concealment of Christian Identity

Jonathan Malesic

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos, 2009 (248 pages)

The Contested Public Square: The Crisis of Christianity and Politics

Greg Forster

Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 2008 (254 pages)

Jonathan Malesic's *Secret Faith in the Public Square* and Greg Forster's *The Contested Public Square* share a number of things in common, as the similarity of their titles suggests. Both interpret the present state of political and social life (particularly in America), place the issue of Christianity and public life in historical perspective, and offer some constructive suggestions for Christians in the public square. The tenor and perspective of these books are quite different, however. While Forster guides us through the political thought of major theologians and the most significant political developments in the West, Malesic takes readers to the outskirts of the Christian tradition, where a few fascinating figures advocated principles of secrecy and concealment of Christian identity in the public square, over against prevailing sentiments of their day. Yet, both volumes, in their own way, offer welcome encouragement for Christians to be modest and humble as they participate in social life.

In *Secret Faith in the Public Square*, Malesic presents an intriguing, contrarian thesis that advances an initially outrageous claim and invites readers to think outside the box.

Malesic's thesis is that American Christians should intentionally conceal their Christian identity in their public lives. Warding off a number of potential misinterpretations, he explains that Christians should remain socially active, that their religious faith should continue to inform their moral decisions in public life, and that they should not pursue secrecy in order to avoid persecution or other hardships. He argues, in light of the social advantages the Christian profession brings in America, that Christians should conceal their identity for the well-being of Christianity itself. The strategy of secrecy will protect Christianity's distinctiveness, prevent Christianity from being used as a political tool, and help to keep Christians from doing good deeds for self-serving and self-righteous purposes.

In part 1, Malesic examines three figures who advocated concealment of Christian identity in public life: Cyril of Jerusalem, Søren Kierkegaard, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Cyril promoted the "discipline of the secret"; that is, keeping numerous secrets from people, particularly about the sacraments, until their baptism. Malesic notes that this practice did not emerge until the fourth century. Cyril promoted the discipline of the secret not to protect Christians from persecution but to protect the church from opportunists looking for social advancement (and also to protect his see's interests from encroachment by imperial and ecclesiastical powers).

The ideas about and rationales for secrecy were somewhat different for Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer. Kierkegaard was primarily reacting against the situation in nineteenth-century Denmark where being a good Christian was identified with being a productive participant in economic and political life. In this context, Kierkegaard saw secrecy as a way to recapture authentic Christianity by protecting the inward reality of faith from accommodation to the world. When Christians conceal their identity while doing loving acts, he believed, the other person is unable to reciprocate, and the selflessness of neighbor love is preserved. Bonhoeffer wrote about secrecy a century later in Germany. Malesic notes that Bonhoeffer did see a place for Christian visibility in the world and thought that Christians ought to protest publicly in extreme circumstances. Malesic, however, claims that secrecy also played an important role in his theology. Bonhoeffer's *Arkandisziplin* involved confessing one's Christian faith in private and concealing it in public, until the eschaton—"God's own time"—when all is revealed. For Bonhoeffer, this forestalls self-righteousness and seeking an earthly reward and encourages Christians to live wholly for others. Their silent good deeds serve as their mission to the world.

In part 2, Malesic explores what the concealment of Christian identity would look like in contemporary America. His basic case is that Christians should exhibit their identity only when they are among members of the Christian community and performing actions that distinguish their community from others. Among the various issues that he explores are interiority, the Christian's responsibility for the other, and how the church can perform its evangelistic task while maintaining this secrecy. He points to sections of contemporary American evangelicalism as a good example of how Christianity is distorted when Christian identity is used to promote political and economic aspirations. He concludes with a chapter critiquing Stanley Hauerwas's belief that visibility is central to the church's mission.

Malesic's work is valuable for raising questions too often ignored in typical discussions about Christianity and culture and reintroducing little known subcurrents that have periodically reappeared in Christian thought. His principal concerns—that Christianity is distorted when Christian identity is used for social advancement and that works of love should not be done for purposes of self-glorification—are poignant and pressing. Amidst the considerable pressure that most Christian communities place on their members to make their faith visible to the world, Malesic's contrarian suggestion about concealment ought to provoke believers to ask hard questions about how and why they present themselves as Christians publicly.

Nevertheless, there remain significant difficulties with his argument that will probably keep his proposal as a whole from gaining widespread traction. One issue, his understanding of the contemporary American scene, is particularly important, because he sees his proposal specifically as a remedy for corrupted American Christianity. His perception that the Christian profession brings major social advantages in wide swaths of American political and economic life and that everybody in America knows what Christianity is will probably not resonate with large numbers of American Christians. Many of them feel that their traditional doctrinal and moral convictions are being increasingly marginalized in American society, especially in influential sectors such as the media and academia. While most Americans obviously have heard of Christianity, it seems highly questionable that most Americans really understand the content of Christian faith and life. Furthermore, Malesic himself acknowledges an important objection to his thesis: How can missionary work take place when Christian identity is concealed? In response, he points to the power of loving deeds to draw out people's inner capacities for love, to provoke them to inquire whether these deeds are done by Christians, and to entice them into the Christian community. The New Testament's emphasis on sin and the necessity of public proclamation of the gospel for turning people to Christ, however, makes Malesic's response less than satisfying.

Forster intends *The Contested Public Square* to be an introduction to Christian political thought. He admits up front that this is merely a window into a larger world, but he provides helpful discussion of many prominent thinkers and significant turning points in the history of Western Christianity. Although the book is primarily historical in its focus, the first chapter provides a number of constructive reflections on a proper Christian perspective on politics. Forster argues that the church, not the state, is central to Christianity, and he points out that the New Testament says very little about civil government beyond the Christian's general responsibility to be an obedient and peaceful subject. This means that attempts to find a political theory in the Bible are examples of eisegesis. He also notes the importance of general revelation for political life and claims that Scripture assumes that all people know the basic norms of justice.

The seven remaining chapters take readers on a selective tour through the history of Christian reflection on political thought. Chapter 2 discusses some aspects of political thought in ancient Greek philosophy and comments on how Christians came to utilize

important features of Greek philosophy while rejecting features that they deemed incompatible with the faith. In chapter 3, Forster focuses on Augustine, who lived in a day when Christian political thought became more urgent due to the rapid expansion and increasing prominence of Christianity in the Roman Empire. He introduces Augustine's concept of the two cities and his conviction that justice is the purpose of civil government. Forster moves to the Middle Ages in chapter 4 and focuses on the ripening of the idea of natural law, which he identifies as the most important political idea ever developed. He argues that Thomas Aquinas and William of Ockham were progenitors of two distinct schools of natural law and political thought, though both belonged to a broad, common tradition.

Chapters 5 and 6 consider the monumental shifts in Christian political thinking in the Reformation and post-Reformation eras. Forster explains that the magisterial Reformers were committed to the idea of natural law and many other standard features of earlier Christian political thought. Yet, the major theological divisions that arose in western Europe precipitated crucial new questions about religion and political authority. Forster outlines several significant responses to these questions (including those represented by Martin Luther and John Calvin) and explains how the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, more than anything else, catalyzed the emergence of the modern world and its solution to the crisis of a fragmented Christendom—religious liberty. Chapter 6 discusses John Locke at some length as a significant defender of religious liberty, and chapter 7 continues the consideration of Locke, especially in his influence on the American Revolution and on the subsequent development of the American constitutional order. Crucial for the American founding, according to Forster, was an understanding of natural rights rooted in earlier Christian natural law theory. Although he obviously looks favorably on the development of religious liberty, Forster notes the difficulties posed by the lack of common religious convictions in a society, particularly the question of how necessary public virtues are to be fostered apart from a shared worldview. Chapter 8 closes his study with a discussion of the political crisis of the past century, a crisis marked by the threat of totalitarianism and by internal tensions within liberal democracy. He discusses three particular Christian responses to this crisis—those of Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, and C. S. Lewis—only the last of whom promoted a positive view of natural law.

As an introduction to Christian political thought, this volume succeeds admirably. Chapter 1 is particularly helpful in giving readers an excellent broad perspective on the subject, pointing to the church and the heavenly kingdom as the object of the Christian's highest allegiance and encouraging appropriately modest expectations for life in civil society. Given the wide scope of his work, Forster has chosen judiciously where to focus his attention. He does a fine job identifying the origins and subsequent ramifications of key political ideas among Christian thinkers, such as the two cities, natural law, and religious liberty. His handling of natural law as a widespread Christian idea (rather than simply a Thomistic or Roman Catholic idea) is welcome, and his reflections on the benefits and lingering challenges of religious liberty are balanced and wise. Given Forster's appropriate warnings in chapter 1 about the relative silence of the New Testament on

political matters there is perhaps too ready an identification of liberal democracy with Christianity (and of Locke's thought as a "Christian" natural law theory) in the closing chapters. However, given the great alternatives of the last century—various forms of totalitarian government—this is an understandable move. It is to be hoped that Forster will develop this general material into more detailed studies in the future and unpack important nuances that *The Contested Public Square* could not explore.

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The End of Secularism

Hunter Baker

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There is much to admire in Hunter Baker's slender but ambitious book, *The End of Secularism*. Baker breezily covers a lot of ground, synthesizing a great deal of analysis and argumentation in a variety of fields, including the history of political philosophy, contemporary legal and political theory, constitutional law, American religious history, the sociology of religion, and the history and philosophy of science, all in service of his central claim that secularism—the assertion that public discourse is healthier when conducted without reference to religion—is “not neutral” (193).

Those familiar with the critique of secularism, as carried out by Nicholas Wolterstorff, Paul Weithman, Kenneth Craycraft, the late Richard John Neuhaus, Steven D. Smith, and Stephen L. Carter, among others, will find little that is altogether new in Baker's book. Like his predecessors, Baker contends that the attempt to depict religious claims as uniquely contentious and uniquely inaccessible to a wider democratic public fails on a variety of grounds. Like his predecessors, Baker convincingly shows the partisanship of a supposedly neutral “view from nowhere.” Rather than being able evenhandedly to accommodate the whole range of worldviews, secularism is itself a worldview with a nonneutral agenda, aiming to displace any and all previously authoritative religious positions.

What distinguishes Baker's treatment from those of the authors mentioned above is, above all, its scope. Rather than, say, focusing narrowly on the details of contemporary Anglo-American liberal theory, as do responses to John Rawls's concept of “public reason” (which demands of all participants in a liberal polity that they offer their colleagues reasons in principle accessible to everyone and hence independent of particular faith commitments), Baker ranges widely along the horizon, incisively characterizing and commenting on these arguments and many others. Thus, for example, we are treated to a discussion of the relationship between religion and science, where Baker persuasively gives the lie to a popular secularist claim that faith and reason (in particular, Christianity and modern natural science) are necessarily at odds with one another. Those who make such an argument, Baker suggests, are more interested in challenging and