

Is Some Form of Secularism the Best Foundation for Christian Engagement in Public Life?

*Jonathan Malesic**
Assistant Professor of Theology
King's College
Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

“I don’t see that Christ was a patsy. He was ambitious.” So said Don Soderquist, a Wal-Mart executive and evangelical Christian, in an interview for *Faith in the Halls of Power*, a book by the sociologist D. Michael Lindsay.¹ The remark is good news for a certain kind of American striver: not only *may* one be both a Christian and a powerful executive, but in taking the path to corporate success one follows in the footsteps of the Lord.

This and other versions of the success gospel prevalent in America today are but symptoms of a chronic sickness whereby Christianity is made to serve the ends of the individual’s public life. This sickness severely compromises the integrity of Christian language, worship, and community, at times attenuating their strength, at other times utterly perverting them. Because of the damage this sickness can do, American Christians need to impose a form of secularism on themselves as a therapeutic measure.

The damage is visible in Soderquist’s assertion. In it, one of the greatest virtues in American public life—encompassing politics, the workplace, the marketplace, and the media—has been imported into Christian thinking. Of course, ambition is not remotely a Christian virtue; those who tout it as one twist the

* Jonathan Malesic is assistant professor of theology at King’s College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, and author of *Secret Faith in the Public Square: An Argument for the Concealment of Christian Identity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), which won the 2009 gold medal for the religion category in *ForeWord* magazine’s Book of the Year Awards.

New Testament into conformity with the gospel of entrepreneurial capitalism. Jesus may have been a carpenter, but he was not a builder. Even the kingdom of God, a lofty thing to be sure, was not Jesus' ambition, because for him the kingdom was not a goal that might, with a sound plan and the right effort, be attained. It was a reality that he had already made possible and that his disciples would partake in: "A time is coming and has now come" (John 4:23 NIV). Then there is the Sermon on the Mount, which praises the exact opposite of ambition. Soderquist's dichotomy between the ambitious person and the patsy invites the response Jesus gave when Simon Peter glossed over the suffering the Son of Man must undergo: "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Mark 8:33 NIV).

The all-too-human ambition and competitiveness that animate American public life lead American Christians to sell off their religious identity for worldly success. This is a second major symptom of the sickness. We do not practice identity politics in this country quite so much as we do identity economics—manufacturing, selling, and consuming identities—and Christians are no less eager participants in this economy than anyone else. Lindsay's book describes the networks that have supported the advancement of evangelical elites in many sectors of public life. Christian identity gets one through the doors to these networks, just as identity as an Elk or a Pi Phi grants access to other networks.² In addition, much of the logic governing the selection of a fraternal organization to join—evaluating the network's strength, perks, reach, its members' prominence—operates as well in evangelical elites' decisions to join churches or bible study groups. Indeed, many of the networks' ties form while their members are in college, training to be elites, the same as their peers on fraternity row.³

The existence of these networks, the insistence on a highly visible Christian identity, and an "elastic orthodoxy" ready to accommodate the bloated excess of American public life together yield a class of cosmopolitan evangelicals driven by typical careerism and floating free from the constraints of doctrine or, sometimes, a local church community.⁴ Lindsay himself has a fairly benign view of the evangelical elites he interviewed. He probably meant for the *in* of the book's title to designate locations newly opened to the visibly Christian. Instead, it indicates this kind of faith's object: In the forms and forums of American power—places where God can be brought in if he might help your career. This is a perverse form of Christianity, detached from church tradition and running counter to Paul's admonishment "not [to] be conformed to this world, but [to] be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2 NRSV).

One cause of this sickness is confusion about the priority of Christianity's sociological and theological dimensions. As a social reality in the world, the Christian church confers an identity on its members and provides them with peers who might form a network. However, Christians have traditionally seen the church in theological terms as well, understanding themselves as, for example, the body of Christ—a reality not reducible to sociological terms. While the sociological nature of the church is undeniable, it should not be placed ahead of the church's theological nature if Christians want to remain true to their traditional ideals. In this respect, critics of Christianity such as Marx and Nietzsche, who accused Christians of using theology as a mask for agendas to gain worldly power, do the church a great service by helping recall it to its proper priorities.

Once they have subordinated the theological to the sociological, Christians begin to see the church as *only* a network—another advantage exploitable in our competitive public life. The theological truth is that Christian identity is not meant to be *for* any worldly good at all. It is merely an epiphenomenon of the faith that incorporates someone into the body of Christ. Being seen as a Christian in public adds nothing to being a Christian, and the latter is of infinitely greater theological importance. When job seekers rely on Christian fellowship networks to aid their careers, then Christian identity has been jumbled with professional identity. Ironically, then, by assuming that Christian identity should be displayed even at work or in politics, so that they can witness to the gospel and sanctify the secular, Christians blunt that witness and sully the sacred. When Christians treat their religious identity as a stand-in for other criteria for gaining worldly rewards, they make Christian witness no different from a brand name or an alumni association membership.

A second cause of the sickness is sin. From a theological perspective, humans appear prone to inordinate desires and to abusing goods for base purposes. Selling off a higher, abstract good (like fidelity to the church's theological nature) for a lower, more palpable good is a common human maneuver, though one that Christianity teaches Christ died and rose so that humans could overcome. Christians are fortunate—indeed, graced by God—to recognize their sinfulness and to be able to do something about it.

In light of this, self-imposed secularism can help preserve Christianity against Christians' own corrupt tendency to exploit their being Christian for anything other than the highest theological purposes. This secularism should take the form of concealing Christian identity when acting in the public spheres of politics, the economy, and culture.⁵

In all of this, what do I mean by *secularism*? The term is used in varying ways, such that countries with religious publics as divergent as France's, Turkey's,

and the United States' can all be considered secular. In his book *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor outlines three distinct, though related, senses of secularism: the public sphere's independence from explicit divine or ecclesial sanction, the decline in belief in God, and the emergence of a condition in which belief and unbelief are seen as equally legitimate options for the modern individual.⁶ It is the first of these that I maintain American Christians should support in order to save the distinctiveness of Christian identity from themselves.

Just as sound waves cannot propagate in a vacuum, the various aspects of modern public life operate only within a medium. The economy is one such medium, in which public activities like producing and selling occur. This essay occurs within the medium of public academic debate. It is helpful to think of a continuum of secularism, such that aspects of public life are secular to the degree that the media in which they operate are independent of religious sanction.

The networks of cosmopolitan evangelicals are antiseccular efforts in that they try to make Christianity a thicker medium for public life. A business owner who includes the outline of a fish on his or her advertisements in the hope of drawing in Christian patrons likewise pushes public life in a less secular direction, as he depends partly on religious symbolism and commitment to conduct business.

Virtually all actions in our economic sphere are intelligible without including Christian identity as a medium for carrying them out. Employees can be hired based on their perceived ability to do a job, or, for that matter, on their being an Elk or a Pi Phi. Adding Christianity as a medium for these public activities does not increase the intelligibility of them, but it can corrupt significant aspects of Christianity. By concealing Christian identity in public life, Christians would help disable the circulation of their religious identity in arenas where it does not help, thus removing the temptation to sin by subordinating a theological reality to a sociological one.

This does not mean that Christians should ignore their religious commitments when engaging in public life. These commitments are meaningless if they do not inform how a Christian votes, conducts business, or consumes. However, it is not necessary to openly declare that one thinks theologically before making economic decisions. One can simply do it and leave the reasoning behind it unsaid—or give a reason in nontheological terms. In this way, Christians do not succumb to all logics governing the arenas of public life, but they do respect their secularity.

Likewise, one can evaluate the extent to which the actions of others conform to Christian norms, rather than evaluating their (often empty) words. The atheist who does business in accordance with Christian principles of justice more properly deserves Christians' support than does the nominal Christian who exploits the poor. Saying otherwise turns Christian identity into a team identity:

We will cheer for the players wearing the Christian jersey, no matter what they actually do on the field. Thus, secrecy—as a means of allowing the world its secularity—becomes a way to take religious commitment more seriously than the rampant superficial publication of faith does.

This argument in favor of a self-imposed secularism via concealing Christian identity in American public life is uncommon among academic theologians.⁷ American theologians virtually take it for granted that public figures should speak with distinctively religious voices, and not only because theologians' livelihoods depend in part on Christianity's continuing to seem relevant to culture. They are guided both by the evangelistic spirit of the New Testament and the principle that simple honesty demands that a Christian holding a viewpoint for theological reasons should voice those reasons. This latter principle has led even prominent non-Christian scholars to view engagement with politics and culture in specifically religious terms as healthy for both Christianity and American democracy.⁸

Above all, American Christian thinkers' positions on this issue are shaped by the conviction that Christians have a special mission to demonstrate visibly the kingdom of God. They are the light of the world and the salt of the earth, or as the second-century Christian document known as the *Letter to Diognetus* says, "the Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body."⁹ The body is dead without the soul as its source of life, unity, and activity. Applying the letter's words to our time, Christian authors (such as Richard John Neuhaus) have argued that if the world is to become better or more just, it will become so through the work, prayer, and moral example of Christians.¹⁰ Thus, Christians should actually be visible as Christians in their public lives—the more prominently, the better—so as to sanctify the secular. On this point, seemingly all types of Christians—liberal, conservative, Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox—agree.

However, the *Letter to Diognetus* takes the analogy a step further than American Christian thinkers are usually willing to go: "As the visible body contains the invisible soul, so Christians are seen living in the world, but their religious life remains unseen."¹¹ This line, unacknowledged by Neuhaus, places a severe qualification on the ways in which Christians can engage the world. Yes, Christians are special, but what makes them special does not need to be seen for them to accomplish their mission.

Christians thus have justification in one of their most ancient reflections on the relationship between Christian identity and public life for them to engage the world on secular terms, appearing outwardly no different from the rest of world's denizens, using the vocabulary and grammar of the secular contexts in which they live.

Inwardly, however, things are quite different. This is true not only in the modern individualistic sense that Christians have an inward faith in God, but in the communal sense that they are a body with an internal life characterized by a range of liturgical, spiritual, intellectual, and moral activities. This inward life bears on how Christians conduct themselves in public, but it is not itself public in the same way as working, debating politics, or shopping are.

Because Christianity is defined by something internal to the person and the community, Christianity is highly portable from culture to culture. It need not have a particular economy or politics around it in order to thrive. Thus secularism, at least the form of it I have described here, is no less Christianity's natural home than was medieval Christendom. Indeed, Christianity may be more at home in contexts where it need not bear the burdens of mediating public life.

I conclude by considering a final objection. Someone could argue that forms of secularism are not the best way for Christians to interact in American public life because the secular is a heavily tilted field of interaction, with its own norms, some of which are utterly opposed to Christian norms. A Christian might take the bias of the secular as good reason to voice opposition to the secular by using their religious tradition's vocabulary against secularity.

Such a one is right to see the secular as not always neutral but wrong to think that the danger of secularism is that it is opposed to religious voices. American secular public life is not opposed to *any* voices, precisely because it allows anything to be sold and any speech to become a form of advertising. By vocally opposing the secular, Christians end up reaffirming the competitiveness of the American secular sphere. Once again, the irony is that the attempt to distinguish Christianity from the broader culture results in Christianity's capitulation to that culture. Only public silence about one's Christianity will break this logic.

What happens when Christians in a secular world are faced with a political situation they simply cannot countenance as a matter of principle? Should they not speak in explicitly Christian terms then? Imagine the most extreme case: The secular state uses the threat of violence to coerce Christians into going along with political projects Christians strongly object to. What then?

Faced with a violently hostile secular sphere, Christians actually have a moral resource that others lack: the tradition of martyrdom. In Diognetus' time, and again during post-Reformation conflicts, the Nazi era, and other times, Christians have stood against public spheres they could not sanction. They rightly made public confessions of faith, resulting in their deaths. Such a fate, the ultimate refusal to compromise the church's theological character, is surely hard to reckon with, but Christians should not forget that following Christ means following him to Calvary.

Despite the apocalyptic rhetoric some American Christians use to denounce the present state of affairs, however, we are not remotely in such circumstances in America today. The secular is not nearly as hostile as some imagine. Indeed, in present circumstances, Christians themselves pose a greater threat to Christianity's integrity than does the secular.

Notes

1. D. Michael Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite* (New York: Oxford, 2007), 170.
2. The journalist Jeff Sharlet has done an exhaustive study of evangelical networks within the federal government in his book, *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008). More recently, he has illustrated attempts to desecularize the armed forces in his article, "Jesus Killed Mohammad: The Crusade for a Christian Military," *Harper's*, May 2009, 31–43.
3. Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power*, 89–93.
4. Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power*, 216–18.
5. I make the full case for this in my book, *Secret Faith in the Public Square: An Argument for the Concealment of Christian Identity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009).
6. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2007), 2–3.
7. The nearest argument that I am aware of is found in Charles Marsh, *Wayward Christian Soldiers: Freeing the Gospel from Political Activity* (New York: Oxford, 2007).
8. See, for example, Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).
9. *Letter to Diognetus*, 6, in "From a Letter to Diognetus: The Christian in the World," ed. Spiritual Theology Department of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross. http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20010522_diogneto_en.html (accessed October 28, 2010).
10. Richard John Neuhaus, *American Babylon: Notes of a Christian Exile* (New York: Basic, 2009), 23–24.
11. *Letter to Diognetus*, 6.