

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

A Response to
Jonathan Malesic

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At the beginning of his interesting and thought-provoking argument, Jonathan Malesic relates material from Michael Lindsay's outstanding book *Faith in the Halls of Power*. I worked in Houston when the book came out and had the opportunity to speak with Dr. Lindsay, who is at Rice University, about his work on a couple of occasions.

Dr. Malesic correctly sums up part of the basic critique Lindsay offers of evangelical elites. In short, they gravitate toward para-church efforts where they can call the shots, have tenuous ties to real church congregations where they would mix with many kinds of people, have trouble finding a pastor they can identify with because of their own successes, and have not thought carefully enough about the materialism exhibited by their lifestyles.

Malesic looks at the critique provided above and adds that he sees evangelical elites wrongly using their faith as a networking and marketing tool. The prescription, in his view, is that we should embrace a form of secularism and begin a new life as secret Christians.

The first response I would offer to this, in my mind, startling conclusion is: "Why jump to *that* answer?" Secularism as a form of therapy to chasten wrong-headed Christians is an intriguing and provocative idea, but I have a hard time understanding how that would be the logical next step in addressing the issue. Would it not flow just as well or perhaps better if we were to look at the

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problems Michael Lindsay outlined and say that we need better discipleship, better understanding of the Scriptures, a higher view of the status of the church in the believer's life, and a stronger critique of materialism? We could work on all of these points without purposefully taking our Christianity private.

Along these lines, one could also answer Malesic by adducing examples of public Christians who successfully witness to others by going public and by integrating their faith with their professional lives. One of the great catalysts in my own conversion was the example of Jerry Lundquist, a Wheaton graduate and highly successful businessman in Florida. As a college-aged non-Christian, I thought only pastors and missionaries talked about Jesus in their everyday lives. When I first heard him speak, I was stunned to know that a businessman could take Christ so seriously. The existence of a man such as Jerry Lundquist caused me to reevaluate Christianity as an option for life in the world. Thus, even if we take for granted that Jonathan Malesic's entire characterization of some Christian businessmen is true, I am not sure why that would indicate we should take other men like Jerry Lundquist out of the game in public life. By claiming that Jesus is Lord not only of his home, family, and private life, but also of his business, he caused others, like me, to take notice and to investigate further.

In addition, I suspect Dr. Malesic underestimates the degree to which great heaping numbers of Christians would love to be thrown in the briar patch of secret Christianity he suggests as a therapeutic measure. I suspect that many Christians feel obliged to be public about their faith and would be pleased to view secrecy as a virtue. It would be like being appointed to give a speech at a public event and then finding out with a little thrill that a storm had canceled the date. Masses of believers would breathe a sigh of relief to think that their faith could be merely a private matter. The result might well prove less therapeutic and faith-strengthening and instead an invitation to spiritual sloth. A significant part of Christian maturity and spiritual development is being willing to be known and held accountable as a follower of Christ by believers and unbelievers alike.

My debate partner looks at Don Soderquist's saying that Christ was not a patsy and that he was ambitious and instead sees a kind of warped Christian triumphalism at work. I believe that is a misreading of the situation. Soderquist, like many successful men and women who are Christians, probably knows that in the worlds of Wall Street and the Fortune 500 his status as a believer in the supernatural truths of Christianity does not enhance his esteem among his peers. The truth is the opposite. Many of his fellow executives probably see his faith as a psychological crutch or some leftover from his childhood. Surely, it is at least as likely that he offers his statement about Christ's ambition in a somewhat self-defensive mode as it is that he is purposefully setting forth some prosperity

idol. I read his statement as something like, “Christ is not a patsy and neither am I for following him.” Soderquist lives in an era when Christians are expected to raise hands and be identified publicly. He does so more likely at some social cost as opposed to some great benefit.

Soderquist feels the pressure to be known as a Christian in part because one of the great priorities of the last thirty years of Christian ministry, activism, and advocacy has been centered on the theme of resisting the privatization of the faith. Rather than accepting the old nostrum that religion and politics do not make for good dinner conversation and are not topics for cocktail parties, a variety of Christian voices have prevailed to some degree in their effort to call on their fellow religionists to stand up and be counted. This movement toward public Christianity has been a conscious response to sociologists proclaiming the progressive extinction of religion in our lives and to cultural elites isolating faith as some kind of vestigial force in public life. Religion, in their view, is like the appendix. They cannot discern a useful purpose, but they hope evolution will eventually cancel it out so they will not have to countenance its disconcerting presence any longer.

Another driver of the counterrevolution by Christians and churches determined to push their flocks out into the offices, streets, factories, stores, and the like as identifiable Christians has been massive social change. *Roe v. Wade* is a prime example. Although evangelicals slept in the early 1970s, Francis Schaeffer eventually succeeded in pricking the dormant evangelical social and political conscience. Deprivatization was part of the response. Many probably wondered if they had been more alive to the relationship between faith and public life whether certain disastrous sexual and reproductive seeds would have bloomed as they did at such great cost. In any case, the mainstream press was shocked to see the sudden emergence of so many public Christians. The self-identification of elite men such as the disgraced Nixon aide Chuck Colson and President Jimmy Carter as “born-again Christians” combined with a surge in Christian political activity served stunning notice that deprivatization was afoot. Where had these people come from?

It has now become part of the expectation of serious Christians that they are willing to be known as such. Their public self-identification often functions less as a triumphalistic or egotistic expression as it does to draw unwelcome attention to the self-identifier. I recall my own time as a law student at the University of Houston. Although my occasional advocacy and/or defense of the faith in the classrooms of seventy to eighty students was sometimes uncomfortable, I discovered that in moments when I could be found alone such as in a corner of the library or walking to my car in the parking lot fellow Christians would seek me

out to thank me for representing their point of view. They felt the same burden to speak out that I did, but were often cowed by the psychological resistance to doing so. One risks becoming a figure of fun. In many worldly contexts, making one's Christian identity known can be like wearing the tonsure haircut of monks. Many Christians have learned hard lessons while bearing this responsibility. When we speak, we should do so standing on firm ground, closely guided by relevance, and taking care to speak with information and sophistication to the degree we are able to achieve it. Perhaps it would have been better for Mr. Soderquist, then, to have spoken differently rather than not at all about the character of Christ.

Now, having made a strong endorsement of public Christianity over the notion of secret Christianity, I must concede that I think Dr. Malesic is correct in his charge that the faith identity of Christians has morphed into a consuming identity. It seems as though every Christian speaker has a book to sell. If the book does well enough, then we can count on a bevy of derivative products such as a devotional, a journal notebook, a calendar, T-shirts, a compilation CD inspired by the book, and so forth. Christian products are now everywhere. They inhabit space at the most mainstream of retail outlets.

Christian marketing was not nearly so accomplished when I visited an independent Christian store in the early 1980s. Having not grown up in that subculture, I had never seen the kind of books, art, and other items that were there. Who were these people who bought this stuff, I wondered. I picked up a comic book about a police officer Christian who took in troubled teens and eventually got shot trying to save a drug addict. As a non-Christian, I found it interesting and unusual, and I had never seen anything like it in the kinds of stores I usually frequented.

Today, the non-Christian consumer, unlike my old secular self, is well aware that books by Zondervan, Thomas Nelson, Baker, InterVarsity, Crossway, and other companies exist. On balance, I cannot help but believe it is better that the large output of these companies and others is broadly available. To the degree that I find any of the products schlocky, shallow, excessively slick, or market-driven to a grasping degree, my response is again that I would push for better and more thoughtful products before I would advocate sweeping them away into a secret world of the Christian church. Malesic's therapy would lead to ghetto-ization of the faith and, at the same time, lets Christians and their church off the hook for the tough job of engaging the culture publicly. His intent is obviously benign, pure, and concerned with holiness, but in this case the remedy might be more damaging than the illness.

The second part of his case, and in my mind the more problematic one, has to do with functional differentiation. Malesic argues that, "Virtually all actions in our economic sphere are intelligible without including Christian identity as a medium

for carrying them out.” Thus, the Christian need not “declare openly” that he is thinking theologically and can leave any theological reasoning unstated. Malesic does maintain that the Christian should bend the knee of lordship to Christ in his own economic actions. The believer should simply keep his motivation to himself.

The trouble with this way of thinking about economics is that it accepts the Weberian logic that the various fields of human endeavor can function perfectly well without any overarching framework of values acting as a guide. Consider the name of the regional conferences the Acton Institute carries out from time to time: *Toward a Free and Virtuous Society*. Why does Acton choose that name for gatherings that focus to a large degree on the need for freedom in the sphere of economics? Their answer would likely be the same as it was for many in the American founding generation who understood the existence of a vital connection between freedom and virtue. *In order to have freedom, we must govern ourselves. We must have virtue. And virtue has a source.*

To the extent that we are virtuous we can be free in economics and other spheres of life. There must indeed be some overarching framework hovering above setting parameters and pointing to the good. Part of the reason why many American founders, including those without any special attachment to the Christian faith, looked favorably on religious establishments is because they saw the churches as inculcators of virtue and thus as underwriters of ordered liberty—a seminal concept in the development of civilization.

Having mentioned religious establishments, I do not mean to endorse them so much as to acknowledge that values must come from somewhere. Economics does not operate well independent of external virtues and values. Daniel Bell recognized that when he wrote about the cultural contradictions of capitalism. Pure economics, not tethered to some overarching ethos, gives us markets for everything, including those goods and services that are extraordinarily deleterious such as addictive substances, pornography, prostitution, slaves, snuff films, assassinations, and so forth. Markets, alone, give us many of the things that will severely undermine our ability to have free markets and a free society. Capitalism, without virtue, can sow the seeds of its own destruction.

Even if we only consider ordinary economic transactions, it is still the case that markets work best when tied to virtues and values that generate trust between economic actors. With trust, there is less need for the ever-increasing profusion of lawyers, litigation, regulation, and complex contracts that arises in the absence of simple good faith. Legal coercion and forced order is the price of a lack of cultural capital in the form of virtue.

Taking yet another angle on the notion of economics’ being independent from overarching considerations like theology, consider the sort of doctrine that comes

from elevating economic efficiency beyond values some might call extraneous. The one I have in mind comes from the law and economics movement and is referred to as efficient breach. Efficient breach deals with the situation in which two parties have a contract, but one party realizes it could obtain a greater advantage by contracting with a third party. Under efficient breach rules, the party wanting to break the contract would be justified in doing so as long as it could potentially compensate the party now left in the lurch. Note that the idea in efficient breach is *not* that the contract breaker would *actually* compensate the contract partner who has been hurt, but rather that the gains would be sufficient that the loser *could* be compensated. The reason an action of this type can be defended is on the basis of economic efficiency. If the net economic efficiency is greater with one party breaking its promise, then the independent logic of economics (according to this notion) justifies the act. Thus, economic efficiency justifies a lie and the abandonment of a commitment.

Virtue is demonstrably relevant to even a very worldly field of endeavor such as economics. Where does this virtue come from? Unless we believe it to be a mere assertion, virtue must have some foundation. Our faith offers such a foundation and one we believe to be true and accessible to others. The reason we, as Christians, insist on Christ's lordship—not only for us, but for everyone—in areas of life such as economics is because our faith is founded on a real event in time and space (the Resurrection) that has implications for the whole of the creation. Sin is a reality and so is the answer to sin. These realities need not dwell only in private communities and individual lives. We apply them broadly just as did Martin Luther King, Jr., in his magisterial *Letter from Birmingham Jail* and the Confessing Church did with its Barmen Declaration. Keeping strictly to our business here, I suggest it is not difficult to see how the Christian concept of sin and the pursuit of righteousness place valuable limits on economic activity that actually helps to maintain the freedom of the marketplace by preventing it from destroying itself.

To close this round, I do not doubt the wholesomeness of Dr. Malesic's suggestions regarding secret Christianity. Too often, the assays into public life by Christians evoke images of a "man-made" or "counterfeit" Christ, as Eric Metaxas has written of Bonhoeffer's feelings on the matter. However, these poor efforts, rather than leading us to abandon the field in a therapeutic exercise, must be overshadowed by a faith, as Kuyper insisted, which asserts the lordship of Christ over every square inch of creation and is, as Metaxas wrote of Bonhoeffer's faith, "shining and bright and pure and robust."