

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

A Surrresponse to  
Jonathan Malesic

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I would like to conclude this exchange by offering my thanks to the *Journal of Markets & Morality* and the Acton Institute for providing the idea and the forum. Thanks also to Jonathan Malesic for his challenging and interesting arguments regarding the public role of the Christian faith. Although we have not achieved a meeting of the minds, I think we have generated a number of points, which help clarify our respective positions.

Dr. Malesic and I disagree about whether being known as a Christian is a boon or a liability to the person willing to be identified as such. The reality is that it depends on the situation. Don Soderquist, a Wal-Mart executive, is unlikely to gain greater esteem on Wall Street because of his faith. The same is true of other cultural elites. Hollywood stars are unlikely to advance their careers by declaring their faith, and neither do sports stars. Not really. Malesic mentions Tim Tebow as an example of a Christian sports advertising juggernaut, but is the juggernaut status because he is openly Christian? No. Tebow is one of the few players who has detractors simply because of his faith. He gained tremendous acclaim because of his work ethic and what he can do on the field. He would likely be more marketable if he were to tone down his faith identity. I imagine he has already heard that from his agent. I contend that Americans generally are fine with Christians as long as they are not too Christian. Tim Tebow shows his disdain for going along to get along when, for example, he appears in a prolific Super Bowl ad. Readers are free to decide which assertions in this regard ring more true in their own experience. Certainly, it is the case that Tebow, by going public with his faith, has ensured that he will be held to a higher degree of public

accountability and will endure more scrutiny for having done so. The white-hot charge of hypocrisy can only be leveled at those who purport to stand for something. I must also address the political event at Rick Warren's church, which is offered as evidence of the great advantage of being a Christian in America. The candidates appear before the NAACP with regularity. Does this fact suggest the ascendancy of African-Americans in our culture or are we simply observing the timeless operation of politics in our democratic republic? Politicians seek out various demographic groups and ask for their support. That is how it works.

I feel I must take issue with Malesic's portrayal of Michael Lindsay's book *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite*. Malesic contends that "the entire point of Michael Lindsay's study was to demonstrate how the social cost of publicly identifying oneself as a Christian has dramatically *diminished* in recent decades because so many corporate cultures became entwined with evangelical Christian cultures." Lindsay's book is an in-depth study of evangelical elites, not an indictment, a complaint, or an allegation of evangelical social feather-bedding. He describes their behavior, what they have achieved, and where they could be challenged.

The accomplishments include strategic philanthropy, expansion of evangelical intellectual and cultural influence through the development of networks, significant social movements in areas such as bioethics and the environment, and a diminution of barriers making religious expression in the business world taboo. The networking Malesic mentions is not something evangelicals have used only (or predominantly) as a way of getting ahead. Lindsay tells the story of a meeting of Washington evangelicals (the Faith and Law group) with Steve Case (then of AOL) and Hollywood magnate Philip Anschutz that resulted in commissioning a Harvard study "to monitor the media's effect on children." To quote Lindsay: "This is how evangelical networks get things done."<sup>1</sup> I am unable to see what it is in this portrayal that would cause Malesic to see Lindsay's book as a major support for his own conclusions about secret Christianity. The book jacket extols the evangelicals Lindsay describes as "cosmopolitan" and "well-educated" men and women "who read both the *New York Times* and *Christianity Today*." If I recall, the big knock on evangelicals was once that they were provincial and undereducated. It looks to me as if—according to Lindsay—evangelicals are doing something right.

To the extent that Lindsay poses a challenge to evangelical elites, as I read it, his goal appears to be to highlight weaknesses that should be addressed in order to make their public witness more fully orbbed. For example, many Christian executives have lavish lifestyles that would seem vulnerable to challenge by a world wondering why being faithful does not include better stewardship of

resources. In addition, he was lightly critical of evangelical elites for inadequate connection to local churches. Again, I do not see the evidence that would lead us to take the faith underground. Having read the book carefully, I think the following brief excerpt sums up Lindsay's findings extremely well:

The word "religion" can be traced to a Latin phrase that means "to bind together." In recent decades, evangelical religious identity has facilitated strong ties among *public* leaders. Because religious identities are connected to moral frameworks, a sense of how things ought to be, this shared evangelical identity has endowed the movement with *a seriousness of purpose, an overarching meaning system, and a repertoire of practices—like prayer and fellowship groups—that sustain leaders* (italics mine).<sup>2</sup>

Although Lindsay offers some critique, it is fair to suggest that on balance his extensive study of evangelical elites leads him to see their public presence as a positive social development.

With regard to the example of the Oklahoma home siding contractor and his relatively tactless use of Christian identity to sell his product, I think this is where Malesic's argument fails. Of course, we can always find individuals employing their faith identity in a way we would identify as subpar. An old idea from law school seems to me to apply quite well here. My professors used to say, "Hard cases make bad law." The meaning is that you do not draw your governing principle from unusual cases. Certainly, it is not the norm for Christians who own businesses to make some kind of blatant, tribalistic appeal for the business of others. Just as in the last round, I have to say that we can produce positive examples to counteract these negative ones. So, why let the bad ones rule our choices? I am thinking in particular about an auto repair shop in Houston, Texas, which was known as a Christian business operating on Christian principles. The fact was not cynically broadcast, but people found out and newspapers even covered it. The shop had more business than they could handle because of their Christian commitment to be honest and their fulfillment of the promise that commitment held. I see no reason why that owner should be discouraged from openly telling people that his business belongs to the Lord and that his relationship with God leads him to value true service over pure profit and loss. That business is an effective witness. Indeed, it is a ministry to people in the area. Chick-fil-A and the Cathy family offers another and higher profile example of a Christian business that blesses its community through service and lightly pricks the conscience of the larger society with its Sunday closing standard that surely results in the loss of millions of dollars worth of profit each year.

Malesic objects to some degree to my claim that public Christianity is important because it helps to impart virtue to a given society. He states that if one builds a case for Christianity in terms of its sociological value, then one sets the faith up for a fall when sociologists are able to compile a study demonstrating no positive impact on the society. While I would not want to premise the value of Christianity on some sociological effectiveness index, I think almost any Christian would be greatly disappointed if such a null impact could be demonstrated. If Christ is Lord of our lives, then our lives should look substantially different. In reality, I think it is not difficult to demonstrate sociologically, historically, anthropologically, economically, and so forth, that the long life of Western civilization has been influenced much to the good by the public and vital presence of Christianity, both *de jure* and then *de facto* as part of the culture. If we were to go more strongly in the direction of a secular society, government elites would be stunned at the giant gaps in the areas of health care, higher education, primary education, and various charitable services that would have to be made up by new state institutions.

Christianity is, to some degree, the soul of the system in which we live. Many believe that American society runs quite well on its own independent logic, but the system is not an achievement of its own making. It did not self-generate. Many of the values and understandings on which we rely come from the deep, deep connection of Christianity with our ideas and institutions. There is a desire to be free, to kill the soul of the system or to deny that it exists. I do not attribute that desire to Dr. Malesic but to various actors within the system who see the “soul” as a limitation preventing “progress.” Should that ever happen, we will discover that C. S. Lewis was right about his “men without chests” who are ruled by whatever logic the conditioners decide to apply. It is important for Christians to stand as an obvious reminder to their peers of where we have been and who it is that they claim is Lord, not only of the Sabbath, but also of the other six days and everything that happens on those days, too, not only for Christians but for all the world.

## Notes

1. D. Michael Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 213.
2. Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power*, 214.