

# Is There a Place for “Christian Politics” in America?\*

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Lesslie Newbigin, perhaps more clearly than other Christians writing today, has exposed the myth of a secular society. Deep faith commitments govern every form of society, so the idea of a secular society itself arises from faith - faith in human autonomy and a closed universe.<sup>1</sup> The strongest worldwide reaction against this myth is now being mounted by Muslims, not by Christians, as Newbigin points out. Christians have been far more accommodating.

But if a so-called secular society is invalid, and if the Muslim vision of society is the wrong answer, then, as Bishop Newbigin asks, “can we think about the possibility of a Christian society and what would that imply?”<sup>2</sup>

This is a huge question, as Newbigin recognizes. Any satisfactory answer to it must deal not only with the untapped and often unrecognized resources of God’s blessings to the world in Christ but also with the offences Christians have committed against their neighbors down through history. Somehow the normative standard of God’s goodness and truth in Christ must be distinguished from - elevated above - the reality of Christians’ performances in history. One of the contemporary differences between Christianity and Islam in this respect, according to Newbigin, is that “Islam has none of the embarrassment about itself that contemporary Christianity has. It is confident

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\* This paper was made available in 2011 by Professor Danie Strauss of the University of Bloemfontein, Republic of South Africa. It was the basis of a presentation to a graduate class at that university which the author gave May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1997. It formulated the author's views after reading Newbigin's works which he had been doing since the 1970s. See "Love's Labours Lost... or Found?" speech to CLAC's 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Convention, Saturday April 6, 1974. Around that time, seminars were held Newbigin in Leeds under the auspices of WYSOCS, at the initiative of Al Wolters and Mike Goheen.

1. See, for example, Newbigin’s *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 21-38, 211-21. A powerful excerpt from Peter Marin’s book *Freedom and Its Discontents: Reflections on Four Decades of American Moral Experience* (South Royalton, Vermont: Steerforth Press, 1995), published in *Harper’s Magazine* (September, 1995), confirms Newbigin’s assessment of the secularist myth. Marin considers himself a secularist but decries the arrogant, uncritical, dogmatic character of American secularism today: “Something has gone radically wrong with secularism,” Harin writes. The problem has more than its share of irony, for secularism, in the end, has converted itself into a kind of religion. Our hallowed tradition of skepticism and tolerance has grown into its near opposite, and it now partakes of precisely the same arrogance, the same irrationality and passion for certainty, the same pretense to unquestioned virtue against which its powers were once arrayed. In a desperate way we cling to belief, in our contempt for those who do not believe what we believe, secularism has, indeed, taken on the trappings of a faith - and a narrow one at that” (p.20). Marin does not seem to see that the faith had to be there from the beginning and that the religious character of secularism is not a late flower. But his description of what he considers to be deformed secularism is sharp, and his longing for a more humble secularism shows some of the marks that should characterize a humble Christianity. “What we [secularists during the last 100 years] should have learned has something to do with fallibility, with humility, with the endless human capacity for error. It ought to have sent us rushing back to examine the fundamental assumptions we’ve made about the world, the pretty castles and palaces we’ve etched in the air. We know now, or ought to know, that men are as ready to kill in God’s absence as they are in his name: that reason, like faith, can lead to murder, that the fanaticism long associated with religion was not born there, but has its roots deeper down in human nature.” *Ibid.*, p.22.
2. From paragraph #14 of Newbigin’s “What Kind of Society?” (October, 1995).

that it has the truth and it has set out an agenda.”<sup>3</sup> Part of the question of a “Christian society,” therefore, is whether a self critical, humble, yet confident posture can be re-established among Christians who, with complete trust in their Lord and clear habits of repentance in the lives, are able to overcome embarrassment about being public Christians.

Certainly part of what would constitute a “Christian society” would be a just political order. Questions about the character of such an order will occupy my attention here, and in that regard I want, first of all, to expand Newbigin’s question somewhat. Newbigin’s primary criticism of the concept “secular society” is levelled against the secularist faith, myth or ideology, deriving chiefly from the Enlightenment - that would push Christian expression into a private corner in order to keep public life neutral and secular. His criticism is entirely on target, in my view. But this focus on the secularist myth or faith does not, by itself, help us sort out the healthy from the unhealthy features of the legal and political structures that now exist in countries such as Great Britain and the United States where the struggle with secularism’s failures is taking place. In some respects we already have in place some important legal and political elements of a “Christian society” and those must not be slighted in the process of criticizing ideological secularism. In other words, the phrase “secular society” should be used to identify both secularism’s ideological faith and the laws and policies that flow from it, but it should not be used to refer to the social and political order as a whole, without qualification. Likewise, if we are going to use the phrase “Christian society,” we should do so in a way that emphasizes the normative, guiding principles (the way Psalm 119 does) rather than as a referent to a concrete social order such as the late medieval or the early American one in its entirety, as if a particular, historical social/political order was without sin and could serve as the normative standard for all times.

Let me try to explain this point very briefly and thereby set the stage for the remainder of the paper. One of the failures of Constantinian Christianity, as Newbigin explains, was its failure to build the political order on the basis of true humility - the humility of the cross of Christ.<sup>4</sup> In the name of Christ, western Christendom was imperialistic and impositional with its armies and its laws. The crusades and the European religious wars now symbolize the tragedy of the identification of Christianity with political dominance in the Middle Ages and the early modern era.

Many Christians today, however, would agree with Abraham Kuyper that political imperialism and public discrimination against non-Christians is not legitimate, did not originate with Christianity, and does not properly belong to Christianity.<sup>5</sup> This is a case in point where the phrase “Christian society” must distance itself from, and actually stand in normative judgment over, a particular, historical political legal system that

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3. Ibid., par. #17.

4. *ibid.*, par. #19. See also Newbigin’s *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 137ff. and *The Other Side of 1984* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), pp. 32-7.

5. In his Princeton Stone Lectures of 1898, Kuyper said, “The duty of the government to extirpate every form of false religion and idolatry was not a find of Calvinism, but dates from Constantine the Great, and was the reaction against the horrible persecutions which his pagan predecessors on the imperial throne had inflicted upon the sect of the Nazarene.” . . . “Notwithstanding all this, I not only deplore that one stake [the burning of Servetus], but I unconditionally disapprove of it; yet not as if it were the expression of a special characteristic of Calvinism, but on the contrary as the fatal after effect of a system, grey with age, which Calvinism found in existence, under which it had grown up, and from which it had not yet been able entirely to liberate itself.” *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1931), p.100.

was called “Christian” and had many Christian elements in it.

The reaction to realities such as the religious wars, a reaction guided eventually by the Enlightenment’s new “religious” drive toward a secular society, gave birth to western political orders that aimed to keep religious conflict out of the public square. The secularist vision is a myth, a pseudo-religion, as we’ve already said, but the political consequences of religious toleration in Great Britain and of ecclesiastical disestablishment in the United States are, in many ways, institutional expressions of the very humility that ought to characterize a Christian society. Making room in the political order for equal treatment of all faiths, I would argue, is a principled expression of Christian charity, justice, and care. It is a proper political/legal dimension of a “Christian society”.

The problem in our day, however, is that Christians, for their part, do not have a strong and distinctive doctrine to ground this kind of political pluralism; they do not see that the fair treatment of all faiths in the public arena should, as a matter of principle, be one aspect of a “Christian society”. In the absence of a coherent Christian view of such matters, the doctrine in support of freedom of conscience that fills the vacuum is the secularist one.

But we have just said that the secularist doctrine of religious freedom aims to keep religion (other than secularist convictions) out of the public square. Consequently, the political imposition of a sacred/secular dualism substitutes for the older religious impositions; it becomes a new civil religion. Moreover, Christian embarrassment about past failures to treat others fairly in public leaves Christians in a somewhat passive condition, which leads in turn to their accommodation. A strong, organized, distinctively Christian movement for religious pluralism in the public square might appear to be an attempt to revive Christian imperialism (as many believe is happening in the United States). So Christians, by and large, have fallen back on the secularist arguments for a democratic society, accepting, at least in practice, the secularist judgment that Christian faith is a parochial matter and that public life demands a common, secular mode of communication, accommodation, reasoning, and law making.

The truth which Christians should be arguing, however, is that an open, non-totalitarian, religiously plural society cannot be grounded in intolerant secularism but is, in fact, grounded in God’s patience and mercy in upholding the creation. The fact that most citizens, including Christians, do not think in these terms means that, in the contemporary West, we live with confusion caused by the disconnection between reality and its misinterpretations.

On the one hand, there is the disconnection between the ideology of secular tolerance and the reality of a diversified society, which is not, in fact, sustained by systematic secularism but by God’s providence and grace. A truly open and tolerant society is actually threatened by secularism in its National Socialist, communist, and democratic capitalist forms. At the same time, on the other hand, we have a disconnection between the privatized mindset of Christian parochialism, spawned by its embarrassment and accommodationism, and the reality of a diversified society whose best structural features owe their existence not to secularism’s saving grace but to God’s mercifully sustained creation order as understood by Christian faith. In sum, secularists give themselves too much credit and Christians give God too little credit for the relatively open society that now exists.

If as Newbigin advocates, we are to overcome Christian embarrassment, accommodation, and the acceptance of a mythical sacred/secular dualism, it will be necessary, to revive an integral Christian way of life that can distinguish the healthy and just aspects of Western society from its anti-normative aspects. Those aspects of an open society that do justice to God's good creation order, upheld by God's grace, must be identified as such and interpreted from a bold, unembarrassed Christian point of view. A "Christian society" will not be an entirely new construct in our day, but will emerge from a reformation of the present order that preserves the legal, political, and other elements which would not exist apart from God's love of the world in Christ. Such a reformation would also reverse or dispense with those elements that express imperialistic forces of secularism, paganism, and other anti-Christian religions.

## The Cross and the Truth

Bishop Newbigin's primary rationale for the safeguarding of religious freedom in a Christian society is the truth of Christ's cross which stands at the heart of the gospel. The Christian story is unique, he explains, in that at its *heart* there stands the cross, the cross and the resurrection, which, taken together, mean, do they not, that the union of truth with power, while it is a reality, as the resurrection shows us, is nevertheless a reality beyond history, not a reality which is to be expected within history. Within history, therefore, truth may be exactly aligned with powerlessness. Yet, because the union of truth with power is the reality beyond history, it must shape at every stage the steps that we take within history. Moreover, the truth which the gospel affirms requires that we also tolerate untruth. In other words, it is not an uncertainty about the truth that we proclaim that requires us to tolerate its contradiction. It is the truth itself that we proclaim in the gospel, which requires us to tolerate the power of the untruth.<sup>6</sup>

My enthusiasm for Newbigin's statement here is qualified only by a concern to make some important differentiations within the argument, differentiations that are crucial, I believe, if we are to overcome the disconnections I've just described.

On the one hand, Bishop Newbigin is surely not arguing that within ecclesiastical communions themselves Christians should be seeking, as a matter of principle, to tolerate the power of untruth. Surely a Christian bishop should not agree that the denial of Christ's lordship, of the cross, and of the resurrection should be tolerated as doctrine within the church. The point of Newbigin's argument, I am sure, is that the broader society should be characterized by tolerance for untruth, with the same civil rights and protections being granted to Christians and non-Christians alike. Christians should support such freedom as a matter of principle, because their very doctrine of the cross and resurrection teaches them that the completed community of believers in Christ does not, and cannot, correspond with any political community of citizens on earth. Christians, in other words, have not been called by their Lord to clean up the field of this world but, to the contrary, have been told to let wheat and tares grow up together as God is doing, allowing rain and sunshine to fall on the just and unjust alike (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43; 5:43). This is the gospel truth that requires that we tolerate untruth in the world.

If this is what Newbigin means, then we must be very clear, from the Christian

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6. Newbigin, "What Kind of Society?" par. #21.

standpoint of truth, about what we identify as a normative political/legal community of citizens. If the ultimate and finished truth of God's kingdom in Christ is "beyond history", we should accept the fact that human political power in this age can never, should never try to, make that truth manifest in this age. Or as Newbigin puts it further on, the very truth of the gospel (in the ultimate sense) requires that we tolerate the power of untruth in this age. Christ and the angels, not a particular generation of Christians in this age, will bring in the completed kingdom.<sup>7</sup> But if this is true, then something very important follows. Insofar as the ultimate and complete truth of the gospel *entails* the truth that, in this age, religious freedom ought to be safeguarded by political authority, then surely Christians ought to defend the truth of political/legal justice for all.

What I mean by this differentiation within Newbigin's argument can be elaborated as follows. If the right thing for Christians to do in obedience to the truth of Christ's cross and resurrection is to defend religious freedom in public, then they must not tolerate the power of political untruth that would deny religious freedom to non-Christians or to some other religious group. What we require, in other words, is a normative *political* principle for a Christian society that is consistent with the gospel demand that Christians should make some room for untruth and not try to act as God at the final judgment. If the *political principle* consistent with this truth is that all citizens should be treated fairly and equitably in regard to their religious way of life, then the political principle of tolerance is a normative truth-consequence of the gospel. Of course, the truth of political fairness for all citizens excludes the untruth of political discrimination or persecution of one or another religious group. Thus, precisely in order to live and proclaim the truth of the gospel, Christians should be willing to lay down their lives even for religious enemies in order to defend the truth of equal public justice for those enemies. Just as a church should not tolerate untruthful errors and habits that deny the truth of the gospel within, neither should Christians tolerate the untruth of political/legal errors and habits that would deny the truth of the gospel without.

There is, then, a certain kind of political power that Christians ought to be seeking if they wish to help shape a "Christian society." We might call it the power of principled pluralism.<sup>8</sup> Precisely in order to do public justice to those who deny the truth of the gospel, we must work for a political order that will treat all citizens with equal fairness in regard to their religious ways of life. In other words, if principled pluralism does not hold sway (exert exclusionary power), then some other principle will rule: perhaps it will be the secularist exclusion of religion from public life, or the Marxist exclusion of an even greater number of human freedoms and responsibilities, or perhaps a Muslim imposition that dismisses or restricts or penalizes anything that does not conform to Islamic law.

If my argument has any merit, then the political quest for principled pluralism might help Christians get over their embarrassment in public life. For here we have the beginnings of a *Christian* argument for the equal treatment of all citizens regardless of their religious profession. It is an argument grounded in the gospel of God's love expressed in the cross and resurrection of Christ. It challenges the shallowness of secularism, which cannot provide such protection of all faiths in public. It also requires humility on the part of Christians, not in the sense that it can

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7. See *Foolishness to the Greeks*, pp. 117-18, and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, pp. 103-15.

8. I have developed this argument in some detail in my *Recharging the American Experiment: Principled Pluralism for Genuine Civic Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994).

guarantee humble hearts in everyone, but in the sense that it puts all citizens in the same position of equality under the law. With this approach, a Christian profession of faith in God's creational providence and mercy - corresponds with, rather than disconnects from, the reality of an open society with equal treatment for all citizens. Here also is where the false doctrine of secularism is exposed for what it is - for its actual intolerance and unfair treatment of many people.

## Principles for the Just Treatment of Public Religion

A good way to illustrate some of the implications of this viewpoint for contemporary western societies is to quote and comment on a document drawn up in Washington, D.C. in 1995 by a group of Christian organizational leaders of which I was a part. The occasion for the 10-point statement was (is) the growing antagonism between the so-called "Christian right" and the "secularist left" in American politics.

Many Christians are quite uncomfortable with the options on either side of this divide; some of these leaders lead Christian schools and colleges, Christian relief and social service agencies, Christian legal associations, and various Christian research, civic education, and advisory organizations. The statement is titled "Justice for Diverse Faiths in American Public Life." The first point is this:

1. Most people cannot separate their religious convictions from their public and professional lives, and they should not be required by law to do so.

The intent of this initial affirmation is not to leave open the possibility that religious convictions *can* be separated from public and professional life, but merely to say that the law should not try to force such a dualism on citizens. This also holds for those, such as secularists, who might not consider their basic commitments to be religious. Principled secularists would be outraged by a law that would say secularists have the right to gather in private with other secularists who share that faith but they must use only Christian (or some other religious) language and ideas in public. The point is that a just society should not have laws that try to force a sacred/secular dualism on citizens. We could say, therefore, that a "Christian society" would be one in which the government and its constitutional law allow people to live by their fundamental convictions in public as well as in private life.

2. The [United States] Constitution's First Amendment protection of each person's conscience, deepest beliefs, and exercise of religion is essential for the organized life of churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques.

This affirmation simply asserts what most Americans believe, namely, that religious freedom means equal treatment of ecclesiastical type institutions. But this is only a small part of religious freedom as the statement goes on to say in its third affirmation:

3. The First Amendment's guarantee of religious freedom is also critical for life outside such institutions, because religious convictions or other basic beliefs may obligate people in their vocations; the fulfillment of their civic duties; the education of their children; and the various social and humanitarian services they perform or seek out.

With this we are trying to draw out the full implications of religious freedom under public law. Jews, Muslims, and Christians, for example, affirm (whether or not they practice it consistently) that their religions are ways of life and not merely “ways of worship.” Of course, not all Jews, Muslims, and Christians take this to mean that they should educate their children in distinctively Jewish, Muslim, or Christian schools, or that all of their humanitarian services ought to be done through professedly religious organizations.

But the point is that citizens ought to be free to follow their ways of life without public-legal discrimination, whether that discrimination is directed toward Christians or secularists, Muslims or Jews.

4. The purpose of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment is to assure equal protection of religion for all citizens by disallowing the establishment of any particular religion.

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution says that Congress may not pass any law to establish religion or to inhibit its free exercise. Many legal authorities, including some Supreme Court Justices, have, from a secularist standpoint, interpreted this to mean that Congress may do nothing to aid or hinder religion at all, assuming that religion is a private matter and that the public square should remain secular.

In my view, and in the view of many others, this position actually infringes on the free exercise of religion because it judges beforehand that explicitly religious activities should not be supported in the public arena. This stance gives privilege to those religions (including secularism) that hold to a sacred/secular, private/public dualism. Consequently, the religious freedom of all citizens is not protected and the First Amendment is thus violated.

Our interpretation of the Establishment Clause is different, as we go on to assert:

5. The aim of the Establishment Clause is not to restrict religious practice to a private sphere or to give non-religious or anti-religious beliefs a privileged place in the public sphere.

This is a direct statement rejecting secularism as the proper dogma for interpreting and enforcing the First Amendment. Professedly religious standpoints and ways of life should be treated with the same protection and access as are the standpoints and ways of life of those who call themselves non-religious or secular, though, as I have argued, a secularist stance is a way of life every bit as religious as a Christian way of life. This leads, then, to the next affirmation:

6. Constitutional protection of religious freedom in all areas of life offers the best means of guarding against the illegitimate establishment of any particular religious, non-religious, or anti-religious commitment or institution. With this we go to the heart of disputes about the nature of life beyond the walls of churches, synagogues, and mosques. The key to whether the First Amendment is interpreted from a Christian or a secularist standpoint is whether religious freedom is protected in areas of education, the workplace, the media, various professions, and politics.

For example, I would argue that government may, quite legitimately, require that

every citizen receive an education and that all citizens pay taxes to support a free education for each child. But what this means in the United States today is that government may use all of those taxes to support only secularized public schools, giving none to children who attend independent religious schools. The reasoning behind this position is that government should not aid religion and that whatever the government controls (such as “public” schools) are by definition secular and deserving of tax support.<sup>9</sup> My argument to the contrary is that equal protection of all religious ways of life should mean that all parents are equally free to choose education for their children (whether of a secularist, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or some other variety) without penalty or discrimination from government. Government funding for the education of citizens should flow equitably to all children, and thus to the diverse schools they attend in proportion to their numbers. Secularized schools (whether government-run or independent) should be neither privileged nor disadvantaged. Christian schools should be neither privileged nor disadvantaged. Government’s support of the education of all children in this fashion does not establish religion in general or any particular religion; it merely promotes universal education without religious discrimination. An illegitimate establishment does occur, however, when government privileges the secularist schools, as it does today. The only way to avoid establishment of a religion and to protect the free exercise of everyone’s faith is to treat all schools with equal Justice.<sup>10</sup>

Much the same can be said about government’s support for other public concerns such as health care, job training, social services, and so forth. The seventh affirmation we drew up makes this point:

7. The law should not discriminate against persons eligible to benefit from government financial assistance for human services (such as job training, health care, shelter, child care, education, counselling, and drug and alcohol rehabilitation) simply because they would choose to receive those services from religiously oriented service providers.

This statement speaks to the fair and equal treatment of persons. Our next statement tries to do the same thing for institutions and organizations that would receive or offer a service of some kind.

8. Religious organizations, on an equal footing with non-religious organizations, should be allowed to obtain government funding for beneficiaries so long as the funds are used for the stipulated purposes.

Here we seek to distinguish the legitimate role of government in protecting all citizens from the roles of other organizations. Many non-governmental organizations exist; the professedly secular ones should not be given privileged treatment by government. Of course, government may designate funding specifically for education,

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9. In the field of education, Newbiggin explains, “we are, once again, up against the myth of neutrality. . . . I find it quite extraordinary that to teach children that the world can be adequately understood and coped with without reference to God is called education, and to teach children that, in order to understand and cope with the world, we need to know something about God is called brainwashing. This I find hard to understand. It is the myth of neutrality which we have to explode. If that is so, the cultural world will necessarily be a world where there is controversy.” “What Kind of Society?” par. #24. A recent American book that explores, among other things, the aspiration to secular neutrality and rationality in education is Warren L. Nord, *Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

10. For a thorough presentation of this argument in the U.S. context see James W. Skillen ed. *The School Choice Controversy: What Is Constitutional?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993).

or housing, or Job training, or something else, and no organization should be allowed to use those funds for purposes other than the ones stipulated. But a Christian school or Christian health clinic should not be denied proportionate funding on the grounds that it is doing something “religious” rather than something educational or medical. That is a false dichotomy created by secularism. To turn it around, if an imperialistic “Christian” government were to use the same argument, it might deny aid to a secularist school or a secularist health clinic because the school or clinic is promoting secularism. That would be an illegitimate discrimination. Our point is that government may properly decide to promote or give aid to education, or job training, or health care, or family counselling, but if it does so, it has no right to discriminate between “religious” and “secularist” agencies of education, job training, health care, and family counselling.<sup>11</sup>

The final two affirmations we constructed aim to distinguish government funding or support from government ownership and control.

9. When a religious or other non-government organization serves beneficiaries of government-funded programs, the organization’s identity and self-governance should not stand in jeopardy or be called into question as a consequence of the legitimate regulation of government programs.

One of the fruits of Enlightenment secularism has been to identify everything government does, or everything “the people” do through government, with a general public. As long as individuals (or privately contracted associations) remain at a distance from government, especially at a distance from public funding, then they can claim some degree of autonomy. But once an organization participates in public funding, it is often treated as if it is no longer independent, or as if its original identity should be subordinated to a public identity under government rules and regulations.

My contention is that the rules of a “Christian society” should not only protect individual religious expression but should also protect the identities of independent, non-governmental institutions, whether or not those are professedly religious. An independent hospital or law firm or school should be recognized and protected in law for what it is. If that organization happens to perform a public service that government funds either fully or in part, this gives no cause for government to violate the identity of the organization which renders the service by, for example, demanding that it hide or discard its religious character. Perhaps government has set up some of its own health clinics, job-training centers, or schools. Whether or not that is a wise thing to do, the government surely should not discriminate against non-government agencies that perform the same services.

And if government chooses, as it often does, to contract out some of its services to non-government agencies, there certainly should not be any discrimination against the professedly religious agencies compared with the professedly secular agencies.

This brings us back to the question of government’s fair treatment of all religious

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11. The Center for Public Justice has used this kind of argument in addressing issues of welfare reform in the United States. See Stanley W. Carlson-Thies and James W. Skillen, eds., *Welfare in America - Christian Perspectives on a Policy in Crisis* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1996). See appendix for their “A New Vision for Welfare Reform: An Essay in Draft” pp. 551-579 the basic policy document which was subject to critical appraisal at the May 1994 consultation in Washington DC.

and pseudo-religious citizens and organizations. In our tenth and final affirmation, we say:

10. There is no conflict with, or threat to, government's constitutional (often called "secular") purpose of promoting the general welfare when it cooperates or contracts with religiously oriented social-service organizations on the same basis as it does with non-religious organizations in seeking to fulfil this purpose.

Here, in sum, is a statement about the positive engagement of government in society that would, I believe, satisfy the requirements of a "Christian society." Christians ask for no legally privileged position or favour.

These Christian affirmations insist only that no citizen should suffer public discrimination on account of their Christian or other faith profession. From such a standpoint Christians, along with all other citizens, may work together to promote the general welfare of society. Whatever the arrangements made regarding education, welfare, science, the arts, business, medical care, and environmental protection, the laws would permit the same public access and activity for Christian and other religious organizations as it would for all others. The protection of religious freedom is not achieved by government remaining aloof from professedly religious organizations and acting as if only secular organizations are publicly legitimate. Rather, government should exercise its rightful power to promote the general welfare and to protect the commonwealth by recognizing the independence of institutions such as churches, families, schools, businesses, and many other institutions and organizations. If in order to promote the public good government acts to fund education or job training or health care, this might lead, quite legitimately, to its cooperation with many different kinds of independent groups. What it should recognize is that those families and schools and other entities will, by their very nature, be guided variously by secularist, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and other convictions. As long as government is fulfilling its proper governmental responsibility and not trying to act inappropriately as a parental, educational, or ecclesiastical authority (and thereby violating the trusts that belong to those other institutions), there is no reason why government's cooperative efforts should be anything other than non-discriminatory with regard to the religious convictions of its citizens in all those different spheres.

## The Body of Christ and a Christian Society

All that I've said above comports well, I believe, with what Bishop Newbigin argues in his six points about a "Christian society." What I would like to do now, in conclusion, is to add a further note in regard to his fifth point about the body of Christ in the public square. He says,

The Christian society would be one where there were agencies which made possible for Christian lay men and women in all the different sectors of public life, in economics and politics and in medicine and in healing and in the various fields of culture, to explore and explicate the implications of the Christian faith for that particular area of public life, a kind of lay theology.<sup>12</sup>

It seems to me that this is where we need to think very carefully about the meaning of the gospel for creation. Bishop Newbigin's statement suggests that the gospel can

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12. Newbigin, "What Kind of Society?" par. #25.

make a noetic contribution to life outside the church, such that “lay men and women” can develop a “lay theology” for various fields of public life. But is this the best way to think about the development of a “Christian society”? What do we assume is the meaning of economics and politics and medicine apart from the development of a lay theology?

Then the apostle Paul writes to various churches and challenges them to live wholly in Christ, he frequently addresses believers in their capacities as husbands and wives, parents and children, employers and employees, and citizens (or subjects) in the political realm. But in those capacities Paul does not address them as lay-men and lay-women, implying that their identity in those roles is as ecclesiastical non-professionals. A “husband” is not a church lay person needing a theology for being a husband; he is a member of the body of Christ who has, among many different Christian responsibilities, that of being a husband. In this capacity, it is not as a church lay person that he needs a theology for loving his wife, but rather that he needs to understand God’s will for his role in marriage.

Precisely here, it seems to me, we should think *not* of applying some ecclesiastical truths to non-ecclesiastical areas of life, but rather, of taking seriously the way the gospel restores and illumines the meaning of God’s good creation. John’s gospel, Paul’s letter to the Colossians, and the letter to the Hebrews, for example, all begin by stating that the incarnate Son of God is the one in whom, for whom, and through whom all things were created.

The creation is revelatory of God and connected to the Son of God prior to the incarnation and the organizing of the church. The good news of the Jesus Christ is, among other things, that creation has been recovered and is being restored so that it will finally come to fulfillment in the City of God. The body of Christ is a communion of reborn creatures - of the renewed image of God. Marriage, family life, farming, commerce, music, civic responsibility, and everything else in creation have genuine revelatory meaning that is disclosed in the exercise of human responsibility in each area of life. In each of these capacities the Christian person’s identity is not that of a lay church person but that of family member, farmer, trader, musician, or whatever. The exercise of proper and righteous responsibility in contrast to misdirected responsibility in each of these areas will come as a result of the renewal of life in Christ. Consequently, the words “lay persons” should be a designation applied to Church members who do not hold ecclesiastical office, and should not be used to describe the roles people have in non-ecclesiastical areas of life.

The development of a Christian society, I am suggesting, comes not from a theology for church lay persons but from obedience of the whole body of Christ in all areas of creaturely life where its members bear responsibility as they learn to live completely unto Christ. Of course the whole creation holds together in Christ, so the meaning of marital love, of economic stewardship, of public justice, of medical healing, and of so much more hangs together in one meaningful creation, which has been distorted by sin but judged and redeemed in Christ. The redeeming work of Christ redirects hearts and lives in all areas of life. Along with sound Christian theology, then, there should emerge sound Christian philosophy, obedient Christian political practice, healing Christian medical practice, and so forth. The adjective “Christian” in each instance refers not to theology as something added to an otherwise indistinguishable mode of worldly life, but indicates the genuine redirection, recovery, renewal of life among those led by faith in Christ. The Christian “way of life” should, in other words, appear

different from the secularist way of life, the Muslim way of life, and so forth.

What will often be necessary as Christians seek to fulfil their earthly responsibilities in all areas of life are Christian organizations of parents, of farmers, of labourers, of academics, of citizens, and so forth. The purpose of such organizing should not be so Christians can isolate themselves or try to create a perfect community on the edge of civilization, but rather to develop consistent Christian practices in each area of life as they live side by side with people whose ways of life are directed by faith in other gods. The body of Christ is the people of God, lifting up all of creation's treasures in every realm of existence in praise to God, looking and pointing ahead to the Christian society that will finally be revealed in its fullness when the Lord returns.

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