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BOOK REVIEWS

At the Limits of the Secular: Reflections on Faith and Public Life

Edited by William A Barbieri Jr

Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, xii + 374 pp (paperback £25.99) ISBN: 978-0-8028-6877-0

While the churches continue to agonise about their role in what they understand to be a 'secular' society, academic discourse has moved on. As the title of this volume of essays suggests, the book is pushing at the boundaries of the secular and moving into the emerging realm of pluralism – beginning to explore what it might mean for the churches to survive and thrive in a plural and pluralistic world. It is a response to and critique of Charles Taylor's celebrated, but diffuse and prolix treatise, *A Secular Age* (2007). A conference on that work in 2009 was followed by a series of seminars, resulting in this book. The context is that of the Roman Catholic Church in America but the discussion has broader relevance. The volume develops its theme in a stimulating and constructive way and opens the door to a wide range of more specialised literature. It provides a valuable resource for anyone wanting to get to grips with the cultural transformations of religion in our time.

The classic 'secularisation thesis' of the 1960s – that institutional religion was incompatible with the conditions of modernity and was therefore destined for oblivion – is now widely discredited. In a global perspective, religions (particularly Christianity, Islam and Judaism) have shown themselves able to negotiate the challenges of modernity in various ways without being terminally weakened by it. Indeed, resurgent religion – though not generally in western Europe – is riding the bow wave of modernity and making use of the tools that it provides, especially electronic means of communication, and in some cases also lethal weaponry. Christianity in particular has shown its ability to come to terms intellectually with the modern world. It continues to demonstrate its vitality in several kinds of creative theology and apologetics, so bearing out T S Eliot's dictum that Christianity is constantly evolving into something capable of being believed. Religion is once again a major player in the public square, a factor and a force that national governments and international agencies have to take seriously. If states in particular want to promote social harmony and reduce conflict, they will need to engage actively with religious communities. To do that they will need the expertise and advice of theologians, lawyers and sociologists of religion.

Having said that, we have to acknowledge straight away that corrosive forces of secularisation continue to eat into the accepted patterns of religious belief and

practice in western Europe (and the United States of America is not unaffected). We need to be clear about the difference between secularisation and secularism – terms that are often confused. The churches are being pushed further than ever before to the margins of society, to the fringe of the public square, and have become almost inaudible in public discourse, where politicians, media outlets and even so-called 'celebrities' make the running. That is *secularisation*: a socio-economic and cultural process. Alongside the forces of secularisation, a few loud voices of *secularism* – atheism and materialism – seek to complete the process of secularisation and to drive 'God talk' out of the public arena altogether. They deny the authority of religious bodies to intervene in public debate, to pronounce on anything except within the interior realm of personal faith. Secularism aims to drive the witness of religious faith out of the public domain and into the small corners of the heart, the home and where two or three are gathered together behind closed doors. The prevailing cultural paradigm in the developed world is secularist, namely that religious belief and practice is a private matter and should not intrude into politics, economics or ethics: it has no place in the articulation of public doctrine.

This book proposes that such attitudes and assumptions are becoming anachronistic, hangovers from superannuated anti-religious ideologies. They are still powerful – in the mass media and in political discourse they are even normative – but the tide is against them. For one thing, the privatisation of values, including religious or 'faith' values, is far from total or complete. Religious bodies such as churches are public entities, taking up public space; they cannot realistically be ignored or brushed aside. More than that, the public impact of religion across the world has been growing, to a magnitude that can no longer be ignored by either politicians or sociologists of religion. Religion has re-entered public consciousness through the gateway of globalisation. The climate has changed to the extent that some socio-cultural analysts believe that the tide has turned. Peter Berger spoke of 'desecularisation', Jurgen Habermas of a 'post-secular society', Jose Casanova of the global 'deprivatisation' of religion; Barbieri (in this book) refers to 'harbingers of post-secularity' (p 135). The leading edge of Western culture is now post-secular. There is no retreat from modernity, but a new 'post-secular modernity' is coming into view. It is hospitable to the sacred in various forms – therapeutic, environmental, communitarian, aesthetic and erotic – though not particularly to the 'religious'. 'Religion' (as Linda Woodhead has claimed) is widely regarded as 'a toxic brand'.

So, while secularisation – the marginalisation of religious institutions and the privatisation of religious belief and practice – continues to gain ground, new values, new forms of transcendence, new experiences of beauty, truth and goodness spring up outside the Church. Their sacredness is self-authenticating to many. We no longer live in a 'secular' society – if we ever did – but in a mixed cultural economy, where highly diverse expressions of

sacred and secular, religious and non-religious, exist side by side. Western society is moving beyond the secular to a situation of pluralism. The emerging state of affairs is not merely plural (empirically speaking) but pluralistic (ideologically speaking): that is to say, 'pluralism' is not merely a description of society but a positive value judgement about what is good for society – the way it should go in the future. Pluralism, rather than secularisation, is the dominant reality of our time.

In his editor's introduction Barbieri singles out Taylor's claim that one key reason why our age is rightly called a secular one is because faith in God, instead of being taken for granted, as part of our mental furniture, by most people, has become not only an *option* but also a *problem* for almost everyone. For the first time in history faith has to be chosen and internalised by the individual. Even if they have previously learned it at their mother's knee, at a certain point a decision will be needed. In this respect, secular humanists and card-carrying Christians are in the same boat, shaped by the same forces. We have all become disembedded from the sacred cosmos and structured society, validated by religious authority, that was the norm from antiquity to the twentieth century. This 'disenchantment of the world' (Max Weber) brings with it a greater stress on human self-sufficiency and autonomy: we find ourselves alone in an uncaring, purposeless universe. In such a world, as Taylor (following Alastair MacIntye) pointed out, spirituality takes the form of a search, a personal quest for identity, meaning and authenticity. The need to choose and to internalise faith (or not) is a key function of pluralism, a pluralism that is both intellectual (choice of belief) and existential (choice of how to live).

However, the weakness of Charles Taylor's analysis in *A Secular Age* is that it is basically confined to personal spirituality and to what affects the knowing subject; it does not deal adequately with the implications of secularisation for the public realm. To that extent, Taylor buys into the secular privatisation of critical values, including spirituality, neglecting the socio-political dimension of secularisation. This is not helpful even for a discussion of secularisation, but it is disastrous for an understanding of pluralism. It is precisely the nature of public life that raises the question of the scope and limits of pluralism. Public life cannot avoid doing this because the need to live together and to communicate with one another, to maintain social stability, places restrictions on the burgeoning of pluralism and poses it as a problem. The concept of 'public' necessarily imposes limitations on pluralism. In particular, the challenge of formulating a concept of 'public reason' (John Rawls), the conditions of rationality that should govern public debate, inhibits untrammelled pluralism.

Because to 'go public' imposes constraints on rampant pluralism – things must hold together if civilised existence is to survive – it usefully curtails fanaticism, intolerance and intemperate language, and does this not only by convention but also by law when convention falters. A common language of public

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debate, overlapping with the diverse particular languages of the plurality of interest groups, is constantly being negotiated, so that a tacit recognition (or at least toleration) of other parties and interests evolves. A modicum of civility must prevail; tact and diplomacy come into play. The hurling of insults in the public forum discredits those who hurl them and disqualifies them as recognised interlocutors because they are flouting the ground rules of public discourse. Given suitable rules of engagement, debate gives rise to policy and policy to action – and that changes something in the world. If the Church wants to see a better, fairer and more compassionate world, it must speak into the debate and speak with reasoned persuasion.

As the Church does so, through its publicly recognised spokespersons (usually archbishops), it should not hold back on the ultimate grounds in Christian doctrine for its position or seem apologetic about them. Every interest group, including political ones, has its deep presuppositions about meaning and value in the world and brings its passionate convictions to the debating chamber. So the Church should not be intimidated by the claims of secular thinkers such as John Rawls and Robert Audi that religiously determined positions should have no place in the sphere of public reason on the grounds that reasons or arguments should be such as all can accept. When pluralism is taken seriously, the idea that public debate can be conducted purely in terms that all can accept is ludicrous. While not attempting to conceal our Christian convictions and principles, we will also seek (as recent papal teachings have urged) to build bridges, to forge alliances and to cultivate common ground with others whose convictions, though not identical with ours, overlap in certain respects with them.

Of great importance to Christian leaders and thinkers engaging with today's culture is to understand that the pervasive dualism of the religious and the secular is not inevitable but is an invented construct, designed to make secularity seem natural, which it does even to Christians firm in their faith. Both 'religion' and 'the secular' are constructs too, having many meanings and applications relative to history and social context. As William Cavanaugh writes, 'To say that we live in a secular age is really to acknowledge that we live in an age where the religious–secular distinction has been invented and continues to be deployed to buttress certain kinds of social arrangements' (p 121) – by which he means power relations. Both 'religion' and 'the secular' as concepts invite ideological and ethical critique. Can they handle difference? Are they sensitive to unequal power relations? Are they prone to totalising claims over human life? In this respect, is not an avowed pluralism more conducive to social harmony and political stability?

Christian theology does not recognise a separate realm of 'the secular' in the modern sense. For Christian faith there is no part of God's creation that is not held in being by God's power, no area of life where God is not present. If we believe that the Holy Spirit is present to all persons at all times, we will be

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guarded in using the language of 'the secular'. As 'salt' and 'light', Christians are called to permeate their local communities, the institutions of civil society and the counsels of state, as far as possible – to bear witness by word and action at every level of society. We will not retreat from engagement but will claim a place for the things of Christ at every opportunity. The binary language of 'sacred' and 'secular' works to the advantage of the enemies of faith and does no favours to the Church. In the present intensifying pluralistic situation, Christians should resist polarisation: it leads only to exclusion. It is God's world – all of it – so let us inhabit it as such in Christ's name.

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Islamic Law in Past and Present

MATHIAS ROHE
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In these troubled times, Islamic law does not inspire opinions so much as stances. Many devout Muslims idealise its theoretical perfection, while downplaying or ignoring injustices perpetrated in its name. Critics equate a jurisprudence built up over 1,400 years with its most misogynistic and brutal modern practitioners. Each group could usefully learn from the other. The mundane manifestations of God's law owe plenty to politics and historical accident – but its durability alone is evidence of qualities more positive than compulsion.

As Mathias Rohe illustrates in this magisterial survey, Islamic law has not historically been either regressive or especially rigid. Literalism, so often associated with simplistic religious interpretation, was not even an option for early Muslim jurists, because orthodoxy has always held that God's message to the Prophet Muhammad evolved gradually over two decades. Contextualisation of the Qur'an's verses, and of thousands of associated oral traditions, was therefore essential. The possibility of over-zealous enforcement was also lessened by techniques that would be familiar to any modern lawyer. Harsh rules were mitigated by invoking God's benign purposes, leading to the development of presumptions as merciful as they might be implausible – memorably, the finding of scholars that childbirth could take place several years after conception, which has twice so far this century saved pregnant Nigerian divorcees from being stoned for adultery.