

Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics

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Chapter Three
From Christendom to Pluralism
John Briggs

CHAPTER THREE

From Christendom to Pluralism

Definitions

DOUBTLESS THE EMERGENCE OF PLURALISM HAS MUCH IN common with the more general process of secularization, the impact of permissiveness, the discounting of authority in favour of an all-sovereign relativism: indeed each and all of these are elements in our modern plurality of thought. But pluralism as such embraces further elements and requires, in consequence, more careful and precise definition. For the purpose of this paper, I take a pluralist state to be a state which, in its institutions, laws and culture, reflects the diversity of race, creed and heritage of its members, at least in some measure. In contradistinction, the unitary state is a state where common experience and belief allow the state itself to adopt a distinctive religious or philosophical stance in which it presumes to speak for all its members, and because of which, it feels able to require of them a uniformity of moral and religious practice. Whatever its degree of success in this, the requirement stands as an announcement of the commitment of the state and a declaration of its norms.

A vehicle of language is also needed to describe the nature of different religious groups and their attitudes towards the wider society. Sociologists of religion have elaborated many typologies of religious organizations since Weber and Troeltsch first drew attention to the distinction between

church-type and sect-type Christianity, but their original distinctions still help to define the poles of the argument.¹

The *church-type* organization, laying stress on the institutional character of the church, defines its life in relationship to its priesthood and the ministry of word and sacrament. Since the focus of its activity lies here it may appear reluctant to give precise definition to its membership, other than by reference to infant baptism, for ideally it champions the identity of the religious community with society at large. Its concern is therefore with all men, and not confined to the elect. Moreover, since its holiness is assured by priesthood and sacraments, it has found itself able to co-operate with the secular order without any sense of contamination, and indeed it has normally sought a close relationship with the state in terms of patronage and establishment. At the local level it manifests itself in parish responsibility rather than church fellowship. Whereas within the Catholic tradition such a concept of church transcends national boundaries, within Protestantism it has more often operated within and been allied to specific nationalities.

The *sect-type*, by contrast, defines the church not from a priesthood and hierarchy downwards but from the belief and commitment of the individual believer upwards. It represents the church as gathered out of society, and set under the law of Christ. By contrast with the church-type, membership is precise and discipline is rigorous and indeed its concern for purity of membership may provoke a pietistic rejection of all forms of responsibility for the wider society, and an attempt to establish a separate Christian society within society at large.

These two patterns should not be seen as exclusive definitions but as part either of a spectrum of ecclesiastical stances or better of an essential dialectic within religious experience.

Later sociologists of religion, and more particularly H. Richard Niebuhr in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York, 1929), have added to this base the language of *denomination* to explain both the institutionalization of some sect-type organizations and the accommodation of some church-type hierarchies to a *de facto* pluralism of belief and organization. The denomination, in contrast to the sect, accepts the need for a working relationship with existing political institutions, is less pessimistic

1. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (1911; English Translation, 2 vols., London, 1931).

about human history, and is encumbered by a weightier institutional machine. The process of evolution from sect to denomination has been widely discussed whereas the corresponding evolution towards denomination from church origins has been less fully documented. The process is nevertheless apparent as church-type organizations have had to come to terms with the breaking down of unitary cultures. Apart from other considerations, in the processes of history all pretence to exclusive representation of religious belief has had to be surrendered as alternative forms of Christian commitment have been recognized as in some way valid. Accordingly the concept of denomination assumes no exclusive claims but rather stands for a 'pluralistic legitimacy' as each group comes to play down competition and recognize at least the partial legitimacy of its rivals. Church-type and sect-type religious organizations may, though not necessarily so, coalesce in the newer pattern of denominational life which in itself is evidence of the pluralism of Christian experience that exists in the state.

Idea of Christendom

So much for definitions and abstractions. Historically the story must start with the emergence of Christendom. The idea of Christendom was one of power and territory, an attempt at a geographical incarnation of the gospel. In fact Christendom dated back to Constantine's first steps towards the establishment of Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire in A.D. 313, but its development owed quite as much to the threat presented by the rapid advance of Islam in the south in the years following the prophet's death in A.D. 632 as earlier it had benefitted from the threat of successive attacks of barbarians in the north. In other words the emergence of the concept of Christendom was in large measure a response to fears of incipient pluralism: it represents a backs-to-the-wall defence of inherited culture and virtues savagely under attack from external forces. That the threat could as well be internal is witnessed to by the history of the medieval church's attitudes to heresy: a crusade against the Albigenses in Southern France was as much a defence of Christendom as was an attack upon the infidel in the Holy Land, for heresy represented not merely theological deviancy but a threat upon the stability of an indivisible

Christendom. Church and state were coterminous: baptism signified entrance not only into the ecclesiastical community but into the civil community as well. That is to say, behind the idea of Christendom lay the medieval principle of totality. 'The atomization of our activities into religious, political, moral, cultural, economic and other spheres' was alien to this world of Christendom; rather 'man was whole and indivisible', every one of his actions amenable to judgement by Christian norms and standards, norms and standards established and motivated by the church authority. This was the import, according to the medieval papacy, of Christ's words to Peter, 'Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven' (Matt. 16:19). This was quite unambiguous in its all-embracing scope and stamp: 'whatever' meant whatever, nothing was excluded, and heavenly action consequent on judgements in this world meant that these were final judgements against which there could be no appeal.²

Notice what we are discussing: it is the claim upon obedience made by Christendom and its papal directors. We know that from time to time groups of men rebelled against this Catholic totalitarianism; we know that in many respects the Christian culture of medieval Europe was only skin-deep, and that it compromised with an ongoing paganism, not to mention its Islamic neighbours and a resurgent Hellenism. All this is admitted. But the theory remains as a testimony to political intention and ambition, to what the state would have liked to secure, if only it had the power: not merely a unitary state but a unitary Christian domain (for that is what 'Christendom' means), at least in western Europe.

Collapse of Christendom

But right from the moment of its creation, this Christendom was a fragile institution and suffered numerous set-backs: the schism of eastern and western Christendom in 1054, a constant pattern of strife and petty war amongst the western kingdoms, but above all the threat of the Ottoman Turk on the eastern frontier. In this respect what came to be most important for the idea of Christendom was that some Christian powers were prepared to make alliances with the Turk against their Christian neighbours. The rise of Islam had initially for-

2. W. Ullmann, *Principles of Government and Politics in the Middle Ages* (London, 1961), pp. 32-36.

tified the idea of Christendom but the westward thrust of the Islamic Ottomans in the fifteenth century well-nigh broke it. In the context of such action Christendom was made a vacuous word: Erasmus appealed to 'the nations of Europe', not the members of Christendom, to crusade against the Turk. Even without the Reformation the transition from the religious 'Christendom' to the secular 'Europe' was already in progress.³

Hard upon competing nations however, came competing sects, but even before that with William of Ockham and the fourteenth-century nominalists the Thomist synthesis between revelation and reason was under attack, in favour of the discrete study of theology and philosophy as separate and autonomous spheres of intellectual activity. Even as the political unity of the Christian west was constantly menaced by diverging interests so the old unity of thought was under threat a century or more before the Reformation.

The breach between the Reformers and the papacy was not as simple as the schism four centuries earlier between Rome and Constantinople, for the attempts at pan-Protestantism failed and the division in the church that occurred was multiple rather than simple. Moreover a combination of the rising nationalism of sixteenth-century Europe and the essential conservatism of the Reformers, meant that national Protestant churches, *Volkskirchen* or *Landeskirchen*, embracing the old caesaro-papism of the Middle Ages, became the order of the day. The territorial principle of the Peace of Augsburg (1555) — *cuius regio, eius religio*: the religion of a territory shall be the religion of the prince who rules it — combined with a deep religious respect for the rule of the magistracy, whether territorial prince or city oligarchy, meant that plurality developed between territories rather than within territories. Something of the mentality of Christendom lingered on in these separate states where the Reformers still maintained the old equation of church and state and where theological judgement still dominated everyday life. On the one hand, princely resort to the idea of the divine right of kings witnessed both the continued application of medieval theology to political affairs, and the overlapping jurisdictions of church and state; on the other, a religious justification of revolution was deemed essential to the politics of opposition, for no-one wanted

3. P. Coles, *The Ottoman Impact on Europe* (New York, 1968), p. 148.

both God and the king as their enemies.

Indeed it was just because the Anabaptists opposed the identity of church and state in what they called 'everybody's church' that they were so bitterly persecuted. Their emergence, therefore, highlights part of the dialectic of ecclesiology described by Troeltsch: the alternatives of parish- or church-type Christianity, on the one hand, and sect-type Christianity on the other. Where the Anabaptists survived the hostility alike of papal and reformed antagonists, they, with their commitment to a church of believers only, added to the pluralism of religious choice, in much the same way as the separatists were later to do in England.

Birth of Secularism

In such a context of choice, then, the lay and secular spirit of the renaissance flourished. Many commentators noted the secularizing of mental interests at a time when dogmatic differences occasioned so much bloodshed: Sir Thomas Browne thought his experience was like that of an amphibian as he found himself consciously required to adjust to existing in more than one intellectual element. All thinking men, in professor Dickens's words, 'found themselves in a world which had made itself far more independent of Christian controls than the world of the late Middle Ages'.⁴ So with the Reformation the intellectual climate changed.

New stress was laid by this process upon the free choice made by the individual. Society was at once atomized and secularized. The sovereignty of individual conscience, though doubtless it deepened the religious intensity of the life of the church, also secularized the life of society. So it has been said, 'Christian conscience was the force which began to make Europe "secular",'⁵ even as it was pious men who claimed that religious experience must be personal, who first shattered the old dream of one universal Christian society.⁶

In this pluralist climate it is perhaps significant that some

4. A. G. Dickens, *Reformation and Society in Sixteenth-Century Europe* (London, 1966), pp. 196-197.

5. O. Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1975), p. 23.

6. See H. Butterfield, 'Reflections on Religion and Modern Individualism', in J. A. Burrell, ed., *The Role of Religion in Modern European History* (New York, 1964), p. 142.

Christian groups developed voluntarist forms of church association. Rejecting parish Christianity, they conceived of the church as a free assemblage of committed believers, called out of the world into spiritual fellowship. The old social solidarity was gone: a man was born into the state but needed to be reborn into the church. Their ethics were in large measure community ethics rather than social ethics; their own communities they governed by the rule of love whilst in society at large they exhibited a general suspicion of all magisterial action. In matters of faith most certainly no coercion was appropriate, for only Christ himself could be 'the key and language of the church and the conscience'. If the law was impotent to secure uniformity, then toleration became a necessity.

Growth of Toleration

But such early pleas for religious toleration were not widely acclaimed. At a time when the English Presbyterians denounced toleration as 'the Devil's masterpiece', Cromwell's image suffered more from his religious magnanimity at home than from the penal rigour of his Irish administration abroad. At the Restoration, with the bitter experience of religious war high in its memory, the restored Church of England was faced with having to decide between two policies, comprehension and toleration. Those favouring comprehension argued that some small adjustment of Anglican doctrine, and more particularly of Anglican practice, would accommodate the vast majority of dissenters and leave only the fanatics outside the state church, thereby managing to salvage the idea of the Church of England as indeed the church of the English nation. But this was not to be: the opposition of the High Church Party ensured that it was the alternative policy of toleration of tender consciences that was eventually implemented in 1689. This had dire consequences for the position of the established church when it was discovered that freedom to attend conventicles could also be interpreted as freedom not to attend church at all. Toleration of tender consciences in the event involved also toleration of apathetic consciences and therefore marked an important stage in the development of a society in which religious belief was emphasized as arising out of a judgement both private and voluntary. That is the problem with the idea of tolera-

tion: as Owen Chadwick expressed it, 'From the moment that European opinion decided for toleration, it decided for an eventual free market in opinion. A toleration of a minority is not the same as equality before the law between opinions. But in the circumstances of European history the one must lead into the other . . . A free market in some opinions became a free market in all opinions.'⁷ If we are tempted in our day to seek to reimpose a Christendom ideal on our society then it needs to be noted that a last desperate attempt to maintain a unitary state in Britain, by way of reordering the state church on more comprehensive lines, failed to find favour both in the late seventeenth century and also in the 1830s when Thomas Arnold renewed this kind of programme of church reform.

From the Act of Toleration onwards an implicit pluralism, at least of varieties of Protestant allegiance, in some measure characterized British life. The nineteenth century saw the continuation and even the acceleration of this process. With the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 the Anglican constitution came to an end and with Catholic Emancipation in the following year the Protestant constitution. The word 'secularist' was first used in 1851 and by 1886 the right of an unbeliever to sit in parliament had been conceded. Formally, and exclusively, the Christian constitution of England was at an end, though informally and influentially Christian paramountcy continued to dominate the affairs of state. But perhaps more important than formal changes was a change in interest, for as Professor Marsh has shown, at just this time parliament showed itself more and more reluctant to give time to ecclesiastical business, which was unfortunate in so far as the church had a great need for ongoing reform. Matters of state now took priority over matters of church establishment.⁸

Nineteenth-Century Pluralism

Not only the pace of change in the nineteenth century but also its range and scope should be held firmly in mind. Professor Chadwick makes this same point when he affirms, 'The problem of secularization is not the same as the problem of enlightenment. Enlightenment was of the few. Seculariza-

7. Chadwick, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

8. P. T. Marsh, *The Victorian Church in Decline: Archbishop Tait and the Church of England, 1868-82* (London, 1969).

tion is of the many.” And whereas the men of the early enlightenment lived within a calendar of sunrise and sunset, sowing and harvest, of the seasons in their order, a world where providential explanations of experience were widely accepted, the contrived world of industry and capital, of mechanical time and of urban communities divorced from a direct sense of dependence on the land, had quite a different impact on the popular mind. Instead of the mystery of the divine ordering of events, there arose a brash confidence in human design and accomplishment. So the pluralism of belief that emerges after the crises of 1828/9 is of a wholly different order from that which had been tolerated in the previous one hundred and fifty years. The issue now was not merely the pluralism of a variety of forms of Christian belief and practice, but a pluralism of belief and unbelief, a pluralism that witnessed the emergence of overt secularism, evolutionary history and sociology, and Marxist Socialism, all of them the more powerful because of the broadcasting capacities of a rising press which embraced an ever-widening literate or semi-literate public as the century drew to a close.

In this process, another aspect of pluralism needs to be noted. In an earlier age the pulpit had, as one Victorian preacher expressed it, been ‘newspaper, schoolmaster, theological treatise, a stimulant to good works, historical lecture, metaphysics etc. all in one’.¹⁰ But no longer was this so. The clerisy could no longer be assumed to be wholly Christian. In the marketplace of communications Christian proclamation had to compete with a multitude of voices, committed and uncommitted. The church no longer shaped the public mind, but rather found itself responding to stimuli from a hundred other areas of human experience. In particular it is important to take note that this growth of pluralism occurs alongside a revolutionary growth in the activities of the state and its increasing appetite to control more and more of the lives of its citizens. And when the state reflects the plurality of belief and non-belief of its members, then its influence, though hopefully making for justice and even mercy, must necessarily emphasize the secular nature of life in the modern world. That the true character of these changes has often been masked and improperly appreciated does not deny the reality of their existence.

9. Chadwick, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

10. F. W. Robertson, cited by Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, vol. 4: *From Newman to Martineau, 1850-1900* (Princeton, 1962), p. 282.

For example, it has often been argued that the Christian, and more particularly the evangelical conscience, exercised a deliberate and powerful influence on the life of Victorian England, but a more penetrating analysis may suggest that this appears to be the case only because there was a prior invasion of the theological mind by the secular philosophy of individualism. Indeed it now seems clear that whilst this skewing of the Christian conscience in an individualist, even laissez-faire direction, led to an emphasis upon a number of moralistic crusades, it co-existed with the toleration of a number of great social abuses: the dehumanizing structures of the textile and sweated industries, the oppression of women in society, and the prosecution of opium wars in the imperial interest, to name but three examples.

In the world of the mind, providential explanation of human experience had to face competitive mechanistic explanations. Although not always taken to be denials of providence such explanations still offered alternative accounts of human behaviour, especially when the biological phase of the science-and-religion debate led on to the sociological and psychological. Everywhere there was a movement away from the ultimate to the immediate. The best logical analyses certainly recognized that there was no inherent conflict here, but concern for one as over against the other indicates a crucial change of intellectual climate. For example, in international relations there was a new emphasis upon sheer expediency and the dynamics of power. There emerges a more nakedly secular viewpoint, unconcerned about all doctrines and metaphysics. Functionalism rather than allegiance to principle was all that mattered: old fashioned journalists at the time of the Franco-Prussian War regretted the passing of the old international moral order (perhaps a last legacy of old Christendom) in favour of *realpolitik*, though it should be noted at the same time that the very destructiveness of modern warfare, even within a secular environment, has given rise, albeit falteringly, to a new search for international order.

Part of the dilemma for the church in this changing situation was that she too easily became identified with an unthinking conservatism. English Evangelicals may not have produced any statement as comprehensive in its condemnation of modern civilization as the Papal Syllabus of Errors of 1864, but their suspicious response to a changing world could sometimes be little less negative. This intellectual conser-

vatism was often accompanied by a social conservatism, a too close and uncritical identification with the static part of the social structure of the age.

Dilemma of the Church of England

In this respect the Church of England faced a particular problem in so far as she had become fully integrated into the life of the aristocratic England of the eighteenth century: religious conformity in consequence both 'symbolized and reinforced the cohesion of an established social order'.¹¹ When the processes of industrialization began to corrode that stability, the church's identification with the old order meant that she no longer fulfilled a universal integrative function but now a partisan and privileged one. The changes in society associated with industrialization were far-reaching in their implications, involving changes in economic organization, social thinking and political representation which were not easily worked out in the context of the widespread fears begotten of the French Revolution. The challenges were not altogether new, as any familiarity with the history of the seventeenth century would indicate. Pluralistic society in England was already partly developed, but there was a new sense of crisis and foreboding, a sense of the almost total dislocation of the traditional society. The temptation for the Church of England was to engage in a yet more thorough reliance upon its established position and this in part accounts for the worsening of relationships with dissent at this time. But the Church could not stop the new society from coming into being, and that new society was a plural society in which there was a diversity of wealth, commercial as well as landed, and a diversity of classes all with their differing cultural aspirations. The old coherence was shattered. No longer could it even theoretically be argued that all men belonged together in one monopolistic culture of deference and responsibility. You see this clearly in political terms: the apologetic for an unreformed House of Commons was that there was a coherence within the different interests in society and that whilst those interests were *actually* represented, the people were *virtually* represented by their social superiors.

11. A. D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel and Social Change, 1740-1914* (London, 1976), p. 75.

But when men began to be conscious of a horizontal solidarity with men of a similar class, and when they began to see their superiors, either landlords or employers, as opposing rather than representing their interests, then the theory became obsolete. It is, in some measure, this recognition of the tensions that existed in the older patterns of social organization, this recognition of the emergence of class as a dominant social discipline, that lies behind the passing of the Reform Bill in 1832. This was the new social reality with which the churches had to come to grips.

Accordingly because the social reality had changed, the maintenance of a church-type organization by the Church of England had to be reconsidered. In response to social as well as religious fragmentation the Church of England in the nineteenth century assumed a denominational outlook. The other denominations were recognized and a co-operative pattern of co-existence was evolved, whilst at local level, the church, though not relinquishing parochial claims, became increasingly congregational, again particularly as it responded to the growth of conflicting parties within its own church order. Whilst formal disestablishment did not follow, much accommodation of other Christian bodies, not to mention secular influences, did. Exclusive control over the registering and sanctifying of the processes of 'hatching, matching and despatching' came to an end, as did the responsibility for the maintenance of church buildings by the population at large, and the established Church's monopoly of higher education. Fierce battles were fought over church education. The monarchy remained loyally and effectively Anglican and most of the bishops remained in the House of Lords on the basis of a formula worked out in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century the 'pluralistic legitimacy' of all mainstream Christian sects has been recognized in a number of areas, as for example in hospital and military chaplaincies and religious broadcasting, whilst indirectly a great deal of state money has been made available to churches of all denominations.

Twentieth Century

Nevertheless, the spread of secularization has continued unabated, aided by disillusion with the shallow liberal optimism brought about by two world wars. Even without

reference to migration factors, the revolution in communications has set the life of our nation in a context of world religious belief and political commitments, making impossible any thought of an insular or merely British solution to our problem. Migration has added to the phenomenon of plurality as large communities of members of other living faiths have established religious communities in this country, whilst the historic churches have shown themselves less than expert in drawing Christians of other ethnic origins into the worshipping and witnessing community.

All this is true, but it is equally true that even in the twentieth century we still live with the inheritance of Christendom, and the crucial issue for our development of social ethics is to decide whether our strategy should be to attempt to renovate the idea of Christendom, or rather, not merely reluctantly, but gladly to accept the nature of our modern secular society and to try within its context to discover an appropriate mode for expressing our discipleship.

Within the Church of England in the early 1920s there emerged the Christendom Group of Catholic social thought that published the series of essays entitled *The Return of Christendom* in 1922 and, after the Second World War, a second symposium entitled *Prospect for Christendom* (1945).¹² In many respects their thinking embraced some of the most creative work then accomplished in Christian social ethics which is still worthy of serious consideration today. But the language of their title represents a nostalgia that dates their work to a bygone age. The 1944 Education Act perpetuated the same obsolescence: though worked out in a context in which only a minority of the population were practising Christians it put the Christian faith in a privileged position as the officially recognized 'stance for living' inherited from the centuries of the 'Christendom era'.

The Modern Debate

The best plea for Christendom-type thinking in the modern world is to be found in T. S. Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society* which dates to the eve of the outbreak of the Second

12. *The Return of Christendom*, by a group of Churchmen, with an introduction by C. Gore and an epilogue by G. K. Chesterton (London, 1922); M. B. Reckitt (ed.) *Prospect for Christendom: Essays in Catholic Social Reconstruction* (London, 1945).

World War. Viewing a Europe split between materialistic fascism and materialistic communism Eliot sensed that the mass of English people still held an undisplayed commitment to Christianity. He deduced that in the moment of crisis they would reject the 'neutral society' of the politicians in favour of something more distinctively Christian. His own belief was 'that the only alternative to a progressive and insidious adaptation to totalitarian worldliness for which the pace is already set, is to aim at a Christian society'. Such a society would possess three elements: the Christian state or legislative aspect; the Christian community, the vast mass of people who conformed 'largely unconsciously' to Christian norms of behaviour; and finally the community of Christians from whom alone could one expect 'a conscious Christian life in its highest social level'. In such a context he argues against disestablishment: 'The effect on the mind of the people of the visible and dramatic withdrawal of the Church from the affairs of the nation, of the deliberate recognition of two standards and ways of life, of the Church's abandonment of all those who are not by their wholehearted profession within the fold — this is incalculable . . . I am convinced that you cannot have a national Christian society, a religious-social community, a society with a political philosophy founded upon the Christian faith, if it is constituted as a mere congeries of private and independent sects. The national faith must have an official recognition by the State, as well as accepted status in the community and a basis of conviction in the heart of the individual.'¹³ Eliot's plea is a curious one because whilst it admits a declension from Christian belief and commitments, it still hopes to maintain allegiance to Christian norms. This is what makes it adopt ambiguous Coleridgean language to describe non-believing 'Christian' citizens. In the context of the Europe of 1939 that was perhaps a reasonable plea, but this analysis seems to offer little illumination for society in our own day. One would not want to argue with Eliot's wide vision of appropriate Christian concern, and it seems to me that an emphasis on striving towards the establishment of the kingdom of God must always correct any tendency to limit or privatize the areas of religious concern in a pluralist society. The issue with which we have to grapple, however, concerns the use of the power of the state and the nature of the religious justification of

13. *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London, 1939), pp. 20-21, 26-28, 49-51.

this. By what rights may the Christian conscience impose Christian norms on the uncommitted and those of other faiths? Were the boundaries of church and state once more coterminous, would it be right to use the power of the state to secure the Christian morality of all citizens? What is the relationship between a pattern of life freely chosen and that same pattern of life implemented as a response to the state's demand?

Moreover it is important that we do not become too parochial in our judgement about pluralism. Though recognition of our pluralist situation in Great Britain may involve a painful recognition for many of us, in the United States the fact of plurality of belief led from the very beginning of the federation to a separation of church and state, and her subsequent history has shown that this has certainly not meant that Christian believers have been prevented from bringing their consciences to bear on political issues. In this, of course, Christian statesmen have been assisted by the fact that although the state may be secular, society or its members appear to continue to be profoundly religious, which properly alerts us to the distinction between state and society. At the end of the last century Lord Bryce observed that 'so far from suffering from want of State support, religion seemed in the United States to stand all the firmer because, standing alone, she is seen to stand by her own strength'.¹⁴

It must, moreover, be recognized that it has been a gain to Christian missionaries in many places for the apparatus of government to recognize the pluralism of belief within their territories (e.g. India, Japan, Indonesia). Furthermore the problem of church-state relations in eastern Europe has to do with securing a greater recognition of the implications of a pluralism of commitments. In many respects, the situation there may be represented as a mirror image of the conventional situation in the west: namely the commitment of the state to a particular doctrinal stance, albeit one of political doctrine, which does less than justice to the plurality of commitments within the society concerned. It is difficult, to say the least, to argue for a recognition of pluralism abroad, as the evangelical conscience has so often done, and to refuse to face the implications of its dominance of our own domestic life.

In 1962, D. L. Munby replied to Eliot with *The Idea of a*

14. Cited by D. Edwards, *Religion and Change* (London, 1969), p. 92.

Secular Society in which he made a plea for Christians to have done with patching up the old idea of Christendom and instead by conscious commitment not only to recognize the secular nature of society but even to rejoice in it as the creation of western Christianity,¹⁵ claiming it as a society 'framed more nearly in accordance with the Will of God as seen in Scripture, in the Incarnation and in the way God actually treats men, than those societies which have attempted to impose on the mass of men what a small Christian group have believed to be in accordance with God's Will'.¹⁶ Though his language is not always as clear as it might be, the advantages of the secular state are strikingly spelt out by Munby:

The Christian claim differs from that of the pure secularist, not in a belief that the secularist has failed to understand one part of life — religion, nor in a necessarily different moral code in everyday matters. It differs in the belief in God, who exists behind the world and on whom it depends. The secular world has its limited aims, and God respects these; there are no other alternative aims for Christians in their everyday life. But Christians, believing in God, can see these aims as *limited*, precisely because they look for *ultimate* satisfaction to God alone.¹⁷

The kind of emphasis that Munby made was expressed even more forcefully three years later in Harvey Cox's *The Secular City*. The exaggerations of his position have been properly criticized, but the general tenor of his argument has been widely influential. In particular, for our purposes, we may note that Cox made an important distinction between secularization and secularism. Secularization implies an historical process, almost certainly irreversible, in which society and culture are delivered from tutelage to religious control and closed metaphysical world views. Secularism, on the other hand is the name for an ideology, a new closed world-view which functions very much like a new religion. While secularization finds its roots in the biblical faith in western history, this is not the case with secularism. Like any other 'ism', it menaces the openness and freedom secularization has produced; it must therefore be watched carefully to prevent it becoming the ideology of a new establishment.¹⁸

15. D. L. Munby, *The Idea of a Secular Society* (Oxford, 1963).

16. *Ibid.* p. 34.

17. *Ibid.* p. 76.

18. H. Cox, *The Secular City* (London, 1965), pp. 20-21.

Education

The increasing realization of the secular context of contemporary experience will have particular repercussions at many points. Paul Hirst tries to relate the kind of things that Munby and Cox are saying to the area of moral education. He claims that a credal approach to moral education is not appropriate to our modern pluralist position and tries to put forward as an alternative the position of what he calls 'secular Christians' — those who 'would claim that the true character of their religious beliefs only emerges when they are combined with a thorough secularization of all other areas of human thought and experience'.¹⁹ And for Hirst morality and education both represent 'other areas of human thought and experience'. First with regard to education, 'the idea that there is a characteristically or distinctively Christian form of education seems just as much a mistake as the idea that there is a distinctively Christian form of mathematics, of engineering or of farming'.²⁰ He further argues that to assert the significance of moral and scientific knowledge in the Christian world view does not entail saying that such knowledge must have a religious justification. Even as Christians over the centuries have reconciled themselves to accepting the 'independence of science from religion as central to Christian teaching, an expression of the mandate that God has given to man as called on to "subdue the earth" ', so now they must also come to accept the view that in the moral sphere man has a similar autonomy, and again it is argued that 'Christian belief rightly understood necessitates this' as in line with biblical teaching about natural morality.²¹ He concludes that Christian teaching can never hope to be coherent if it denies the legitimacy of living in secular terms: 'What it has to do is to get clear the place of this form of life within a Christian perspective'.²²

Morality and Law

Another area of lively debate that has been linked to the process of secularization but arising from quite different sources, is that of the relationship between morality and the law.

19. P. H. Hirst, *Moral Education in a Secular Society* (London, 1974), p. 3.

20. *Ibid.* p. 77.

21. *Ibid.* pp. 22-23.

22. *Ibid.* p. 27.

The *Wolfenden Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution*, published in 1957, in debating the scope and function of the criminal law in relationship to sexual ethics provoked considerable response. In answer to the question, 'What constitutes a crime?' Wolfenden gave a positive and a negative definition: the criminal law had a responsibility 'to preserve public order and decency, to protect the citizen from what is offensive or injurious, and to provide sufficient safeguards against exploitation and corruption by others, particularly those who are specially vulnerable because they are young, weak in body or mind, inexperienced, or in a state of special physical, official or economic dependence'.²³ By contrast, the Committee following the general principles of John Stuart Mill's classic defence of individual liberties, argued: 'It is not, in our view, the function of the law to intervene in the private lives of citizens, or to seek to enforce any particular pattern of behaviour . . .'²⁴ The document goes on to argue that it cannot be held that the law should cover all forms of sexual behaviour even though many might object to certain practices in these areas: 'certain forms of sexual behaviour are regarded by many as sinful, morally wrong or objectionable for reasons of conscience, or of religious or cultural tradition; and such actions may be reprobated on these grounds'.²⁵ But this was not a sufficient argument for making them criminal. The report argues later that 'There must remain a realm of private morality and immorality which is in brief and crude terms, not the law's business'.²⁶

Lord Devlin in *The Enforcement of Morals* (1959) challenged Wolfenden's distinction between the public and the private both as a matter of fact and as a matter of desirability. Euthanasia might be cited as an example of the law's invasion of the area of the private as a matter of fact, and Devlin argued that this involvement of the law in the private lives of individuals was properly done since a society is bound together not merely by a political system but by a common morality. 'The suppression of vice is as much the law's business as the suppression of subversive activities; it is no more possible to define a sphere of private morality than it

23. *Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution (The Wolfenden Report, London, 1957)*, pp. 9-10.

24. *Ibid.* p. 10.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.* p. 24.

is to define one of private subversive activity.²⁷

Devlin's argument is essentially that a society has a right, which certainly it should employ sparingly, to use the instrument of law to defend itself by securing minimum standards of behaviour from its members. This position has been challenged by Professor H. L. A. Hart in his *Law, Liberty and Morality* who argues that Devlin's contention, that the preservation of a society's morality is essential to its continued existence, is an argument 'unsupported by evidence' which is also based on the wrongful assumption 'that all sexual morality together with the morality that forbids acts injurious to others such as killing, stealing and dishonesty — forms a single seamless web, so that those who deviate from any part are likely or perhaps bound to deviate from the whole'.²⁸

Recognizing then that Devlin's position is not without its critics, we should notice that even on his argument the actual condition of society, and the desire to protect it, are the criterion by which the enforcement of morality is to be judged, that is, the nature of society takes precedence over legal disciplines. In this respect a plural society will produce laws which recognize the plural nature of that society, and therefore it is to the nature of society that the Christian conscience ought in the first instance to give its attention. If the morality that the law has a right to enforce is to be a reflection of the condition of society and its culture, then Christian social responsibility must involve an attempt to influence that society to give proper respect to true human values. It may be that in some areas there needs to be a new attempt to secure a higher social consensus more respectful of true human dignity, before we can hope to proceed to legislative action. At the very least our ethical concerns ought to be worked out in actions which are culturally persuasive as well as legislatively coercive. This will necessarily involve an attempt to find some common ground for sharing with others, who, though having different beliefs from ours, nevertheless have a similar concern for the moral order of both state and society. Professor Anderson has suggested that there are valid arguments, even outside Scripture, which demonstrate that the basic moral teaching which Christians accept as part of the biblical revelation, represents what is most beneficial

27. P. A. Devlin, *The Enforcement of Morals* (London, 1959), pp. 13-14.

28. H. L. A. Hart, *Law, Liberty and Morality* (London, 1963), pp. 50-51.

for man's life in society, and argues that it 'is on such grounds that this teaching and, where appropriate, legislation based on it, can be commended to non-Christians in a pluralistic democracy'.²⁹ It is to this task that we have to address ourselves.

As yet, however, the issues are not well-focused. There exists a lack of confidence among Christians, torn between the familiar world they know and the world that is emerging all around them, as to what their attitude and commitments should be. In particular they must learn to distinguish clearly between what is the legacy of history and what is the biblical pattern of thinking.

Jesus and the Pluralist Society

Jesus and the apostles were not defended by any rules of establishment. Theirs was not a protected position. Their moral concern for society as also their evangelism proceeded from a position of no social esteem. The teaching that Jesus gave his disciples was accordingly directly related to the problems of living in a pluralistic society of competing creeds and beliefs. What then was the basis for their working out an approach to the moral problems of their day? In the first place the disciples were called to affirm the goodness of creation. The created world and human society represent a divine creation providentially upheld by God's power. Because it is his creation, it must never cease to be our concern. In this world the disciples are called to uphold the uncompromising demands of God's justice and righteousness. These need to be reflected in our day-to-day relationships in human society. The call here is not merely negative, for Jesus adds to the proper prophetic fury the compassionate call to his followers to discover the true meaning of being a neighbour. The disciples are called to establish the kingdom with all the pervasiveness of the image of salt: their witness is to be in the world and not apart from it. It is in fact God himself who establishes his kingdom but they are to look for its coming. Accordingly the relationship between kingdom and church is one of crucial poignancy for the present discussion on social ethics. The Bible also clearly witnesses to the widespread sovereignty of sin as imprisoning not only individuals but institutions, but

29. J. N. D. Anderson, *Morality, Law and Grace* (London, 1972), p. 82.

affirms that the rebellious powers of this world have been brought into captivity by the cross and there they must stay, even though they still essay to organize and corrupt even the best human aspirations. Finally, amidst all the tangle of this-worldly relationships the Christian is called to affirm that history is not purposeless but moves towards the fulfilment of the new creation when the whole universe, not simply rebellious men, will be reconciled to Christ as Head.

Agenda for Christians

Christians today have to come to a judgement about the nature of the society in which they live: do they in fact live in a pluralist society or is this a false description? On the basis of this judgement they must decide upon the mode of their own Christian citizenship. Is the renovation of the Christendom idea a viable option? Is society sufficiently Christian to allow the imposition of Christian norms on the whole population? Does the Christendom view treat the actual social situation sufficiently realistically or is its vision distorted by an out-dated optimism about the Christian permeation of society? Is a Christian community free to enforce Christian standards on non-believers or is there a Christian conscience on the extent to which the coercive power of the state can properly be employed to such an end? Would it be possible, even among Christians, to secure a sufficient consensus to establish a programme of definite and deliberate action? Alternatively an analysis of the present social situation might be taken to argue for a pietistic withdrawal from the world as hopelessly given over to sin. Because, it might be argued, there is no hope for the world at large, Christians must seek radical remedies and seek to establish a society within a society, and take up a position within the ascetic tradition of the church along with medieval monks and sixteenth-century Anabaptists. To many of us to act in such a way would be to act with unjustified pessimism about God's work in the world and to surrender the common life of society into the hands of materialist agencies. Again such action would also tend to represent a fragmentation of the Christian body into a number of self-concerned ghetto groups as much in conflict with each other as the world.

The nature of society may be pluralist and the outlook of the state may be secular but there is a style of active Christian

citizenship that can be worked out even in this context. To accept the pluralist nature of society, and to be reluctant to seek special privileges of the secular state, does not confine the Christian citizen to a role of passivity or neutrality. Though without rights or power to impose conformity of belief or practice on his fellow citizens, he will feel free to struggle to commend and implement strategies and policies, informed and inspired by the biblical view of man, of human welfare and of justice in society, with all the energy and passion that he can command, freely arguing with those of differing persuasions, giving their views the same respect that he can legitimately expect for his own. The call to active involvement and to passionate campaign exists independently of the nature of both society and state, though its implementation will obviously depend upon the context.

Reading List

- P. Abrecht, *The Churches and Rapid Social Change* (London, 1961).
- B. Mitchell, *Law, Morality and Religion in a Secular Society* (London, 1967).
- L. Newbiggin, *Christian Witness in a Plural Society* (London, 1977).
- D. Sheppard, *Built as a City: God and the Urban World Today* (London, 1974).

Other works are listed in the text and the notes.

Questions for Discussion

- 1 Does the advent of the pluralist state require us to be morally neutral and to suspend Christian commitment in political life?
- 2 Relate the law-making responsibilities of Christian majorities to the position of Christian minorities (e.g. the stance adopted by Christians in the west to the position encountered by Christian minorities in e.g. an Islamic state or eastern Europe).

- 3 What are the implications of living in a pluralist society for (a) moral education and (b) the law of the family?
- 4 What part has legislation to play in the building up of a sense of community in an ethnically diverse society? Does an acceptance of pluralism deny the need to work for integration?
- 5 Is it time to have done with attempts at renovating the idea of Christendom and for a new and deliberate search to be undertaken to discover an appropriate mode for Christians to 'do politics' in a pluralist state?