Participating without Possessing: The public and the private in Christian Discipleship

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Identifying a theme

For the first time the census of 2001 asked specifically religious questions in order to gain a picture of the religious temper and distribution of the British nations at the beginning of the 21st Century. People's private religious convictions were deemed to have public significance, to contain implications for social policy. Contrast this curiosity with the reticence of previous census forms, illustrated by the following, possibly apocryphal, story. In the 1960s a senior civil servant responsible for the census-taking was asked why there was no question on religious affiliation. 'Religion', he replied in tones which invited no argument, 'is a private matter'.

Maybe so. Religion is indeed a private matter if by that is meant that it is a deeply personal affair which touches on our most intimately held beliefs and so is never fully available for public scrutiny. But 'religion' is far more. It is not long before any form of corporately held religious conviction transmutes into that much maligned entity 'organised religion'. And organised religion just because it is a human phenomenon is both communal and political and so intrudes itself into the public realm, contributes to it and so requires to be taken notice of and given a fair hearing.

In this lecture my concern is with the relationship between the public and the private in the practice of Christian discipleship. In turn this engages what in modern thinking is referred to as the 'social teaching' of the Christian churches. The focus of the lecture has to do with the interaction of the public and the private. Some sections of the Christian church came to assert that the public realm, acting through that agency which for the sake of shorthand we call the 'state', ought not to intrude upon the private consciences of its citizens. Specifically, what people believe and how they worship is their own affair. The state is to be limited so as not to interfere with the tender consciences of the people in religious matters. This point of view is now so widely held as to be a standard orthodoxy. The private is to be protected against the public and such protection is expressed politically through such social teachings as the 'separation of church and state' or the prohibition, as in the American constitution, of the 'establishment' of religion. This delineation of the public and the private and the distinction between them has an honourable Christian pedigree, defensible both biblically and theologically. Paradoxically however, a teaching which was designed to enable the flourishing of religion without let or hindrance is transformed in a more secular age into its polar opposite. The public realm is to be protected from the private realm of religious belief. In this perspective, religion is inherently dangerous, a realm of superstition, fanaticism and sectarian conflict. Religion and politics should not be allowed to mix. The state cannot prevent people

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1 A lecture delivered to the 125th anniversary gathering of the Industrial Christian Fellowship at St Etheburga's Church, City of London on 26th November 2003.
holding such views but it can insist that they be kept private and that the public realm be a religion-free zone.

To identify these alternative ways of reading the private-public split is to begin to indicate the complexity of the field and that there is room for the kind of thinking engaged in by this lecture.

**Building on a Legacy**

I am not, of course, the first person to chart a path through this territory. I am preceded by some giants of social and theological thought whose typologies have been enormously influential. 'Typology' is the correct term since this is the analytical device through which the discussion has often been shaped. So, for instance, Ernst Troeltsch, after surveying the history of Christian social thinking, concluded that there were to be found within it three broad types which he distinguished as the Church-type, the sect-type and mysticism. Each type could appeal to Scripture for justification and only together did they exhaust the breadth of New Testament teaching.

- The Church-type was characterised by *universal*ity, the belief that everything public and private comes under the sway of the Christ, so laying claim to the whole spectrum of human endeavour and claiming the right to interpret it. But by doing so it came inevitably into compromise with existing reality, the ambiguous business of wielding worldly power, by being insufficiently distanced from it. Typical of this type is the whole Catholic tradition with its long story of engagement with the secular powers, sometimes by means of conflict, sometimes by means of partnership.

- The contrasting sect-type was characterised by *intensity* and as such remained more faithful to the primitive Gospel but at the cost of setting itself corporately over against the public realm from which it sharply distinguished itself. This, of course, is a Protestant tendency most 'purely' expressed in the Free Church traditions but already prefigured in the monastic movements from a much earlier date, as Troeltsch notes at some length. The sect-type is easily caricatured as practising a strategy of withdrawal from public involvement into the private world of a religious sub-culture.

- Mysticism, characterised by *inwardness*, remained entirely in the realm of private spiritual experience without laying any particular claims to a communal identity or to the public realm other than the freedom to ignore it and go its own way. It remained individual and idiosyncratic and influenced the public realm only in indirect ways.

As ideal types, of course, there are variations within and between the types advanced by Troeltsch as a heuristic model. There can be no denying the fact that this has been an enormously influential and valuable approach and Troeltsch's work has classical status. At the same time, and inevitably, there are critical things to say. Its opposition of Church

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and sect is unfortunate since the word 'Church' is a prestigious one and leads to the privileging of that particular type as the 'proper' and normal position to adopt. By contrast the word 'sect' carries, whatever Troeltsch intended, the force of a theological insult and so conjures up ideas of narrow-mindedness and ghetto-mentalities. Troeltsch's use of the language is, of course, properly sociological but in transmission is received as a theological value-judgement. In this way a prejudice is created against the 'sectarian' option whose contemporary advocates are inclined to view it not as a strategy of withdrawal from the public into the private but as an alternative way of influencing the public realm by means of a distinctive and dissenting community which pioneers and fosters possibilities not within the grasp of the dominant culture.

Similar things might be said about H. Richard Niebuhr's seminal work entitled Christ and Culture. Here again Niebuhr works with an ideal typology, five in number, of the ways in which Christ has been deemed to relate to created but fallen human culture throughout Christian history. The Christ against Culture type, which Niebuhr sees illustrated by the various Anabaptist movements deriving from the 16th Century but particularly by the Amish of North America, sets fidelity to Christ over against accommodation to the culture in an intensification of Troeltsch's sectarian type. This is a retreat from the public into the private. The Christ of Culture type accommodates to culture to the point where no conflict between the two is experienced and so could be exemplified by Liberal Protestantism. This is a merging of the private with the public so that the church becomes a religious echo of public culture. The Christ above Culture type is seen by Niebuhr as the centre ground occupied historically by the church according to which Christ makes sense not only of the church's story but of the whole of creation which finds its true nature in the Logos from whom all things derive their rationality. Yet public culture is called to a fulfilment in the Christ who is most clearly known in the church and so judges culture at the same time as elevating it. Christ and Culture in Paradox, illustrated chiefly by Lutheranism, detects a kind of dualism between Christ and culture so that any relation between them is more likely to be derived through conflict and dialectic rather than a smooth cohesion. Finally, Niebuhr is working towards what seems to be his preferred type which is Christ the Transformer of Culture, illustrated by some of the great names in Christian history such as Augustine, Calvin and F. D. Maurice. Christ redeems and transforms the public culture.

Most of us today would probably find ourselves queuing up to sign on as Transformers of Culture and this leads to the impression that the whole analysis is pre-determined to head in that direction. Again, the typology has been criticised from various angles. The term 'culture' is used in an undifferentiated way which overlooks the fact that culture is never monolithic - there are many cultures and they are all in constant flux. Moreover, it is impossible to be 'against culture' in that precisely the movements identified by Niebuhr, such as the Amish, have their own cultures. What is really at stake is being for or against dominant culture, not culture in itself. Even Christ himself does not come to us naked of culture but through a specific culture into which he is incarnated. Furthermore, the effect of designating some movements as being 'against culture' tends, rather as the word 'sect', to their being dismissed as guilty of 'sectarian withdrawal' into the private away from

public engagement rather than valued as alternative strategies towards achieving the transformation of culture which is Niebuhr's prized goal. Finally, the typology neglects the fact that positions cannot always be freely chosen but are as often as not thrust upon the churches by circumstances and forces greater than themselves. To then elevate the positions inhabited as though they were freely chosen and theologically determined stances is to underestimate what is taking place.

Both Troeltsch and Niebuhr have offered ideas and forms of analysis with which to approach the question of the public and the private. Yet both systems have been in the public discourse long enough for us to identify ways in which their typologies hinder as well as advance the discussion. Typologies are illuminating but also misleading in that they invite people to pigeon-hole movements and groups according to a set of preconceived identities. Social reality is always more complex than such types allow and so they need to be used with wisdom and sensitivity. The typologies we have discussed have proved so influential that we can but stand upon the shoulders of such as Troeltsch and Niebuhr, but there must also be other ways of viewing the issue which confronts us. As noted, we are not always in a position to choose the type we may wish to represent but are called upon to play the roles assigned to us by the place we occupy in history and by the sometimes overwhelmingly powerful social reality that surrounds us.

What follows is an attempt more to map the territory of the public and the private than to develop a typology. It is hoped therefore to work towards a degree of clarity as to where we stand, a clarity which is prefigured in the title to the lecture: participating without possessing. I divide the lecture into three sections in a dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis: Firstly, both participating and possessing; secondly, neither participating nor possessing; finally, participating without possessing.

Both Participating and Possessing

I begin here with a cluster of observations concerning the lie of the land under the shared characteristic of participating and possessing. In these perspectives the Christian church lays claim not only to participating in the public realm but also to possessing it in the sense that it lays down the truths and the ideology which under-gird, determine and shape that realm. The church is the determining force in the public as in the private realms. Yet under this general heading there are distinctions to be made about how this is done and what its implications might be.

In their differing ways, of course, all the positions reviewed in this lecture, under this heading and others, proceed on the assumption that Christian truth is public truth, that is to say that it is not only the basis for a private spirituality but for interpreting the whole of reality. Christian truth tells things as they really are and is comprehensive in scope, a grand narrative within which all other narratives properly understood will find their

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place. In this first set of descriptions epistemological optimism is the order of the day. God's truth can be known through reason and revelation and can be authoritatively interpreted by the church. This truth should be applied to the public realm since it is fitting to do so and is beneficial for all: it is the truth of God. Where therefore the church has the influence to do so it should not hesitate to lay claim to the public realm and seek to determine it. After all, if the church does not do this then someone else or something else, less benign and less in accord with the truth, will do so in its place. And in the amazing, we might say miraculous, story of the church's rise from obscure Jewish sect to imperial religion over just three centuries, the church did acquire the power to claim the public realm as its own. Here I want to differentiate three approaches.

The first is theocracy. Theocracy looks for the immediate rule of God on earth through the powers that be, and although I shall argue that it remains an uncharacteristic approach within Christianity, there is no doubt that it has been present. It may take two forms, occurring either when the religious functionary assumes the mantle of secular power or, more commonly, when the secular ruler is deemed to be chosen of God, is invested with the divine right to rule and is given authority over the church as well as over temporal affairs. The technical term for this is 'Caesaro-papism', although it is also known as Erastianism and Byzantism, and it is to be applied chiefly to the authority exercised by the Byzantine Emperors over the Eastern church from the 6th to the 10th Centuries. If there is a 'problem' of the public and the private then according to theocracy it is easily solved: any distinction between the two is abolished. What is publicly confessed by the ruler is to become the private faith of the subject. *Cuio regio eius religio*. Here is not just a totalising vision in the sense that it illuminates all things but a totalitarian one in that it determines the exercise of earthly power. Arguably the West also teetered on the brink of such totalitarianism, not least in the years of the Holy Roman Empire and even in the claim of Charles I to rule over church and state by divine right.

Distasteful though this may now seem to 21st Century democrats and liberals such as ourselves, the biblical and theological justification for such a position can be readily recognised.

- The unitary state of ancient Israel existing under divinely appointed kings who were deemed to rule well when they exhibited zealous Yahwism and extirpated idolatry;
- Paul's ironic exhortations in Romans 13 to submit to and obey kings and rulers since they were no terror to the good but only the evil-doers (ironic because shortly after the writing of these words the same rulers were to have Paul himself executed);
- The language of the supremacy of the risen and ascended Christ ruling at God's right hand and soon to come again to inflict vengeance upon those who opposed his reign.

Whatever the proper meaning and interpretation of such language and images they could easily be turned to use by totalitarian thinkers and rulers. To disobey the ruler was not just treachery, it was blasphemy and to defy the ruler was to become liable to an eternal hell of fire.
Slightly to be distinguished from Theocracy is what I choose here to call Constantinian Christendom, for although the first Christian Roman Emperor certainly wished to use the Christian religion as a means of legitimating his own rule, and was followed in this by some of his successors, not least Theodosius I, the Western Church by and large fell short of full-blown Theocracy. Belief in the public truth of Christianity did indeed insist that both private and public life should come under the divine lordship expressed in Christ. But Western theologians in the tradition of Augustine would be less likely to give unhesitating legitimation to imperial power. There are, after all, two cities and the City of Man is not the same as the City of God. The latter as an other-worldly and future reality calls the former into question and exposes its self-seeking and rapacious powers. Augustine launches a remarkably robust critique of imperial power. Characteristically and significantly, the West retained the language of Church and State, the two not being entirely identical but a tension existing from time to time between them despite the fact that they worked together in partnership. The Church does indeed claim to supply the public truth that makes sense of the State within a comprehensive theology; but the Church's truth would lead it to criticise the State from time to time rather than to confirm it and to expose the claim that something was the will of God simply because the king or Emperor claimed it. The Church retained a degree of independence from the State and for much of its history was helped in this in that it was a supra-national body not immediately captive to national interests. There are Old Testament examples enough for such prophetic confrontation and for resisting the insistence that the temple is the king's sanctuary, rather than the Lord's. An accountability remained to be exercised. Nonetheless this is Christendom in that the church's truth possesses, interprets and determines the public realm. And it is Constantinian Christendom in that the partnership between Church and State led to the willingness of the church to enforce its truth as public truth through the use of the State's coercive powers, seeing this first of all as an appropriate exercise of discipline towards erring and straying Christians, like the Donatists, but with the passage of time applying such force also to unbelievers. It is this dimension, the complicity of the church of Jesus Christ in the use of force and coercion to impose its agenda that has been seen by many as a betrayal of the way of Christ.

But just here is a third possibility and I call it non-Constantinian Christendom. The term 'Christendom' is often used in an undifferentiated way which overlooks the complexity of the phenomenon. Within the church's tradition there have been those who rejected the willingness of the church to advocate coercion to enforce religious conformity. It was once believed that the cohesion of society was tied up with its religious homogeneity. Dissent from the publicly adopted religious line was perceived as destabilising and a threat to the social order. Dissenters were therefore compelled to conform to state-sponsored and approved religion. In response to this and as an alternative construct, what we now call the 'Free Church' tradition arose as an attempt to unhook religious belief from state power so as to permit freedom of conscience and toleration of religious diversity. Public religion therefore was not to be imposed upon private conscience. It is possible quite accurately to see in this the origins of what I shall shortly identify as pluralism. However it is equally important to notice that the first advocates of this, although they foresaw a freedom not just for dissenting Christians but for other faiths as

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5 Amos 7: 12 - 13.
well, did not view their proposals as a surrender of the possession of the public realm by Christian truth. Instead, they believed that faithfulness to Christ pointed in the direction not of a state that would coerce consciences but of a truly Christian one that would protect tender consciences and foster religious liberty. Such largesse would more greatly assist the fulfilment of the church's mission as well as producing more cohesive societies in which some of the finest citizens were religious dissenters.

Although this tradition advocated the separation of church and state to distinguish more clearly between the coercive powers of the magistrate and the persuasive power of the Gospel and its advocates, it was still within a vision of Christendom in which Christian truth was determinative for the public realm. Yet the influence required for that truth to triumph publicly was gained not through top-down imposition by a powerful ruler but through the persuasive power of the Gospel at the grassroots level as people embraced and applied it for themselves. For the pioneers of this approach, that the Gospel might be seriously challenged and the day come when other ideologies would first contest and then vanquish Christianity in the public realm was not in the realm of thinkable thoughts. The public dominance of Christianity, at least in historically Christian lands, was taken for granted.

So far then, I have reviewed various ways in which the Christian faith was embraced as both private and public truth. What was believed privately by Christians counted also as the truth which dominated the public arena, and what was accepted as the public religion was either enforced or, in its more liberal Free Church form, encouraged and facilitated within the private realm. For those inhabiting this territory it would have been self-evident that what was true held good within the private and the public spheres alike and that to entertain any alternative worldview or religion as valid for the public sphere would have been a betrayal of what was known to be the truth.

Yet manifestly this situation no longer prevails. We have moved in the West from a once publicly-Christian world in which unbelief, where it was held at all, was held in private to a publicly-aChristian world in which belief, where it is held at all, is held in private. This brings us then to the position antithetical to that we have just examined.

**Not participating and not possessing**

If the rise of the Christian faith to fulfil the role of public truth is astonishing, it is equally amazing to chart that process by which it was displaced. This is generally attributed to the secularising effects of the post-Enlightenment period, the outcome of which was the gradual removal of Christian faith from its public role to be confined securely within the realm of private belief and a few vestigial and arcane cultural artefacts. If the concern of the advocates of non-Constantinian Christendom was that the public religious ideology should not be imposed within the private world of the religious conscience, the parallel concern of post-Enlightenment secularism has been that private religious conscience should not be allowed to lay claim to the public realm which was to be the domain instead of a supposedly neutral 'Reason'. Christian faith therefore did not only not possess the public realm, it was only to be taken seriously if it was prepared to submerge its
identity, lay aside its own forms of moralising and reasoning and participate in the public arena by accommodating itself to the methodology of secular reasoning. An appeal to God was deemed not to 'count' in the public discourse and when such appeals were made they sounded at best at odds with the way that discourse was carried through and at worst like an irrational attempt to hijack the dialogical process. Religious reasoning was playing outside the rules of the game which were now determined from elsewhere.

Characteristically, the legacy of the Enlightenment is portrayed as a discovery of tolerance, civility and reasonableness. It can be forgotten that the Enlightenment also came to fruition in two avowedly anti-Christian ideologies which caused an unimaginable degree of human suffering over the 20th Century: National Socialism and Communism. In both these systems Christianity as an autonomous ideology was perceived as a threat to be neutralised and excluded from public influence. Under National Socialism the attempt was made to gain control of the Churches and bend them in a direction acceptable to the anti-Semitism and authoritarianism upon which the Nazi ideology was based. Some Christians insisted heroically, in the words of the Barmen Declaration of 1934, that 'Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear, and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death' and that alongside the pronouncement of the forgiveness of sins, 'he is also God's vigorous announcement of his claim upon our whole life'. They thus asserted that both public and private realms are subject to Christ's lordship to the rejection by confessing Christians of any alien ideology. Their story is a noble one. But others, and who are we to judge them when our lives and well-being are not at stake, are examples of what may happen when the public demand of Christian faith is negated or muted in favour of a privatised version of personal salvation. The outcome is withdrawal of the Christian claim to public truth and influence leading to compromise with an alien and destructive ideology for the sake of liberty to preach a privatised Gospel. German Baptists among others had those in their ranks who were content to let Nazism claim the public realm if only they were allowed to preach personal salvation.

Communism proceeded by seeking to persecute the churches out of existence. Its strategy was one of ideological discrimination and persecution allied to a conviction that religion would wither on the vine with the advance of the socialist revolution. Marxism-Leninism could tolerate no rival or alternative ideology in the public sphere. As a strategy of survival Christians were left with little option other than to confine themselves to the world of private liturgy or piety and, sometimes, to develop theological justifications for this by narrowing down Christian mission to concern for personal and other-worldly salvation. Experience in the post-Communist age suggests this is a hard theological habit to break.

What we have reviewed is well-trodden territory. My real focus in this section concerns what I identify here as Hard Secularism. Hard secularism is more than a political theory.

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It takes its lead from scientism, not as a method of gaining knowledge and understanding but as a simultaneously reductionist but all-embracing philosophy. It is a materialistic, atheistic worldview hostile to religion which it sees as a force for superstition and which it is only prepared to tolerate in so far as it does not have significant social or political effects upon public existence or other people. Privatisation of religion is, according to this account, a containment strategy since the evidence suggests that faith is persistent and that to proceed against it actively only serves to strengthen it. The most effective strategy therefore is to ignore it, to hold it as of no significance, to draw attention wherever possible to its decline and its marginality. Active faith and belief is 'fundamentalism' and religious practice is 'cultic'. Where faith intrudes into public life, as in military, industrial or hospital chaplaincy this needs to be justified in rational or social terms such as the strengthening of the will to fight, complementing the therapeutic process or contributing to commercial and economic prosperity. Faith-based schools are an intrusion of the private into the public since it is immoral to indoctrinate a child in a faith when it is not of an age to 'decide for itself'. With hard secularism, the public manifestation of faith in the ways here indicated may not for historical reasons be immediately reversible, but they should not be extended and where possible should be eliminated.

Although by no means in the same league as other ideologies, hard secularism seeks to possess the public realm as its own territory. At the same time its avowed commitment to human rights and to democracy allows a critique to be mounted against it when it transgresses the boundaries of faith communities. Moreover, those communities may redefine themselves into a subversive role in which they undermine the secularist agenda knowing that, although limitations are placed on their public profile, people of faith are not excluded from engagement in it on an individual basis.

It is time to move to my final, and constructive, area of exploration.

**Participating without Possessing**

Let me for a moment return to the Christendom model. I sought to differentiate between theocracy, Constantinian Christendom and non-Constantinian Christendom as differing visions of the way in which Christian faith can be affirmed as public as well as private truth. It may have been guessed that my sympathies lie with the third of these positions against the former two and that I am disposed towards it because of my Free Church convictions. Christian faith bears witness to truth that is both public and private, but envisages adherence to that truth being gained and maintained through voluntary means alone. Further distinctions are essential even here. It is my contention that a vision of the whole of society as subject to the Lordship of Christ, as Christendom, was never of itself wrong. In this I find myself in agreement with a comment by Gerald W. Schlabach on the most trenchant contemporary Christian critic of Christendom thinking, Stanley Hauerwas. Schlabach, a Mennonite and so reputedly 'sectarian' theologian, comments:

Hauerwas has discovered a dirty little secret - Anabaptists who reject historic Christendom may not actually be rejecting the vision of Christendom as a society
in which all of life is integrated under the Lordship of Christ. On this reading, Christendom may actually be a vision of shalom, and our argument with Constantinianisms is not over the vision so much as the sinful effort to grasp at its fullness through violence, before its eschatological time. Hauerwas is quite consistent once you see that he does want to create a Christian society (polis, societas) - a community and way of life shaped fully by Christian convictions. He rejects Constantinianism because 'the world' cannot be this society and we only distract ourselves from building a truly Christian society by trying to make our nation into that society, rather than be content with living as a community-in-exile.  

The Christendom vision which affirms both the public and the private truth of Christ is not wrong. The means to that vision's achievement may indeed be wrong, by which we mean inconsistent with the very truth that is proclaimed. To see Christendom as a future, eschatological reality both affirms the unity of all truth and all life in Christ and relativises our expectation of how much of this vision may be accomplished now. The public realm is not to be grasped at prematurely. This leads us to believe that whereas aspects of the public realm may be influenced for Christ now, that realm will never be possessed until the fullness of time and even then will be possessed by the one to whom it rightly belongs, not to the church. Until then the public realm may be possessed in whole or in part by another or by several other ideologies with their claims to truth. Since the Gospel works by persuasion not by coercion the church must content itself with the rising and the falling of its influence in any given society and culture since to employ other means than this would to impose its truth prematurely and oppressively upon others. This does not mean that participation in the realm can ever be foregone since this would be to deny the public truth of Christ to which the church bears witness. The witness is sustained with a view to the eschatological fulfilment of Christ's reign. It does mean, as Schlabach's interpretation of Hauerwas suggests, that the Christian church will always be, and in eschatological perspective ought always to be, a community in exile with no continuing city here.  

Of the positions I have explored, non-Constantinian Christendom represents the nearest approximation to what I am seeking here to describe, reflecting the belief that the groundings of a healthy, tolerant and free society are more securely rooted in this theological soil than in reductionist secularism or some alien totalitarianism. But it may be recognised that we now live after any kind of Christendom - the titles of a host of books suggest this perception is widely shared. How else might the land lie? There are two further items of the landscape to note and these are Soft Secularism and Pluralism.  

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10 In the discussion following the delivery of this lecture it was remarked that pluralism also could be seen in both 'hard' and 'soft' categories: hard pluralism is that form which insists that all ideologies and religions are but relative expressions of truth and so denies any claim to 'exclusive', 'final' or 'normative' a hearing.
As Christendom needed to be differentiated so with secularism. Just as there is a difference between science as a method of enquiry and scientism as an all-encompassing philosophy requiring its own leap of faith, so we are wise to distinguish between the hard secularism which is essentially an atheistic worldview and the soft secularism which is a political strategy. It believes that the instruments of government should be implemented without excessive use of religious imagery and justification. Understood in these terms, soft secularism may value the public contribution of religious communities and happily admit their insights into the public arena for a fair hearing while maintaining a clear and constitutional distance between any organ of religion and the means of coercion and compulsion. There is therefore religious participation without religious possession of the organs of government and social control.

This is not a million miles from the insights of non-Constantinian Christendom which may indeed have paved the way for its emergence. Soft secularism can value the public role of religion while, for historical reasons rooted not least in the religious wars of previous centuries, believing that religion itself is corrupted when what should be a matter of voluntary commitment becomes wedded to political power. Soft secularism is a political strategy for maintaining a proper distinction at this point not in the belief that religion should be excluded from the public arena but that it is helpful neither to religion nor to the political realm for association at this point to be too close. In this limited and restricted sense there is indeed insight in the rubric that religion and politics do not mix. When it comes to the distinctive property of the State, which is the power to coerce and enforce, they do indeed inhabit different realms. Faith groups may have access to public debate and political bodies in recognition of their contribution to the moral formation of citizens, their involvement in local communities and the social capital they generate. The ‘politics of recognition’ at these points is simply good politics. At this point I would defend the value of two words: secular and neutral. To say that the State is secular is not to say that it is godless, only that it belongs to the present age. For this reason it should both be valued as a created reality and yet not overblown as though it were more than it is. To say that it should be neutral is not to claim that it could ever be undetermined by somebody's values. Rather it is to seek for it impartiality. Impartiality is itself a value. People should be treated fairly as people, without discrimination on the ground of ethnicity, creed or anything else. The role of the State is to deal even-handedly as, in a sporting game, a referee might, within the context of the rules and values of the game itself, deal fairly with the contestants. This neutrality is value-laden not value-free. But whereas religion in general and Christianity in particular are also concerned with transcendence and eternity, human government belongs to the realm of temporal and worldly affairs and functions best when divested of religious or sacred pretensions. Although we use here the word ‘secularism’ it is quite arguable that what I have outlined

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As has often been pointed out, this is nothing other than a hidden claim to possess for itself the kind of truth that it denies to others. It is therefore ‘hard’ because it is ‘intolerant’. Soft pluralism is the variety which allows all claims to truth a fair hearing and accepts that there will be outright contradictions. Soft pluralism is in view here.

I am largely indebted for the term 'soft secularism' and the immediate points made here to Professor David Fergusson of Edinburgh University who included them in a presentation to the Evangelical Alliance Commission on Faith and Nation, 26th September 2003.
is theologically and religiously dependent on the secularising tendencies of the biblical narrative and the impact of the Christian religion and its commitment to let God be God and the world the world.

So closely allied to *Soft Secularism* that it is possibly the same thing is *Pluralism*. If Western societies are living after Christendom, we need to assert that post-Christendom is not the same thing as anti-Christendom any more than it is pre-Christendom. Arguably, after the collapse of Communism we are as much post-atheist as we are post-Christian. British society, although it contains elements of Hard (could we say ‘Fundamentalist’?) Secularism, is moving more decisively towards a pluralist model of social existence in which we are morally and religiously a multi-lingual community. In the public arena many languages are both heard and welcomed. The challenge is to find a trade language by means of which a plethora of groups with their commitments can express their insights and be heard so that there is sufficient communication to hold together an increasingly diverse, but also an increasingly fascinating social world.

Soft Secularism and Pluralism may be the best models for social existence currently on offer or potentially realisable. Given a free choice we might prefer others but there is no free choice. The biblical narrative gives evidence of many different configurations of the public and the private in the relationships between God's people and the wider world. It is possible to be faithful to God in all of them. Within our present Christians, committed to a discipleship which encompasses both public and private worlds, can be true to their highest and best beliefs and insights. We do not need to possess the public realm to participate in it. Religious and spiritual truths are at their most potent when they are offered modestly as witness from below rather than imposition from above. But Christian faith can never forsake its public testimony or concerns. Participate we must in order to be true to our ultimate hopes and visions and so that, informed by an ultimate future which puts all things in context, we might seek the welfare of the earthly city in which we are in exile. The quality of our participation will be greater if we abandon any illusions that we do possess the public realm and, indeed, we do not need to do so in order to be effective servants and witnesses of the one in whom all things hold together.