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Unpublished 1990 A manuscript written in response to an essay by de Kruijf entitled "The Christian Mission in the West" (1990) in preparation for a conference in Oegstgeest, Holland, the Netherlands, at the Mission Training House, 23 November 1990. The essay and response were two of four papers used as the basis for discussion at the conference.

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Response to Dr de Kruijf.

I welcome this paper because it seems to me to raise the central questions with which we have to struggle. This response can only be also part of the struggle.

1. De Kruijf believes that I am really asking for the restoration of a sort of mediaeval theocracy, a restoration of the Constantinian era. He admits that I have constantly denied this, but he finds it impossible to accept my denial. He even writes (and this gave me a real shock!) "he (Newbigin) feels that the church's influence on public life is-not-established without the support of the State". I have been a missionary for most of my life in India where the Church certainly does not have the support of the State. On returning to England I was invited to take an episcopal position in the (established) Church of England but declined the invitation in order to become a minister of the (nonconformist) Reformed Church. I have to ask myself; Why is it that, in spite of denying it a hundred times, I am supposed to be advocating a restored theocracy? Part of the answer must be my own failure to speak more clearly. I will try to do better in this paper. But I think that part of the answer is that we are in a position which the Church has *never* faced before and there are no precedents to guide us. For three centuries the Church was a persecuted minority without political power. It *did* claim to be public truth, not private piety (*cultus privatus*). Its public witness was by martyrdom. Then for a thousand years it was the official religion of the state, and became the means through which the barbarian tribes of Europe were partially civilized. Then came the religious wars and the intellectual leadership of Europe turned to another faith. It was certainly public doctrine. 'Reason' as understood by the intellectual leaders of Europe, was to govern public life. The education of young people was taken out of the hands of the Church and of the guilds; governments undertook to provide an education which would equip children to compete in the new international economic order. There was a real conversion of culture. The Church responded by retreating into the position of a *cultus privatus*. This can not be accepted as the final answer. We have to find a new way by which Christian faith can become again part of public doctrine. We know that this cannot be done by returning to the Christendom model. We have to find another way. It is because this other way is not yet clear enough that de Kruijf thinks I

want to go back to the Middle Ages, I will try at the end of this paper to sketch something a little more clearly, but first I must take up some of the points made by de Kruijf.

2. I agree that unity is eschatological. I believe in a genuinely plural society where different visions of truth can compete. I do *not* believe in pluralism as an ideology, for it is really not pluralist but monist. Its real belief is expressed in the famous words of the *Rig Veda*: 'Reality is One; the wise call it by many names.' I believe that unity is not a present possession (monism) but a future hope, and this means a pluralism in which conflicting truth-claims are taken seriously as a challenge to further investigation. My problem is that, in post-Enlightenment culture, truth is *not* eschatological. There is supposed to be a world of 'facts' which we 'know' without the exercise of a faith directed towards the *eschaton* when 'we shall know as we are known'. This is the world of 'public doctrine'. It excludes the kind of knowing which acknowledges that in fact 'we know in part' and that we walk by faith looking towards the *eschaton*.

3. I reject the dream of a theocracy, but I recognise the reality of power and recognise that Christians cannot escape from the responsibilities of its exercise. If we live in a democracy and if the State controls public education, we are exercising power over what children are taught to believe. We cannot escape this responsibility. Muslims in England complain with great anger that, through the state schools, their children are taught to believe what Muslims regard as false namely that the world can be fully understood and managed without reference to God - if 'God' exists. Muslims are forcing (some) Christians to realise that we have simply evaded our responsibilities.

4. Surely we cannot accept the idea of the neutrality of the State. The state cannot be neutral between justice and injustice. It is true that democracy 'in its politically dominant form, is based on a formal concept of freedom', but if it is no more than this, it quickly degenerates into the tyranny of majorities over minorities, as much modern experience shows. Democracy, at least in England was conceived in the experience of the Puritan free churches and had deep Christian roots. To some extent these roots still sustain it. The definition of freedom as the absence of coercion is barren. It would mean that the ideal of freedom would be an astronaut floating weightless in space, out of touch with the space-craft. The Enlightenment idea of a natural human freedom has to encounter the word of Jesus that it is only the truth which can give freedom.

5. I take seriously the criticism of my friend M.M. Thomas, and I have discussed these with him. In spite of his words, I do not believe that a wholly secular society is possible. Thomas' own vision of the secular society pre-supposes (as he agrees) certain very definite moral commitments. One has to ask about the basis for these commitments. What is to prevent the powerful from simply over-riding the weak? In fact the leading sociologists are telling us that the Weberian theory of progressive secularization has proved to be false. Evidence is to be found in the rise of various fundamentalisms as a reaction against secularization, and in the rapid growth of astrology, occultism and various irrational superstitions in the most secularized societies.

6. But I must now address the main criticism. I do not believe that there is no third alternative to either a privatized religion or a theocracy. I would like to distinguish between two kinds of plural society. On the one hand there is an agnostic Pluralism which says that, truth is unknowable, therefore one opinion is as good as another. On the other hand there is what I would call a committed pluralism which says that truth is eschatological but that we have to strive towards it. I take as my example the community of the scientists. The scientific community is not a theocracy. It is not controlled from one centre. It is an area in which different views are held. But the differences are not accepted as evidence for the glories of Pluralism. They are regarded as something to be overcome by further effort. In the end some things

are declared to be true and others false. Things found to be true are taken as starting points for new exploration, not thrown away as soon as the next bright idea comes along. Basic to it all is the acceptance of the scientific method as a valid way of seeking knowledge. This is the *dogma*, the basic starting point which is accepted. The key concept is that of responsibility. The scientist takes responsibility for his findings by publishing them and inviting all to test them.

I think this is a model for a kind of society which is not a monolithic theocracy, and not a world in which all opinions are as good as any other because truth is unknowable. The Christian Church itself ought to be such a society.

And it should also, seek to replicate that model in society as a whole. That will require a sustained effort to equip its members working in all sectors of public life to clarify the issues on which the Gospel must challenge accepted assumptions and to give leadership in all these sectors. This means that the Christian understanding of human nature and destiny becomes a vigorous contender in the public debate. I think that it is possible to hope for and to work for a society in which Christianity has a leading role. That is what I mean by claiming the public realm for the Gospel. I do not think we can be content with less.

7. De Kruijf thinks that I want a theocracy although I deny it. He denies that he wants a privatized Christianity, but I am bound to say that the last part of his paper makes me sceptical of this denial. Perhaps this means that we are really both searching for the same thing - and have not yet found it!

7-11-90 Lesslie Newbigin