



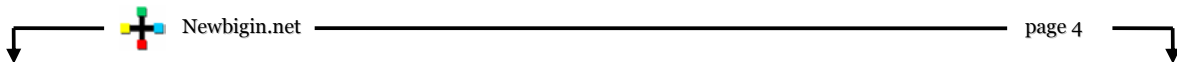
Leading Off: A Christian Society?

(95locs)

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During March 1939, as the shadows were darkening over Europe, T.S. Eliot delivered three lectures which were later published as *The Idea of a Christian Society*.

Like his contemporaries, but with a more penetrating eye, he had witnessed the moral collapse of Western democracies under the onslaught of new pagan ideologies. He argued that, in this gathering darkness, the idea of a neutral society was not tenable.

He sketched the vision which his title suggests. And in the agony of the ensuing struggle, when the idea of neutrality was unthinkable, there was forged – at least in this country – the idea of a society which, if not Christian, was more just and compassionate than the one we had known in the years since 1919. The names of Temple, Tawney, Butler and Beveridge are reminders of how an attempt was made to put a new vision into practice.

Eliot was, of course, departing from the reigning orthodoxy which, following Max Weber, had taken it for granted that the growing power of science, technology and bureaucracy would banish religion from the public to the private world. The process of ‘disenchantment’, of banishing the supernatural from the public world, was inexorable. The only society for the future would be the ‘secular’ society.

Twenty years after Eliot's book came the 1960s, which seemed to revert to the old pattern. This was to be, above all, the decade of the secular. Christian writers tumbled over each other to announce that secularisation was the real meaning of the gospel. Dennis Munby, a Christian economist prominent in ecumenical discussions of social issues, wrote *The Idea of a Secular Society* in rebuttal of Eliot's thesis.

But today, thirty years later, the scene has changed again. Religion has reentered the public square in force. Muslim fundamentalism is a major factor in international politics. Hindu fundamentalism is threatening India's commitment to a secular state. And in the United States, Christian fundamentalism (strangely united with a commitment to that centrepiece of enlightenment rationalism, the free market) has become a major player.

I am told that the British Ambassador in Teheran at the time when the Ayatollah Khomeini came to power, has expressed the opinion that the Iranian revolution might be seen in history as comparable in significance to the revolutions of 1789 and 1917.

The Weberian confidence that the society of the future will be the secular society now looks unconvincing. To date, secular societies have not demonstrated the intellectual and spiritual power to meet the challenge of religious fundamentalism. It will not be enough to deplore religious fundamentalism; it will be necessary to understand it.

With growing confidence, Islam is setting out its agenda for an Islamic Britain. While Muslims living as minorities are bound to submit to being regarded as just one of the religions which make up our charming multi-cultural mosaic, they cannot without apostasy abandon the central message of their faith, that the world must be brought under the rule of the Sharia.

The document put out a dozen years ago by the Islamic Foundation – *The Islamic Movement and the West* – sets out the steps by which this is to be done. We ought to be grateful to the Muslims for the clarity with which they see that the secular society must in the end become the pagan society.

If there is no divine revelation, no Torah, no prophet; and if those who were once shaped by such guidance become a diminishing minority; then society is governed in the end by the basic drives of human nature – power, money, sex. The secular society becomes the pagan society. The evidence is too ubiquitous to require any listing.

I do not want Britain to become an Islamic society. I do not believe that the secular society has the resources to meet the challenge of Islam. I am compelled, therefore, to ask again: what would it mean to speak openly of a Christian society and to seek to make Britain such a society? I think that perhaps three things can usefully be said.

First, it would not be a society in which the power of the state is used to suppress other creeds. All serious claims to know the truth tend to entail the use of power (if available) to suppress denials of it. Christianity has been no exception.

But Christianity alone has at its centre that which cuts the link between truth and power. The centre of its gospel is the event in which divine truth allowed itself to be silenced by its denial, and yet in that very event disclosed the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The gospel of cross and empty tomb requires us to affirm that the union of truth and power lies beyond history, and yet it is that reality which must govern all our action within history. We must also affirm that within history the ultimate witness to truth is in suffering. A Christian society would thus be one in which the very truth which is affirmed requires the freedom to dissent.

Secondly, it would be a society in which Christians, though not necessarily a majority, would be sufficiently numerous, committed to their faith, and articulate in relating their faith to the secular business of the world, to ensure that they had a major influence in shaping public policy through the normal democratic procedures.

Thirdly, It would need a church which believed in the gospel, was willing to hold accountable to this gospel those who preach and teach in its name, and was eager to share this gospel with those who have not heard it or who have rejected it.

It is in the exercise of evangelism at the point where the gospel reveals itself to someone as good news of deliverance from all the dehumanising powers, that the true character of a Christian society – namely its character as a free society – becomes clear.

These are only preliminary thoughts. Could they provide the agenda for us as we go forward into the new chapter of the movement to let ‘mere Christianity’ shape our culture?

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