CHRISTIANITY and the SECULAR

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INTRODUCTION

Lecturing in Cambridge six months before the outbreak of the last war, T. S. Eliot asked the question: Have we—he was, of course, thinking mainly of Britain—reached the point at which practising Christians must be recognised as a minority... in a society which has ceased to be Christian? He was not the first to raise the question; and it has been asked and answered, in one way or another, a thousand times since. While I was writing the lectures that constitute this book, the changing horizons of the discussion concerning secularisation were at the back of my mind—though quite a long way back. This is not what I shall discuss, but it lies behind much of what I have to say. I therefore begin with some brief remarks on this subject.

The years following the war were, of course, a watershed—perhaps in Europe more than in America—in our habits of thought and speech as well as in many other ways. A great deal of earlier discourse on this theme, especially before the middle of the last century, now seems fatally dated. The very terms in which writers of the generation of T. S. Eliot, Jacques Maritain, and the Niebuhrs, to mention only a few, discussed the nature and ideals of


their societies and their cultures now seem mainly of historical interest.3 But questions concerning the ‘secular’ have not gone away. Relations between religion and public life have developed in very different ways on the opposite sides of the Atlantic, and even within Western Europe. Nevertheless, as the sociologists committed to what has been labelled ‘the secularisation thesis’ in the 1960s insisted, secularisation had its impact in America no less than in Europe. One of the best known of them, Bryan Wilson, noted that ‘superficially, . . . and in contrast to the evidence from Europe, and particularly from Protestant Europe, the United States manifests a high degree of religious activity. And yet, on this evidence, no one is prepared to suggest that America is anything other than a secularised country.’4 I quote this testimony simply to underline that despite appearances to the contrary, a general shift in horizons commonly referred to as ‘secularisation’ is accepted as a fact—or was, as we shall see, until very recently—on both sides of the Atlantic. Despite the great divide of the Atlantic, by the late 1950s and 1960s Christians on both sides of it began to feel obliged to come to terms with something they interpreted as secularisation, and many theologians to reinterpret Christianity in secular terms. The emphasis on the ‘adulthood’ of the world in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s late works, especially the Letters and Papers from Prison, first published in English translation in 1953, gave wide currency to theological attempts to construct a ‘secular theology’ or ‘religionless Christianity’ and to portray secularisation as representing a crucial strand in Christianity itself.5 And, perhaps inevitably, historians of Christian thought were not slow to find warrant for such ways of thinking in Christian tradition.

3. For a particularly good discussion of secularisation that provides not only a historical account of this concept but also a constructive explication, see Robert Song, Christianity and Liberal Society (Oxford, 1997). On Niebuhr, see Stanley Hauerwas, ‘The Liberalism of Reinhold Niebuhr’, in With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology (London, 2001), 87–111.


5. See, e.g., his letters of 8 and 30 June and 16 and 18 July 1944 in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London, 1953), and Ethics, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Neville Horton Smith (London, 1955), 62–63. It is thought unlikely, however, that Bonhoeffer himself would have been in sympathy with this development; I have not been able to consult Eberhard Bethge, Die mündige Welt (Munich, 1955–56).
This was the intellectual climate in which I wrote my book *Saeculum*, and it would be dishonest to pretend that I was immune to its influence. It may have shaped, more than I intended, my attempt to understand what Augustine might have to say to Western Christians in the second half of the twentieth century. I was then inclined to see Augustine as one of the founding fathers of a Christian tradition of 'secularity'. Was my approach to Augustine unduly swayed by the intellectual climate in favour of secularisation, was I simply swimming with the tide of intellectual fashion? This is one of the questions I have put to myself and shall try to answer in this book.

The fashion proved, in the event, to be rather short-lived. For as one of the gurus of 'secularisation theory', Peter Berger, wrote in 1999—only some thirty or forty years after the height of the vogue for secularisation—'a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labelled “secularization theory” is essentially mistaken.' The process of modernisation had been taken as the main motive force of secularisation in modern societies, especially in the industrialised world. But modernisation has gone on; secularisation, we are now told, has been reversed. Writing at the very end of the twentieth century, this former champion of 'secularisation theory' had come to recognise—along with a great many others—that modernisation could have quite the opposite effect. 'To say the least', he wrote, 'the relation between religion and modernity is rather complicated.'

We may leave sorting out the complexity of that relation to the sociologists. All we need to note for our purpose is that the reverse, what some have called 'desecularisation', has become a more recent preoccupation of


sociologists of religion—and not only of sociologists. In a more apocalyptic version, Samuel Huntington has, famously, proposed that our world, to borrow George Weigel’s expression, is becoming increasingly ‘un-secularised’ and drifting towards confrontations in which religious conflict is taking an ever-growing part. While the rest of the world is, in Peter Berger’s words, ‘as furiously religious as ever’, this time Western Europe is the exception that proves the rule: it ‘bucks the trend [towards increasing religious resurgence]’.

I have started with these shifts in sociological fashion to provide a backdrop to my discussion of the secular; but I have neither the inclination nor the ability to describe the social, religious, or cultural developments of our time. I do not propose in this book to take sides, or even to discuss these modern issues, several of them highly controversial, of secularisation or its contrary. My aim will be only to contribute to an understanding of the place occupied by the secular in Christian history and within a Christian understanding of society. I shall try to do so through exploring the origins of the notion and the place it held in Christian history until its eclipse in the course of the Western European Middle Ages.

I cannot dodge the task of giving some preliminary clarification of what I mean by the ‘secular’. This has been no easy task, for the multiplicity of definitions on offer are all related to their contexts, and those are many. I shall be concerned with a cluster of ideas of which the secular is a part: the ‘profane’, the ‘sacred’, and the ‘secular’. The sacred and the profane were both familiar in antiquity; but until it was imported by Christianity, there was no notion of the ‘secular’ in the ancient world. The word and the concept are both alien to Greco-Roman religion. It was relatively easy to distinguish the ‘sacred’ from the ‘profane’; but the language of neither law nor religion offered a ready-made terminology for a third realm, the secular. (This state


12. Grace Davie, ‘Europe: The Exception That Proves the Rule?’ in Berger, *Desecularization of the World*. Davie’s essay contains a particularly lucid account of the issues involved in the debate over secularisation. Invoking a definition given by José Casanova, she concludes with him that ‘the differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms remains a general modern structural trend’ (78). On the corresponding process in Islam and the Arab world, see Tamimi and Esposito, *Islam and Secularism*. 

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of affairs is still preserved in romance languages. Modern French, for instance, lacks a term for ‘the secular’. ‘Le profane’, often used as its equivalent, preempts the distinction allowed for in English usage between what can be labelled, respectively, as ‘secular’ and as ‘profane’, and laïcité has a narrower range of reference. The cluster of problems associated with the secular and secularisation has, however, received plenty of attention—French sociologists of religion have spoken of ‘sécularisation’ just as have their anglophone colleagues.)

In Greco-Roman antiquity, the sacred was what belonged to the gods and to their cults. The profane, in line with the etymology of the word, was what lay outside the sanctuary, around the shrine: the sphere of ordinary everyday life. In the course of the confrontation of pagan and Christian in the fourth century the word tended to become part of the language of exclusion on both sides. In modern English it has kept its negative sense of ritual uncleanness, pollution, impiety, or blasphemous contempt for the sacred—in short, of some mark of exclusion from the sacred. Sacred and profane in this usage are contraries, mutually hostile spheres.

Let me suggest that we keep ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ as mutually exclusive areas. From a Christian point of view the ‘sacred’ will be roughly coextensive with the sphere of Christian religious belief, practises, institutions, and cult. ‘Profane’ will be close to what has to be rejected in the surrounding culture, practises, institutions—perhaps more or less identifiable with what in earlier times would have been labelled as ‘pagan’. The ‘profane’ will be what the convert has to renounce in undergoing conversion. ‘Secular’ does not have such connotations of radical opposition to the sacred; it is more

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neutral, capable of being accepted or adapted: the domain of the religious—though not moral—adiaphora. It will be the shared overlap between insider and outsider groups, the sphere in which they can have a common interest and which—from the Christian point of view—need not be repudiated or excluded. It can be spoken of without reference to religion, whereas both ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’, in this usage, will necessarily involve some reference to religion.16

It is easy to misunderstand the neutrality implied in secularity. A great deal of misunderstanding arises from failure to distinguish the private from the public realm. The neutrality which is an essential aspect of the secular—no discrimination between religions, worldviews, ideologies—is a requirement in the public sphere. Thus, for instance, it has been said that ‘secular community has no ground of its own on which it may simply exist apart. It is either open to its fulfilment in God’s love, or it is shut down’.17 The truth of such a statement depends entirely on being understood to refer strictly to the public realm of the community. A truly secular community does not have grounds of its own (understood as ultimate religious or ontological foundations); such grounds belong to the private sphere of its members and are excluded from the public realm. Modern defences of a secular society, of laïcité, would insist on its complete openness to and inclusiveness of diversity.18

What is comprehended within the public realm is what is common to all the members of the community; by implication, it can be spoken of without reference to religion, which, ex hypothesi, is not common to them. In other words, from the Christian point of view, the secular is roughly equivalent to what can be shared with non-Christians. In a society where Christians rub shoulders with others, one possible way of defining what is secular is to point to what can be shared with non-Christians. This is possible only so long as we are dealing with a society which lacks religious homogeneity. It obviously ceases to be possible in a society that is virtually totally Christian.

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16. I have used the term in this sense, for instance, in Markus, Saeculum, 122. Cf. Markus, End of Ancient Christianity, esp. 13–14, 134.


18. E.g., by Peña-Raiz, Qu’est-ce que la laïcité? This theme is discussed at length in chap. 3.
The two ways of defining the secular that I am suggesting seem to be related to the two meanings of ‘secularism’ distinguished by Charles Taylor.19 Taking the Wars of Religion of the seventeenth century, ‘or rather, the search in battle-fatigue and horror for a way out of them’ (32), as the starting point of modern Western secularism, Taylor distinguishes two forms of secularism as alternative exit strategies from such a situation of conflict. The first, ‘the common ground strategy’, assumes a certain range of beliefs shared by all Christians (or all theists) and minimises or eliminates confessional differences that lie outside the boundaries of this shared ground. The second tries to define ‘an independent political ethic’, a strategy he associates with Hugo Grotius. This abstracts ‘from our religious beliefs altogether’ and establishes norms, including norms for how human beings should behave towards one another in society, on which to found a public morality independent of grounds based on religious belief. It is able to provide an area ‘immune from [sic] all these warring beliefs’ (33–34), excluding these by confining them to a private sphere.

Taylor goes on to consider the problem which arises within the first model, when the area of common ground shrinks to exclude religion altogether, as it does in many modern pluralist societies. I am not concerned here with the way he proposes of dealing with the problem. Rather, I would suggest that the two models shade into each other, in proportion to the extent that a given society lacks religious homogeneity. When all confessional differences are eliminated from the public realm, the shared sphere remaining may include common Christian (or theistic) features shared by them. If so, the residual common ground between them will include some Christian (or religious) elements. If the heterogeneity embraces non-Christian groups, as it now does in much of Western Europe and North America (and elsewhere), all that can be shared is a reduced, nonreligious, common ground; and that will be in effect equivalent to the ‘independent political ethic’.20 Given sufficient diversity, at the limit, the highest common factor shared by virtually all within the society, whatever their religious affiliations, will coincide with what can be established without reference to religion.

19. Charles Taylor, 'Modes of Secularism', in Secularism and Its Critics, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (New Delhi, 1998), 31–53. Further citations to this work are given parenthetically in the text.

20. This will turn out to have close relations to John Rawls’s conception of ‘justice as fairness’, which I consider in chap. 3.
In other words, the two models may be different in principle: the ‘independent political ethic’ strategy seeks to construct a political ethic from the ground up, so to speak, without reference to any religious basis, whereas the ‘common ground’ model works from the top down, excluding as much religious reference as is peculiar to one or more groups but not generally shared within the community. But the difference in practise implied by the two models is a matter of degree, depending on the range of religious and moral diversity that obtains at any given time. The bounds of consensus will shrink in proportion to the extent of religious heterogeneity within the community and broaden in proportion to the extent of religious homogeneity. At the limit, in a society which is virtually homogeneous in respect of its religion, the first way of defining what is secular would cease to be applicable.

This is just what came into being in the course of the emergence of Western Christendom from Roman Late Antiquity—a ‘desecularisation’ which is the reverse of what happened in the Wars of Religion. If a notion of the secular were to apply in such a society, it would have to be defined in more problematic terms: as what does not form part of a religious discourse. To define a secular sphere, the members of a ‘Christian society’ would have, so to speak, to imagine the kind of consensus that could be achieved if their Christianity were not virtually universally shared in their society. In Roman society, right down at any rate to the sixth century—which, as I shall suggest in my last chapter, is the watershed in this respect—the reverse was the case, as it is in our modern industrial societies.

It must be evident that any discussion of the secular will impinge at many points on a number of controversial political and theological topics. Among theologians the trend towards a ‘secular theology’ has lost much of its appeal and has given way to theological perspectives hostile to it: not only in the Barthian tradition, but in the work of the theologians claiming the designation of ‘radical orthodoxy’, in the attacks on ‘Constantinianism’ of John Howard Yoder, and in the work of distinguished moral theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas and Oliver O’Donovan.21 Much of the argument of this book will in fact turn out to be an implicit dialogue, often indeed made explicit, with some of these thinkers. Oliver O’Donovan’s great work

21. Cf. the opening sentence of Song’s Christianity and Liberal Society: ‘Ever since Karl Barth’s inversion of nineteenth-century cultural Protestantism in the early decades of the twentieth century, the predominant attitude of Christian theology towards its surrounding culture has been one of critical distance rather than uncritical legitimation.’
The Desire of the Nations\textsuperscript{22} has especially been a constant intellectual challenge as well as a source of inspiration, and I have frequently had to find my way of coming to terms with the views propounded there, sometimes by following the signposts, more often by distancing myself from them.

The core of my argument in this book can be briefly summarised. Its substance is that Christian tradition has a legitimate place for the autonomy of the secular, even though for many centuries this was eclipsed in its awareness, and despite the perpetual undertow of what we have become accustomed to call ‘triumphalism’ in Christian political and cultural attitudes. (By ‘triumphalism’ I mean approving, supporting, or, in their absence, hankering after the conditions which allow institutional religious influence or domination to bear on the legal, cultural, or political structures within the surrounding society; or, put another way, the inclination to approve the subjection of a society’s culture or its legal or political institutions to religious groups or their views. My use of the term has affinities, without being quite synonymous, with what French theorists call intégrisme,\textsuperscript{23} as well as with what some theologians have called ‘Constantinianism’.\textsuperscript{24}

In the first chapter I begin with the roots of the notion of a secular realm in the New Testament, and its emergence and fortunes in the early centuries down to the time of Constantine and the Christian Roman Empire. In the period between the apostolic age and Constantine the problem of the relation between Christianity and a secular society and its culture was suppressed for Christians, being in effect taken out of their hands. They saw themselves as sharply distinct in, if not separate from, the society and culture of their non-Christian fellows, marked off by boundaries imposed on them, not of their own but of outsiders’ making. Dominating this society and its culture was not even an unrealistic option. The ‘Constantinian settlement’ changed the situation radically and raised the problem in an acute form. I see this and its sequel, the new conditions engendered by the gradual Christianisation of the Roman Empire, as the great divide in Christian history. I discuss this theme in the second part of my first chapter and consider

\textsuperscript{22} Oliver O’Donovan, \textit{The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology} (Oxford, 1996).

\textsuperscript{23} See, e.g., Peña-Ruiz, Qu’est-ce que la laïcité?: ‘qui d’une certaine norme religieuse veut faire une loi politique’ (129). The term is, of course, often used in a sense more akin to ‘fundamentalism’.

\textsuperscript{24} On this, see chap. 1.
how Christians confronted the problem of adjusting themselves to the culture and society of the Empire.

In the second chapter I go on to consider the response of Augustine of Hippo, whom I continue to take to be the outstanding critic of the ideology of the Christian Empire as it had developed by the end of the fourth century and in the time of the Theodosian emperors. In the third chapter I seek to defend my view that Augustine, while far from indifferent to the moral foundations of his society, was the principal Christian thinker to defend a place for the secular within a religious, Christian interpretation of the world and of history.

In these two middle chapters I ask, first, going back more specifically to Augustine himself: Does he still look the same now, over thirty years later, as he did at the time when I interpreted his thought—often with less caution than would have been advisable—at the height of the enthusiasm for secularity, as legitimating the secular? This is one of the central themes I shall deal with in these two chapters. My main purpose will not be to reply to criticism, some of it penetrating and very much to the point, of the views I propounded then. I shall indeed have occasion to try to answer some of the objections raised, but only incidentally to my central purpose: What sort of view of human society in relation to the Kingdom of God would an appeal to an Augustinus redivivus authorise? I try to reassess Augustine’s position in relation to a number of concerns that have surfaced and become significant in theological and historical discussion as well as in the field of political theory since the 1950s and 1960s. It will be obvious that the kind of preoccupations which have shaped thinking about liberalism in recent decades lurk in the background of my thinking about Augustine.25 The place of religion in society, the idea of a secular society, and cognate issues—political pluralism, multiculturalism, problems of group and cultural identity, toleration, and the like—all these, along with what has been called the ‘Enlightenment project’, have been extensively debated, criticised, and re-

25. I am conscious of the risk of the word ‘liberal’ being misunderstood, especially in the United States. When I use it, especially in chap. 3, I have in mind the tradition of political thought from John Stuart Mill to Isaiah Berlin and John Rawls. Song has rightly remarked in Christianity and Liberal Society that liberalism is a diffuse phenomenon, with ‘no common or unitary core doctrine’ (40) but with sufficient family likeness to allow us to group together ‘thinkers who are disparate but still sufficiently close to enable us to point to a pattern of characteristic family resemblances’ (9–10). Cf. Basil Mitchell, Law, Morality and Religion in a Secular Society (Oxford, 1967), 87–102.
stated by philosophers, political thinkers, sociologists, and cultural anthropologists, as well as theologians, from several points of view in the decades since 1970. In interpreting Augustine’s legacy I shall need to touch on these debates as occasion arises and to take them into account, if only marginally.

The final chapter traces the increasingly religious orientation of Roman society and its culture, especially from the second half of the sixth century, and the eclipse of the secular at the end of antiquity and during the Christian Middle Ages in Western Europe. I shall go on—very briefly—to reflect on its rehabilitation, above all by the Blessed Pope John XXIII, in whose honour these lectures have been instituted, and the second Vatican Council. The council has, in this respect as in so many others, been a watershed for Catholic thinking. Many educated Catholics brought up in the generations which preceded it inevitably felt the tension between their Catholic loyalties and the Western culture shared with their Christian, and beyond them, non-Christian, fellows. It could almost seem as if they were required to turn their backs on a century or more of European cultural development between Pius IX and Pius XII. Pope John’s vision can be seen, and could be experienced, as a liberation from a Catholic cultural ghetto. It amounted to an acknowledgement of the secular as an autonomous realm. In this book

26. I am unable to deal with the theme in Eastern Europe, or indeed in the wider world. It is also very likely that the problems about the secular are peculiar to Christianity in its Western versions.

27. A claim has been made on behalf of John Paul II by his biographer to his being the pope responsible for bringing to an end the ‘Constantinian’ period of Christianity. According to him John Paul II was the champion of a way of conceiving a Western ideal which gives pluralism and secularity a central role. He is cast for the role of the pope who has made the most decisive break with Constantinianism:

If by ‘Constantinian Church’ we mean a church that was fully participant in public life but that tended to accept many of the canons of public life as ‘the world’ defined them, it might be argued that John Paul II has been developing a ‘post-Constantinian’ model for twenty-first-century Catholicism. . . . It is a church that . . . has reacquired a certain critical distance from the worlds of power, precisely in order to help hold those worlds accountable to universal moral norms. . . . [It] no longer seeks, and in fact flatly rejects, the mantle of coercive power as a buttress to its evangelical mission.

George Weigel, ‘Roman Catholicism in the Age of John Paul II’, in Berger, Desecularization of the World, 32.

I consider the Blessed Pope John XXIII and the second Vatican Council at the end of chap. 4.