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Is Some Form of Secularism the Best Foundation for Christian Engagement in Public Life?

A Surresponse to Hunter Baker

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I thank Hunter Baker for his thoughtful and appropriately critical response to my essay. I also thank the *Journal of Markets & Morality* for the opportunity to engage with Dr. Baker and the journal's readers. I have enjoyed and gained much from the exchange.

Baker and I disagree on several points but agree on one very important one.

We disagree about the present state of Christianity in American society. I see a situation where claiming a Christian identity is an advantage in huge swathes of public life; Baker sees it as a liability. Baker speculates that Don Soderquist presents himself as a Christian "likely at some social cost as opposed to some great benefit." I certainly do not know for sure, but the entire point of Michael Lindsay's study was to demonstrate how the social cost of publicly identifying oneself as a Christian has dramatically *diminished* in recent decades because so many corporate cultures became entwined with evangelical Christian cultures. I do not doubt that in some circles, proclaiming a Christian identity is costly, but it is worth asking how much of a liability Soderquist's Christianity could have possibly been, given how few rungs on the corporate ladder stood above his former position as vice-chairman of the world's largest company.

The idea that America today is pervasively anti-Christian is a fantasy, both because it is untrue and because many of those who hold to it seem perversely to wish it were true. If it were true, then Sarah Palin would be unknown. If it were true, then the presidential candidates in 2008 would never have gone to a forum held at Rick Warren's Saddleback Church. If it were true, then Tim Tebow would simply be a backup quarterback and not a sponsorship juggernaut. The sectors

where an American pays a price in lost business, lost career opportunities, or lost votes for proclaiming himself or herself to be a Christian are relatively few.

I have just mentioned several high-profile examples but claiming Christian identity is a boon to one's public life when stakes are lower too. A friend recently pointed out to me a television commercial for a home siding contractor (Terrell's) near Oklahoma City. The company's logo, which includes an *ichthus* symbol, appears onscreen throughout. In the first half of the ad, David Terrell explains the quality of his work. We see images of siding and energy-efficient windows being installed. In the second half, Terrell, sleeves rolled up and tie loosened, says to the camera, "Yes, I am an Oklahoma conservative Christian businessman who stands for liberty and freedom. So let's end this secular socialism right now. And remember: For the very best in siding, windows, and roofing, at the very best price, call me. Be safe, and God bless."[1]

Why does Terrell say this? To win souls for Christ? Or to win over Christian homeowners? What does his confession of faith really add? Not much. I wrote that economic actions "are intelligible without including Christian identity as a medium for carrying them out." Baker objects, accusing me of capitulating to "the Weberian logic that that the various fields of human endeavor can function perfectly well without any overarching framework of values acting as a guide." In saying so, he makes an unwarranted leap in logic. Using Christian identity as a medium for public activity does not necessarily imply recognizing a Christian system of values. Someone can use Christian identity quite insincerely as a medium for garnering business or votes and then counteract every Christian moral principle once the deal has been signed or the political office is secure.

Jesus warned about such hypocrisy in the Sermon on the Mount, saying: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven." Because talk is so cheap, Jesus says that the Father will discount it; the kingdom is open to "only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21 NIV).

With this in mind, let us consider another commercial. An ad from a siding company in Pennsylvania. P. J. Fitzpatrick includes no religious iconography or speech.[2] It is entirely secular. The ad does aim for an air of wholesomeness, however, as it features a little girl in a jumper standing in front of a fireplace. It also features images of siding, just like Terrell's. At the end of the ad, Fitzpatrick states, "I'm so confident in the quality of our craftsmanship that I guarantee your complete satisfaction in writing" as a picture of a signed document, "P.J.'s Five Star Promise," appears on screen.

Can we honestly say that Fitzgerald's ad, and his business as a whole, is unintelligible? Would having siding installed by a business that issues no theological

claims somehow reveal the moral void at the heart of secularized capitalism? I cannot vouch for Fitzpatrick's promise, but I have no reason to think it any less sincere than Terrell's indirect assertion of honesty.

The ads show us nothing more than two very similar businesses that we would have to evaluate on the quality and price of their work. Until we saw these, we could not pass meaningful judgment on their relative virtues, and the self-proclaimed Christian is not necessarily the more virtuous one. If he is, then we do not need to say that he is a good Christian businessman. He is simply a good businessman, exhibiting virtues—honesty, fairness, devotion to craft—recognizable to Christians and non-Christians alike.

I do not dispute Baker's point that our economy needs virtuous economic actors. To the extent that no one is virtuous absent the grace of God, we must say that God, and human cooperation with his grace, is essential to the best economy possible. However, that does not necessarily mean that explicit profession of faith in God in public life is essential to the best economy. Even those who do not profess Christian faith at all can receive grace; such are the "persons of good will" referred to in the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*. God is the source of virtue, whether we say so publicly or not.

Despite Baker's suggestion that I think Christianity should be wholly private, I did not in my essay use the word *private*, which often connotes that faith should have nothing to do with one's public life. As I said, Christians should maintain very active lives within the church, allowing its teachings, community, and sacraments to shape everything they do in public life.[3] I simply recommend that they keep such activity secret for now, only announcing their Christian identity when partaking in activities (like church services) that genuinely lose their intelligibility without the presupposition of Christian faith.

The last point of disagreement I want to highlight concerns Baker's claim that "many American founders … looked favorably upon religious establishments … because they saw the churches as inculcators of virtue and thus as underwriters of ordered liberty." I worry that in defending Christianity on these grounds, Baker cedes considerable ground to Christianity's intellectual opponents and sets up a God of the sociological gaps.

The danger of appealing to Christianity's positive social function is that it substitutes a theological defense of Christianity for a sociological one. It admits that it is right to judge Christianity on its social function and then leaves it up to sociologists to amass empirical evidence for and against Christianity's positive social effects. Baker identifies secular sociologists as the enemies of Christendom who spurred evangelicals' public backlash. By shifting the terms of debate to sociology, Baker primes them for victory, as it now becomes reasonable to

abandon Christianity should evidence suggest that it has no positive effect on a given society. Baker also leads me to wonder: What if the churches were no longer seen as useful to the American political or economic project? Would those who speak in the founders' names then be compelled to look unfavorably on churches?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whom Baker and I both seem to take as an authoritative voice, rejected all Gods of the gaps when he called for a Christianity appropriate to the "world that has come of age," in which art, science, politics, and society could operate independently from the church—even though Christians would know theologically that God is the source of beauty, truth, justice, and virtue.[4] This insight underwrote Bonhoeffer's call for Christians to be silent until a new (and worldly) Christian language could emerge.[5]

Following Bonhoeffer, I propose secrecy as a therapy to the American church's ills; I call it a therapy because I hope it need not be permanent. I hope that American Christians' approach to their public lives can change, to the point where they can speak authentically and appropriately about their faith, recognizing how little is actually gained, and how much is risked, when they blab about it on television. I grant that my prescription is strict but only because of the great temptation to let oneself off the hook, convinced that, surely, one is doing God's good work and not merely calling attention to oneself.

This brings me to the point on which I agree with Baker entirely: American Christians need more circumspection concerning their religious identity's role in public life. They can only uproot their hypocrisy through attention to grace and internal deliberation about the difference between genuine witness and cheap talk. They must recognize the subtle ways they have turned the cross into a logo and prayer into a sales pitch. They must confess their sins and support each other's progress toward a more authentic language and posture in public life. I think this means they need to speak of faith behind closed doors for a time. When they emerge, we will know them by the fruit of this secret life.

Notes

1. Video available online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWCTxCjgDik (accessed August 5, 2010).

2. Video available online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gySkFscICvs (accessed August 5, 2010).

3. The sociologist Alan Wolfe proposes the useful middle category of "publics" that have internal lives of their own, but whose activity bears on wider economic and political life. The church is one such public. See Alan Wolfe, "Public and Private in Theory

and Practice: Some Implications of an Uncertain Boundary," in *Public and Private in Theory and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy*, ed. Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kumar (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 182–203.

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enlarged edition, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 327.

5. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 300.