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P A P E R S
towards a biblical mind

Secularisation: is it inevitable?

by John Coffey

'[By] the twenty-first century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture.'

Peter Berger, sociologist, *The New York Times*, 1968

'the assumption that we live in a secularised world is false: The world today, with some exceptions...is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever.'

Peter Berger, *The Desecularization of the World*, 1999

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Summary

It has long been believed that secularisation is the inevitable by-product of modernisation, and that the rise of modern science, pluralism, and consumerism is sure to usher in the decline of religion. This secularisation myth has functioned as a 'master narrative', shaping the way we look at the world. It has boosted the self-confidence of generations of non-believers and left believers feeling doomed and outdated. However, in recent years, sociologists of religion have become increasingly sceptical about traditional secularisation theory. This paper explains why this is so, and argues that Christians should not succumb to cultural pessimism.¹

Introduction

Assessing the spiritual state of the modern world is no easy task. For some Christians the appropriate response is the Jeremiad, a prophetic lament over the wasteland of contemporary society, ravaged by secularisation, and over a church that is hopelessly compromised or facing catastrophic and terminal decline.² Others, by contrast, look out on the contemporary world with almost millenarian excitement, and predict a massive Christian awakening.³ This paper draws on the recent work of sociologists of religion to gain a clearer picture of our situation. Although their work is no substitute for theological analysis of contemporary culture, their empirical studies of religion in the modern world are a valuable resource for those who want to develop a Christian understanding of modernity.

Predicting secularisation

In 1822, the great American statesman, Thomas Jefferson, predicted that 'there is not a young man now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian'.⁴ Jefferson was a poor prophet. Even as he wrote, a Second Great Awakening was sweeping America; Baptists burgeoned whilst Deism dived. Ironically, from the 1830s onwards, self-confident European atheists predicted that Jefferson's own Deistic creed was doomed to decline along with traditional Christianity. Religious faith, they asserted, belonged to the past. According to Auguste Comte, mankind was on the final stage of a long but inexorable journey from 'a theological or fictitious age' to a truly 'scientific' one.

Comte's prediction was endorsed by the founding fathers of modern social theory, including Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Sigmund Freud. Some of these writers lamented the passing of traditional religion, whilst others celebrated it, but all assumed that the forces of modernity would usher in a new secular world. And throughout the twentieth century, it was widely assumed that secularisation (understood primarily as the decline of religion) was an inevitable, irreversible and universal process. Modernisation was cast as 'the causal engine dragging the gods into retirement'.⁵ Religion would be overwhelmed by industrialisation, science, urbanisation and consumerism.

¹ I am grateful to David Smith of the Whitefield Institute for comments on this paper.

² See, for example, David Wells, *No Place for Truth*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993; *God in the Wasteland*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994; *Losing our Virtue*, Leicester: IVP, 1998. Significantly, Wells builds on the sociological literature of the 1960s and 1970s. By contrast, this paper draws on more recent sociological writing, which tends to be more sceptical of secularisation theory.

³ This is particularly true of some charismatics and Pentecostals.

⁴ Quoted in Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

⁵ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 59.

Such assumptions are still deeply embedded in the minds of many educated Westerners. Journalists and academics often take the decline of religion for granted, and traditional religious believers are viewed as living anachronisms, cognitive dinosaurs struggling to survive in a hostile new environment. Although there is a vague awareness that many parts of the planet are still disconcertingly religious, this is simply because they are lagging behind us on the road to modernity. Mankind is on a single, linear path to secularity: we Europeans are in the vanguard, but eventually even Africans, Arabs and Texans will catch up.

The reality of secularisation

It is easy to see why this story has gained acceptance, for secularisation is a reality. In sixteenth-century Europe, there was plenty of scepticism and heterodoxy, but almost all intellectuals were Christian theists. In twenty-first century Europe, however, most intellectuals no longer believe in the Christian God, or in any god at all. In sixteenth-century Europe, the church was at the heart of every community and religion was a ubiquitous presence. In twenty-first century Europe, the majority of the population rarely, if ever, attend church, and most aspects of life are carried on with little or no reference to religion.

Take England as a case study.⁶ In 1851, approximately 40 per cent of the English population was present at church or chapel on census Sunday. By the year 2000, only 7.5 per cent of the adult population attended church on an average Sunday. In 1900, 65 per cent of live births were baptized in the Anglican church; by 1993, this had dropped to 27 per cent. As late as the 1950s, around 40 per cent of English children were enrolled in Sunday Schools; today it is below 10 per cent. And the vast majority of those who have stopped participating in Christian churches have not become actively involved in other religions. In the year 2000, a MORI poll asked British young people, 'Do you have any religious beliefs?'; a huge 77 per cent answered 'No'.

The limits of secularisation

Yet despite the rapid dechristianisation of Europe, the late twentieth century witnessed a dramatic resurgence of religion in many other parts of the world. Ever since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, 'Islamic fundamentalism' and various forms of religious nationalism have been recognised as a major factor in global politics. In the United States, evangelical Protestants re-emerged as a significant force in the 1970s, and the Religious Right has played a leading role in national politics.⁷ In the former USSR and in China, decades of officially imposed secularism were followed by significant desecularisation in the 1980s and 1990s. Eastern Orthodoxy, Islam, traditional Chinese religion, and evangelical Protestantism flourished as atheistic Marxism declined. And although it rarely registered with the press, the big story in twentieth-century Christianity was Pentecostalism, which from the humblest of beginnings in the first decade of the century grew explosively to become a worldwide movement of perhaps a quarter of a billion people.⁸

Even in Europe, the heartland of secularisation, religion refused to do the decent thing and wilt away without a fuss. Pope John Paul II and the Roman Catholic Church played a critical role in the collapse of the Communist regime in Poland, an event that produced a domino effect across Eastern Europe. Communism had set out to supplant Christianity; but the churches were having the last laugh.⁹ Even more problematic for secular liberals were the new immigrant communities – Turks, Indians, Pakistanis, North Africans – who failed to see why they should stop taking their religion seriously in order to be good Europeans.

Political theorists, a pretty secular bunch, found themselves discussing Islamic headscarves, blasphemy laws, and religious education. Western governments, despairing at their inability to tackle chronic social problems of crime and drug abuse, discovered a new enthusiasm for faith-based charities and community programmes. Commentators on British church decline recognised that the overall downward trend masked some significant countertrends; whilst attendance figures for some denominations (e.g. Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, United Reformed) were in freefall, others were holding their own or growing (e.g. Baptists, Pentecostals, new churches). Evangelicals, in particular, were not experiencing any significant decline, and the late twentieth century

witnessed the emergence of London megachurches, major church planting programmes, and the phenomenal popularity of 'Alpha' courses.¹⁰

Finally, at the turn of the millennium, hard-nosed secular rationalism jostled side-by-side with a range of eclectic and mystical spiritual beliefs and practices associated with the New Age movement and Eastern religions. Sociologists of religion began to talk about 'the revenge of God' (Gilles Kepel), 'the return of the sacred' (Daniel Bell), 'the resurgence of religion' (David Westerlund), and 'the desecularisation of the world' (Peter Berger). Some experts even suggested that secularisation theory should be buried and left to rest in peace.¹¹

Three forms of secularisation

If burying secularisation theory is a step too far, the theory does require a major overhaul. José Casanova has argued that the traditional secularisation thesis elided three quite different processes: social differentiation, the privatisation of religion, and the decline of religion. Of these, only differentiation is the well-nigh inevitable by-product of modernisation – the privatisation and decline of religion are both contingent processes which can be avoided.¹²

Differentiation: the collapse of religious hegemony

The one process identified by secularisation theorists that does seem inevitable in modern societies is the collapse of religious hegemonies, and the differentiation of secular spheres – the state, the economy, media and education – from the religious sphere. In medieval Christendom, the Christian church enjoyed an ideological monopoly and exercised significant institutional control over the state, the economy, welfare, law and education. However, the process of modernisation has effectively destroyed Christendom. Modernisation has entailed a dramatic shift from ideological uniformity to pluralism, and from institutional cohesion to differentiation. As Christendom became increasingly pluralistic in the wake of the Reformation, ecclesiastical monopolies were placed under considerable strain.¹³

In the highly pluralistic and complex societies of modernity, it is very difficult indeed for a religious community to re-establish ideological hegemony or control the institutions of society. Attempts to reverse the process of differentiation, and reassert the hegemony of Christianity in modern societies like the United States, do indeed seem doomed. The modern era has witnessed 'the transformation of the church from a state-oriented to a society-oriented institution. Churches cease being or aspiring to be state compulsory institutions and become free religious institutions of civil society'.¹⁴ According to the eminent sociologist of religion, David Martin, this 'breaking up of monopolies and hegemonic systems, and the freeing of different spheres – state, market, law, arts, education – from ecclesiastical or political domination' may well be 'the enduring core of secularisation theory'.¹⁵

Privatisation: the relegation of religion to the private sphere

Does modernisation entail a second process, the privatisation of religion? If by privatisation we mean that religion loses its control of the state, and no longer provides the official language of public discourse, the answer is probably 'Yes'. In Britain at least, the language of politics seems to have become thoroughly secularised. However, if we mean that religion becomes a purely private, personal matter, the answer is 'No'. As Casanova explains, voluntary religious movements that accept differentiation and their own loss of monopoly and control can still make a major impact in the public sphere of civil society. The American Civil Rights movement, the pro-life movement, the South African Truth and Reconciliation movement, and Polish Solidarity are all examples of distinctively modern 'public religion'.

In recent years, British Christians have been heavily involved in campaigns over Third World debt, abortion, unemployment, Sunday trading, asylum seekers, and the arms trade. The church may have lost control of various spheres of society, but Christians still participate fully in civil society and in the public debates of democratic societies. In education, for example, the Church of England long ago lost its monopoly, but Christians continue to make a major contribution through church schools, assemblies, religious studies classes,

10 'Faith and Values', in M. Moynagh and R. Worsley, eds, *Tomorrow: Using the Future to Understand the Present*, 2000.

11 Stark and Finke, 'Secularisation R.I.P.', in *Acts of Faith*, ch. 3.

12 José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, University of Chicago Press, 1994.

13 See C. John Sommerville, *The Secularization of Early Modern England: From Religious Culture to Religious Faith*, Oxford University Press, 1992.

14 Casanova, *Public Religions*, 220.

15 David Martin, 'Sociology, religion and secularization', *Religion*, 25, 1995, 302.

16 Casanova, *Public Religions*, *passim*.

17 See Bruce Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.

6 See C. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, London: Routledge, 2001.

7 See Martin Marty, ed., *The Fundamentalisms Project*, 5 vols, University of Chicago Press, 1987–1995.

8 See Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, London: Cassell, 1996. Cox's book reflects the swing towards scepticism about secularisation since he wrote *The Secular City* in the 1960s.

9 See David Martin, *Forbidden Revolutions: Pentecostalism in Latin America, Catholicism in Eastern Europe*, London: SPCK, 1996.

Christian Unions and engagement in educational debates. Monopoly has collapsed, but influence remains. Although Christians often lament the collapse of their hegemony, the loss of political power can be a blessing in disguise. Only when the Catholic church abandoned its hegemonic ambitions and embraced modern principles of religious liberty and human rights, did it begin to play a key role in the process of democratisation.¹⁶ Early Christianity itself flourished in a pluralistic context, and the fact that the early church was not entangled with the powers that be meant that it was prophetic, not that it was privatised.¹⁷

Decline: the withering of organised religion and religious belief

The element of traditional secularisation theory that is most widely questioned among contemporary sociologists of religion is the claim that modernisation leads (inevitably) to the decline of religion. For instead of withering away, organised religion is a vigorous presence in many parts of the modern world. Whilst participation in churches has fallen sharply in many modern European societies, the picture is complicated. In 1990, only 10 per cent of the French attended church at least once a week, but 40 per cent of the Italians and 81 per cent of the Irish.¹⁸ Moreover, in the United States, the modern society par excellence, around 40 per cent of the population attend church on a regular basis. Secularisation theorists try hard to explain this 'anomaly',¹⁹ but writers like David Martin and Peter Berger are now suggesting that instead of assuming American exceptionalism, we should be asking whether Europe itself might be exceptional in its secularism.²⁰

Moreover, even in highly 'secularised' countries like Britain, religious beliefs are still very common. Many who do not attend church still retain traditional Christian beliefs, a phenomenon that has been dubbed 'believing without belonging'.²¹

As for those who have abandoned traditional Christianity, many have adopted other forms of religiosity rather than becoming secularists. Post-Christians are not necessarily non-religious. The England football coach, Glenn Hoddle, may have lost his job when he suggested that the disabled were suffering for misdeeds committed in a past life, but according to surveys, a quarter of the British believe in reincarnation.²²

Dechristianisation is a reality, and over the past three decades the growth of atheism and agnosticism has accelerated in both Europe and the United States. But the complexity of the picture throws a simple 'decline of religion' thesis into question. And even where religion has collapsed, we still need to ask whether this is the inevitable by-product of modernisation.

Explaining religious decline

We have seen that modernisation does seem to involve a process of differentiation; as societies become more complex and pluralistic, civil society and the state are removed from ecclesiastical control. However, it seems to be the case that the privatisation and decline of religion are far from inevitable. In the modern world, religion has not been privatised, and the picture with regard to organised religion and religious belief is very mixed. Secularisation in these areas does not seem to be a simple by-product of modernisation.

Global factors: the impact of modernity

Yet according to the traditional view, key universal features of modernity tend to corrode religious faith. Industrialisation and rationalisation were often cited as the forces that would desecralise the world. But it is now clear that churches and other religious organisations can thrive in highly industrialised and rationalised societies. Urbanisation sometimes coincides with religious decline, but it is often associated with church growth,²³ and in many parts of the world today the megacity has spawned the megachurch. Mass entertainment is also a weak candidate. No society has more mass entertainment than the United States, but it does not appear to have led to any noticeable decline in church attendance.

The pluralism of modern societies is another possibility. Sociologists have often suggested that pluralism corrodes religious faith; the existence of so many religions making competing truth claims undermines the plausibility of religious

belief. Yet we all know that pluralistic societies contain many people with strong religious beliefs – if this were not the case they would not be pluralistic societies! Indeed, a recent study has argued that American evangelicalism positively thrives on pluralism, because living in a pluralistic context causes evangelicals to sharpen their distinctive religious identities.²⁴ More recently, some sociologists have suggested that postmodernity, with its expressive individualism and consumerism, undermines traditional religion. In both Scotland and the Netherlands, the most dramatic collapse in church attendance has happened since the 1960s under postmodern conditions. But equally some forms of religion seem to thrive in a postmodern situation. This is most obviously true of New Age spirituality, but also of charismatic and Pentecostal forms of evangelicalism, which chime in with the expressive individualism of postmodernity.²⁵

Nor is there strong evidence for science as an agent of secularisation. A recent survey of American scientists revealed that in 1996 (as in 1916), approximately 40 per cent believed in a personal God.²⁶ Indeed, academics working in the hard sciences are more likely to be religious believers than those working in the humanities. Science itself is not a secularising force. The one factor that may seem to correlate quite closely with the secularisation of belief is Western-style higher education. Although Americans are noted for their religiosity, there is strong evidence that social élites are quite highly secularised. Yet in both Western Europe and the United States, people with a higher education are more likely to be actively involved in churches than those with little education.²⁷ Hardline secularisation theorists would be puzzled to learn that since its founding in 1978 the Society of Christian Philosophers has become the largest single sub-group within the American Philosophical Association.²⁸

None of the universal features of modernity can explain why some parts of the modern world are much more highly secularised than others. The impact of these factors is dependent on the specific context in which they operate. Global factors are poor predictors of secularisation, and we can only really explain religious decline with reference to independent variables present within highly secularised societies.

Local factors: the impact of contingent historical experience

Increasingly, scholars are coming to the view that secularisation as religious decline is a profoundly contingent process, conditional upon a set of local variables. The secularity of England or France, for example, cannot be accounted for by reference to the universal process of modernisation. Instead we must examine the fate of religion in these countries with reference to local factors connected with their unique historical experience. The presence of a state church and a parish system which inhibited vigorous evangelism by minority groups may partly explain the low participation in churches compared to America. In much of Europe, the identification of Christianity with political conservatism also encouraged the growth of anti-clerical hostility to organised religion. Alternatively, we could explore the devastating impact of the First World War, or the debilitating influence of theological liberalism which was more prevalent in Europe than in America. Within the American context, by contrast, the absence of a state church and the existence of a relatively deregulated religious economy permitted the dramatic expansion of populist denominations like the Baptists and Methodists who succeeded in making church-going popular among both blacks and whites.²⁹

This case-by-case approach is dramatically different to the traditional unidirectional view, according to which the secularity of France or Britain was the result of a universal modernising process yet to take effect in other parts of the world. On the old Eurocentric model, European societies were the 'lead societies', forging ahead on the road to complete modernisation. Other nations needed time to catch up, and the United States was a bizarre anomaly. But if European secularity is the result of a set of uniquely local circumstances, it will not necessarily be replicated elsewhere, and may even be reversed. The simple, teleological 'master narrative' of secularisation cannot predict the fate of religion in the modern world. The prime effect of modernisation is not the decline of religion (secularisation), but the growth of religious and ideological plurality (diversification).

18 Grace Davie, 'Europe: the exception that proves the rule?', in P. Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

19 Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World*, Oxford University Press, 1996, ch. 6.

20 David Martin, 'Religion, secularisation, and post-modernity', in P. Repsted, ed., *Religion and Modernity*, Oxford: Scandinavian University Press, 1996.

21 Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.

22 See Grace Davie, 'Religion in modern Britain', *Sociology*, 34, 2000.

23 See Callum Brown, 'A revisionist approach', in Steve Bruce, ed., *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians debate the Secularization Thesis*, Oxford University Press, 1992.

24 Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, University of Chicago Press, 1998.

25 See David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*, Cambridge: Polity, 2000, esp. ch. 6.

26 E. J. Larson and L. Witham, 'Scientists are still keeping the faith', *Nature*, 3 April 1997, 435–6.

27 See the statistics in Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 76–77.

28 See K. J. Clark, ed., *Philosophers who Believe*, Grand Rapids: IVP, 1993.

29 See the seminal studies by Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989; and R. Stark and R. Finke, *The Churched of America, 1776–1990*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992.

Implications

Recognising the weaknesses of secularisation theory has some significant implications that ought to encourage Christians:

1 *Christianity is not doomed*

Ever since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, critics of orthodox Christianity have suggested that it is doomed by modernity. Deists like Jefferson and atheists like Comte were convinced that history was on their side. Even today, the modernist bishop John Spong announces that the old 'theistic' God 'is doomed to die, no matter how frantically or hysterically people seek to defend it. It will not survive'. Yet if anything is struggling to survive, it is Spong's modernist Christianity. In the bishop's own diocese, attendance has declined by more than 40 per cent during his time in office, while elsewhere in the Anglican communion, evangelical churches are thriving.

Moreover, once we adopt a global perspective, things look even healthier. The past three centuries may have seen a dramatic decline of European Christianity, but they have also witnessed the global expansion of Christianity. In 1500, less than 100 million Christians were mostly huddled in a small corner of the planet. In the year 2000, 1.9 billion Christians are scattered across every nation on the face of the earth. If Christianity has lost its hegemony in the West, other ideologies have lost their hegemony elsewhere and spaces have opened up for church growth. The 'Christianity is doomed' approach is mired in ethnocentrism. Even in the West, the precipitous decline of the Christian churches has more to do with contingent local factors than with universal structural trends. The decline of religion is not the inevitable by-product of modernisation, and it is not irreversible.

2 *Churches can grow in modern societies*

In post-war Britain and America, evangelical churches have flourished while liberal churches have declined. The traditional explanation for this is that strict and conservative religions thrive because they offer dogmatic certainties to their members and demand a great deal in return.³⁰ There is some truth in this, but several important studies have pointed out that during the past fifty years, church growth in Britain and America has been driven by a self-consciously moderate evangelicalism which has deliberately relaxed many of the old strictures associated with fundamentalism.

In the past two decades, the most dynamic American evangelical movements have been the so-called 'new paradigm' churches like Vineyard, Calvary Chapel and Willow Creek. These groups seem to flourish because they avoid the fundamentalist option of isolationist separatism, and the liberal option of radical accommodation. They are both recognisably traditional (even supernaturalist) in their beliefs, and well-attuned to contemporary culture. They are faithful to Christian orthodoxy, and culturally adaptable and inventive.³¹ Maintaining this balance is not always easy. While some evangelicals are tempted to return to fundamentalism, others are naively enthusiastic about cultural accommodation.³² Taking the middle way is the most promising route.

3 *Religious pluralism is as great a challenge as secularism*

In a pluralistic society, it is important that Christian mission and theological reflection address the New Age, the occult and the world religions as well as secular culture. In some ways, desecularisation is a welcome development, for it highlights the intellectual and spiritual inadequacy of secular materialism. But

the Bible is packed with examples of bad religion – religion that is idolatrous, hypocritical, exploitative, or oppressive (Exodus 32; Isaiah 44; Matthew 23; Luke 18:9–14; Revelation 13). Religion is not necessarily a good thing. Although Christians can admire many things in other religious traditions, we must also maintain the biblical stress on the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ (John 14:6, Acts 4:12, Philippians 2:10–11).

4 *Christianity need not be privatised*

The collapse of European Christendom has left many Western Christians feeling shell-shocked. Christianity is no longer the 'sacred canopy' covering society, and we are witnessing the disestablishment of Christian morality following on the heels of the disestablishment of Christian belief. Although it is possible to celebrate our 'liberation' from Christendom, there is much to lament as well.³³ But if desecularisation theorists are right, Christianity need not become a privatised religion. In Scripture, God's people made an impact as minorities in a pagan society; e.g. Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 41); Daniel in Babylon (Daniel 1–6); Esther and Mordecai in Persia; Christians in the Roman world. In plural democracies, Christians can perform an important prophetic function, speaking truth to power and acting as 'a voice for the voiceless'. Our Christianity can still be an important force for good in our society, and we must resist the temptation to domesticate and privatise our faith.

Conclusion

At the start of Christianity's third millennium, Western Christians are tempted to despair. Secularisation can seem unstoppable. Yet although Christianity in the West has taken a severe battering in the last three centuries, even here there are many signs of life – growing churches, intellectual vitality, compassionate social action. And given the reality of globalisation and cultural exchange, we are no longer insulated from the revitalising influence of dynamic Christian movements in other parts of the world. Being a Christian in the third millennium will not be easy, and will require considerable imagination, but there are good reasons to be encouraged.

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- 30 See Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*, New York: Harper and Row, 1972.
31 Donald Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996; Mark Shibley, 'Contemporary evangelicals: born again and world affirming', *Annals, AAPSS*, 558, 1998; Smith, *American Evangelicalism*.
32 I am thinking here of the starkly contrasting tendencies of e.g. Iain Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000, and Dave Tomlinson, *The Post Evangelical*, London: SPCK, 1995.
33 For contrasting views of Christendom see Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991; and Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

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