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*View of Paris taken from the Port  
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## Contact Information

Reprint permissions and journal exchanges:

Executive Editor—Jordan Ballor

[jballor@acton.org](mailto:jballor@acton.org)

Subscriptions, renewals, and change of  
address corrections:

Customer Service Manager—Kimberly Brink

[kbrink@acton.org](mailto:kbrink@acton.org)

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[dlohmeier@acton.org](mailto:dlohmeier@acton.org)

Art Director—Peter H. Ho

[pho@acton.org](mailto:pho@acton.org)

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# **Controversy**

*Jonathan Malesic*

*Hunter Baker*

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

*Jonathan Malesic\**  
*Assistant Professor of Theology*  
*King's College*  
*Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania*

“I don’t see that Christ was a patsy. He was ambitious.” So said Don Soderquist, a Wal-Mart executive and evangelical Christian, in an interview for *Faith in the Halls of Power*, a book by the sociologist D. Michael Lindsay.<sup>1</sup> The remark is good news for a certain kind of American striver: not only *may* one be both a Christian and a powerful executive, but in taking the path to corporate success one follows in the footsteps of the Lord.

This and other versions of the success gospel prevalent in America today are but symptoms of a chronic sickness whereby Christianity is made to serve the ends of the individual’s public life. This sickness severely compromises the integrity of Christian language, worship, and community, at times attenuating their strength, at other times utterly perverting them. Because of the damage this sickness can do, American Christians need to impose a form of secularism on themselves as a therapeutic measure.

The damage is visible in Soderquist’s assertion. In it, one of the greatest virtues in American public life—encompassing politics, the workplace, the marketplace, and the media—has been imported into Christian thinking. Of course, ambition is not remotely a Christian virtue; those who tout it as one twist the

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\* Jonathan Malesic is assistant professor of theology at King’s College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, and author of *Secret Faith in the Public Square: An Argument for the Concealment of Christian Identity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), which won the 2009 gold medal for the religion category in *ForeWord* magazine’s Book of the Year Awards.

New Testament into conformity with the gospel of entrepreneurial capitalism. Jesus may have been a carpenter, but he was not a builder. Even the kingdom of God, a lofty thing to be sure, was not Jesus' ambition, because for him the kingdom was not a goal that might, with a sound plan and the right effort, be attained. It was a reality that he had already made possible and that his disciples would partake in: "A time is coming and has now come" (John 4:23 NIV). Then there is the Sermon on the Mount, which praises the exact opposite of ambition. Soderquist's dichotomy between the ambitious person and the patsy invites the response Jesus gave when Simon Peter glossed over the suffering the Son of Man must undergo: "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Mark 8:33 NIV).

The all-too-human ambition and competitiveness that animate American public life lead American Christians to sell off their religious identity for worldly success. This is a second major symptom of the sickness. We do not practice identity politics in this country quite so much as we do identity economics—manufacturing, selling, and consuming identities—and Christians are no less eager participants in this economy than anyone else. Lindsay's book describes the networks that have supported the advancement of evangelical elites in many sectors of public life. Christian identity gets one through the doors to these networks, just as identity as an Elk or a Pi Phi grants access to other networks.<sup>2</sup> In addition, much of the logic governing the selection of a fraternal organization to join—evaluating the network's strength, perks, reach, its members' prominence—operates as well in evangelical elites' decisions to join churches or bible study groups. Indeed, many of the networks' ties form while their members are in college, training to be elites, the same as their peers on fraternity row.<sup>3</sup>

The existence of these networks, the insistence on a highly visible Christian identity, and an "elastic orthodoxy" ready to accommodate the bloated excess of American public life together yield a class of cosmopolitan evangelicals driven by typical careerism and floating free from the constraints of doctrine or, sometimes, a local church community.<sup>4</sup> Lindsay himself has a fairly benign view of the evangelical elites he interviewed. He probably meant for the *in* of the book's title to designate locations newly opened to the visibly Christian. Instead, it indicates this kind of faith's object: In the forms and forums of American power—places where God can be brought in if he might help your career. This is a perverse form of Christianity, detached from church tradition and running counter to Paul's admonishment "not [to] be conformed to this world, but [to] be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2 NRSV).

One cause of this sickness is confusion about the priority of Christianity's sociological and theological dimensions. As a social reality in the world, the Christian church confers an identity on its members and provides them with peers who might form a network. However, Christians have traditionally seen the church in theological terms as well, understanding themselves as, for example, the body of Christ—a reality not reducible to sociological terms. While the sociological nature of the church is undeniable, it should not be placed ahead of the church's theological nature if Christians want to remain true to their traditional ideals. In this respect, critics of Christianity such as Marx and Nietzsche, who accused Christians of using theology as a mask for agendas to gain worldly power, do the church a great service by helping recall it to its proper priorities.

Once they have subordinated the theological to the sociological, Christians begin to see the church as *only* a network—another advantage exploitable in our competitive public life. The theological truth is that Christian identity is not meant to be *for* any worldly good at all. It is merely an epiphenomenon of the faith that incorporates someone into the body of Christ. Being seen as a Christian in public adds nothing to being a Christian, and the latter is of infinitely greater theological importance. When job seekers rely on Christian fellowship networks to aid their careers, then Christian identity has been jumbled with professional identity. Ironically, then, by assuming that Christian identity should be displayed even at work or in politics, so that they can witness to the gospel and sanctify the secular, Christians blunt that witness and sully the sacred. When Christians treat their religious identity as a stand-in for other criteria for gaining worldly rewards, they make Christian witness no different from a brand name or an alumni association membership.

A second cause of the sickness is sin. From a theological perspective, humans appear prone to inordinate desires and to abusing goods for base purposes. Selling off a higher, abstract good (like fidelity to the church's theological nature) for a lower, more palpable good is a common human maneuver, though one that Christianity teaches Christ died and rose so that humans could overcome. Christians are fortunate—indeed, graced by God—to recognize their sinfulness and to be able to do something about it.

In light of this, self-imposed secularism can help preserve Christianity against Christians' own corrupt tendency to exploit their being Christian for anything other than the highest theological purposes. This secularism should take the form of concealing Christian identity when acting in the public spheres of politics, the economy, and culture.<sup>5</sup>

In all of this, what do I mean by *secularism*? The term is used in varying ways, such that countries with religious publics as divergent as France's, Turkey's,

and the United States' can all be considered secular. In his book *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor outlines three distinct, though related, senses of secularism: the public sphere's independence from explicit divine or ecclesial sanction, the decline in belief in God, and the emergence of a condition in which belief and unbelief are seen as equally legitimate options for the modern individual.<sup>6</sup> It is the first of these that I maintain American Christians should support in order to save the distinctiveness of Christian identity from themselves.

Just as sound waves cannot propagate in a vacuum, the various aspects of modern public life operate only within a medium. The economy is one such medium, in which public activities like producing and selling occur. This essay occurs within the medium of public academic debate. It is helpful to think of a continuum of secularism, such that aspects of public life are secular to the degree that the media in which they operate are independent of religious sanction.

The networks of cosmopolitan evangelicals are antiseccular efforts in that they try to make Christianity a thicker medium for public life. A business owner who includes the outline of a fish on his or her advertisements in the hope of drawing in Christian patrons likewise pushes public life in a less secular direction, as he depends partly on religious symbolism and commitment to conduct business.

Virtually all actions in our economic sphere are intelligible without including Christian identity as a medium for carrying them out. Employees can be hired based on their perceived ability to do a job, or, for that matter, on their being an Elk or a Pi Phi. Adding Christianity as a medium for these public activities does not increase the intelligibility of them, but it can corrupt significant aspects of Christianity. By concealing Christian identity in public life, Christians would help disable the circulation of their religious identity in arenas where it does not help, thus removing the temptation to sin by subordinating a theological reality to a sociological one.

This does not mean that Christians should ignore their religious commitments when engaging in public life. These commitments are meaningless if they do not inform how a Christian votes, conducts business, or consumes. However, it is not necessary to openly declare that one thinks theologically before making economic decisions. One can simply do it and leave the reasoning behind it unsaid—or give a reason in nontheological terms. In this way, Christians do not succumb to all logics governing the arenas of public life, but they do respect their secularity.

Likewise, one can evaluate the extent to which the actions of others conform to Christian norms, rather than evaluating their (often empty) words. The atheist who does business in accordance with Christian principles of justice more properly deserves Christians' support than does the nominal Christian who exploits the poor. Saying otherwise turns Christian identity into a team identity:

We will cheer for the players wearing the Christian jersey, no matter what they actually do on the field. Thus, secrecy—as a means of allowing the world its secularity—becomes a way to take religious commitment more seriously than the rampant superficial publication of faith does.

This argument in favor of a self-imposed secularism via concealing Christian identity in American public life is uncommon among academic theologians.<sup>7</sup> American theologians virtually take it for granted that public figures should speak with distinctively religious voices, and not only because theologians' livelihoods depend in part on Christianity's continuing to seem relevant to culture. They are guided both by the evangelistic spirit of the New Testament and the principle that simple honesty demands that a Christian holding a viewpoint for theological reasons should voice those reasons. This latter principle has led even prominent non-Christian scholars to view engagement with politics and culture in specifically religious terms as healthy for both Christianity and American democracy.<sup>8</sup>

Above all, American Christian thinkers' positions on this issue are shaped by the conviction that Christians have a special mission to demonstrate visibly the kingdom of God. They are the light of the world and the salt of the earth, or as the second-century Christian document known as the *Letter to Diognetus* says, "the Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body."<sup>9</sup> The body is dead without the soul as its source of life, unity, and activity. Applying the letter's words to our time, Christian authors (such as Richard John Neuhaus) have argued that if the world is to become better or more just, it will become so through the work, prayer, and moral example of Christians.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Christians should actually be visible as Christians in their public lives—the more prominently, the better—so as to sanctify the secular. On this point, seemingly all types of Christians—liberal, conservative, Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox—agree.

However, the *Letter to Diognetus* takes the analogy a step further than American Christian thinkers are usually willing to go: "As the visible body contains the invisible soul, so Christians are seen living in the world, but their religious life remains unseen."<sup>11</sup> This line, unacknowledged by Neuhaus, places a severe qualification on the ways in which Christians can engage the world. Yes, Christians are special, but what makes them special does not need to be seen for them to accomplish their mission.

Christians thus have justification in one of their most ancient reflections on the relationship between Christian identity and public life for them to engage the world on secular terms, appearing outwardly no different from the rest of world's denizens, using the vocabulary and grammar of the secular contexts in which they live.

Inwardly, however, things are quite different. This is true not only in the modern individualistic sense that Christians have an inward faith in God, but in the communal sense that they are a body with an internal life characterized by a range of liturgical, spiritual, intellectual, and moral activities. This inward life bears on how Christians conduct themselves in public, but it is not itself public in the same way as working, debating politics, or shopping are.

Because Christianity is defined by something internal to the person and the community, Christianity is highly portable from culture to culture. It need not have a particular economy or politics around it in order to thrive. Thus secularism, at least the form of it I have described here, is no less Christianity's natural home than was medieval Christendom. Indeed, Christianity may be more at home in contexts where it need not bear the burdens of mediating public life.

I conclude by considering a final objection. Someone could argue that forms of secularism are not the best way for Christians to interact in American public life because the secular is a heavily tilted field of interaction, with its own norms, some of which are utterly opposed to Christian norms. A Christian might take the bias of the secular as good reason to voice opposition to the secular by using their religious tradition's vocabulary against secularity.

Such a one is right to see the secular as not always neutral but wrong to think that the danger of secularism is that it is opposed to religious voices. American secular public life is not opposed to *any* voices, precisely because it allows anything to be sold and any speech to become a form of advertising. By vocally opposing the secular, Christians end up reaffirming the competitiveness of the American secular sphere. Once again, the irony is that the attempt to distinguish Christianity from the broader culture results in Christianity's capitulation to that culture. Only public silence about one's Christianity will break this logic.

What happens when Christians in a secular world are faced with a political situation they simply cannot countenance as a matter of principle? Should they not speak in explicitly Christian terms then? Imagine the most extreme case: The secular state uses the threat of violence to coerce Christians into going along with political projects Christians strongly object to. What then?

Faced with a violently hostile secular sphere, Christians actually have a moral resource that others lack: the tradition of martyrdom. In Diognetus' time, and again during post-Reformation conflicts, the Nazi era, and other times, Christians have stood against public spheres they could not sanction. They rightly made public confessions of faith, resulting in their deaths. Such a fate, the ultimate refusal to compromise the church's theological character, is surely hard to reckon with, but Christians should not forget that following Christ means following him to Calvary.

Despite the apocalyptic rhetoric some American Christians use to denounce the present state of affairs, however, we are not remotely in such circumstances in America today. The secular is not nearly as hostile as some imagine. Indeed, in present circumstances, Christians themselves pose a greater threat to Christianity's integrity than does the secular.

## Notes

1. D. Michael Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite* (New York: Oxford, 2007), 170.
2. The journalist Jeff Sharlet has done an exhaustive study of evangelical networks within the federal government in his book, *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008). More recently, he has illustrated attempts to desecularize the armed forces in his article, "Jesus Killed Mohammad: The Crusade for a Christian Military," *Harper's*, May 2009, 31–43.
3. Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power*, 89–93.
4. Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power*, 216–18.
5. I make the full case for this in my book, *Secret Faith in the Public Square: An Argument for the Concealment of Christian Identity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009).
6. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2007), 2–3.
7. The nearest argument that I am aware of is found in Charles Marsh, *Wayward Christian Soldiers: Freeing the Gospel from Political Activity* (New York: Oxford, 2007).
8. See, for example, Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).
9. *Letter to Diognetus*, 6, in "From a Letter to Diognetus: The Christian in the World," ed. Spiritual Theology Department of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross. [http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit\\_20010522\\_diogneto\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20010522_diogneto_en.html) (accessed October 28, 2010).
10. Richard John Neuhaus, *American Babylon: Notes of a Christian Exile* (New York: Basic, 2009), 23–24.
11. *Letter to Diognetus*, 6.

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

A Response to  
Jonathan Malesic

*Hunter Baker\**  
*Associate Dean of Arts and Sciences*  
*Union University*

At the beginning of his interesting and thought-provoking argument, Jonathan Malesic relates material from Michael Lindsay's outstanding book *Faith in the Halls of Power*. I worked in Houston when the book came out and had the opportunity to speak with Dr. Lindsay, who is at Rice University, about his work on a couple of occasions.

Dr. Malesic correctly sums up part of the basic critique Lindsay offers of evangelical elites. In short, they gravitate toward para-church efforts where they can call the shots, have tenuous ties to real church congregations where they would mix with many kinds of people, have trouble finding a pastor they can identify with because of their own successes, and have not thought carefully enough about the materialism exhibited by their lifestyles.

Malesic looks at the critique provided above and adds that he sees evangelical elites wrongly using their faith as a networking and marketing tool. The prescription, in his view, is that we should embrace a form of secularism and begin a new life as secret Christians.

The first response I would offer to this, in my mind, startling conclusion is: "Why jump to *that* answer?" Secularism as a form of therapy to chasten wrong-headed Christians is an intriguing and provocative idea, but I have a hard time understanding how that would be the logical next step in addressing the issue. Would it not flow just as well or perhaps better if we were to look at the

---

\* Hunter Baker, J.D., Ph.D. is the author of *The End of Secularism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009) and associate dean of arts and sciences at Union University.

problems Michael Lindsay outlined and say that we need better discipleship, better understanding of the Scriptures, a higher view of the status of the church in the believer's life, and a stronger critique of materialism? We could work on all of these points without purposefully taking our Christianity private.

Along these lines, one could also answer Malesic by adducing examples of public Christians who successfully witness to others by going public and by integrating their faith with their professional lives. One of the great catalysts in my own conversion was the example of Jerry Lundquist, a Wheaton graduate and highly successful businessman in Florida. As a college-aged non-Christian, I thought only pastors and missionaries talked about Jesus in their everyday lives. When I first heard him speak, I was stunned to know that a businessman could take Christ so seriously. The existence of a man such as Jerry Lundquist caused me to reevaluate Christianity as an option for life in the world. Thus, even if we take for granted that Jonathan Malesic's entire characterization of some Christian businessmen is true, I am not sure why that would indicate we should take other men like Jerry Lundquist out of the game in public life. By claiming that Jesus is Lord not only of his home, family, and private life, but also of his business, he caused others, like me, to take notice and to investigate further.

In addition, I suspect Dr. Malesic underestimates the degree to which great heaping numbers of Christians would love to be thrown in the briar patch of secret Christianity he suggests as a therapeutic measure. I suspect that many Christians feel obliged to be public about their faith and would be pleased to view secrecy as a virtue. It would be like being appointed to give a speech at a public event and then finding out with a little thrill that a storm had canceled the date. Masses of believers would breathe a sigh of relief to think that their faith could be merely a private matter. The result might well prove less therapeutic and faith-strengthening and instead an invitation to spiritual sloth. A significant part of Christian maturity and spiritual development is being willing to be known and held accountable as a follower of Christ by believers and unbelievers alike.

My debate partner looks at Don Soderquist's saying that Christ was not a patsy and that he was ambitious and instead sees a kind of warped Christian triumphalism at work. I believe that is a misreading of the situation. Soderquist, like many successful men and women who are Christians, probably knows that in the worlds of Wall Street and the Fortune 500 his status as a believer in the supernatural truths of Christianity does not enhance his esteem among his peers. The truth is the opposite. Many of his fellow executives probably see his faith as a psychological crutch or some leftover from his childhood. Surely, it is at least as likely that he offers his statement about Christ's ambition in a somewhat self-defensive mode as it is that he is purposefully setting forth some prosperity

idol. I read his statement as something like, “Christ is not a patsy and neither am I for following him.” Soderquist lives in an era when Christians are expected to raise hands and be identified publicly. He does so more likely at some social cost as opposed to some great benefit.

Soderquist feels the pressure to be known as a Christian in part because one of the great priorities of the last thirty years of Christian ministry, activism, and advocacy has been centered on the theme of resisting the privatization of the faith. Rather than accepting the old nostrum that religion and politics do not make for good dinner conversation and are not topics for cocktail parties, a variety of Christian voices have prevailed to some degree in their effort to call on their fellow religionists to stand up and be counted. This movement toward public Christianity has been a conscious response to sociologists proclaiming the progressive extinction of religion in our lives and to cultural elites isolating faith as some kind of vestigial force in public life. Religion, in their view, is like the appendix. They cannot discern a useful purpose, but they hope evolution will eventually cancel it out so they will not have to countenance its disconcerting presence any longer.

Another driver of the counterrevolution by Christians and churches determined to push their flocks out into the offices, streets, factories, stores, and the like as identifiable Christians has been massive social change. *Roe v. Wade* is a prime example. Although evangelicals slept in the early 1970s, Francis Schaeffer eventually succeeded in pricking the dormant evangelical social and political conscience. Deprivatization was part of the response. Many probably wondered if they had been more alive to the relationship between faith and public life whether certain disastrous sexual and reproductive seeds would have bloomed as they did at such great cost. In any case, the mainstream press was shocked to see the sudden emergence of so many public Christians. The self-identification of elite men such as the disgraced Nixon aide Chuck Colson and President Jimmy Carter as “born-again Christians” combined with a surge in Christian political activity served stunning notice that deprivatization was afoot. Where had these people come from?

It has now become part of the expectation of serious Christians that they are willing to be known as such. Their public self-identification often functions less as a triumphalistic or egotistic expression as it does to draw unwelcome attention to the self-identifier. I recall my own time as a law student at the University of Houston. Although my occasional advocacy and/or defense of the faith in the classrooms of seventy to eighty students was sometimes uncomfortable, I discovered that in moments when I could be found alone such as in a corner of the library or walking to my car in the parking lot fellow Christians would seek me

out to thank me for representing their point of view. They felt the same burden to speak out that I did, but were often cowed by the psychological resistance to doing so. One risks becoming a figure of fun. In many worldly contexts, making one's Christian identity known can be like wearing the tonsure haircut of monks. Many Christians have learned hard lessons while bearing this responsibility. When we speak, we should do so standing on firm ground, closely guided by relevance, and taking care to speak with information and sophistication to the degree we are able to achieve it. Perhaps it would have been better for Mr. Soderquist, then, to have spoken differently rather than not at all about the character of Christ.

Now, having made a strong endorsement of public Christianity over the notion of secret Christianity, I must concede that I think Dr. Malesic is correct in his charge that the faith identity of Christians has morphed into a consuming identity. It seems as though every Christian speaker has a book to sell. If the book does well enough, then we can count on a bevy of derivative products such as a devotional, a journal notebook, a calendar, T-shirts, a compilation CD inspired by the book, and so forth. Christian products are now everywhere. They inhabit space at the most mainstream of retail outlets.

Christian marketing was not nearly so accomplished when I visited an independent Christian store in the early 1980s. Having not grown up in that subculture, I had never seen the kind of books, art, and other items that were there. Who were these people who bought this stuff, I wondered. I picked up a comic book about a police officer Christian who took in troubled teens and eventually got shot trying to save a drug addict. As a non-Christian, I found it interesting and unusual, and I had never seen anything like it in the kinds of stores I usually frequented.

Today, the non-Christian consumer, unlike my old secular self, is well aware that books by Zondervan, Thomas Nelson, Baker, InterVarsity, Crossway, and other companies exist. On balance, I cannot help but believe it is better that the large output of these companies and others is broadly available. To the degree that I find any of the products schlocky, shallow, excessively slick, or market-driven to a grasping degree, my response is again that I would push for better and more thoughtful products before I would advocate sweeping them away into a secret world of the Christian church. Malesic's therapy would lead to ghetto-ization of the faith and, at the same time, lets Christians and their church off the hook for the tough job of engaging the culture publicly. His intent is obviously benign, pure, and concerned with holiness, but in this case the remedy might be more damaging than the illness.

The second part of his case, and in my mind the more problematic one, has to do with functional differentiation. Malesic argues that, "Virtually all actions in our economic sphere are intelligible without including Christian identity as a medium

for carrying them out.” Thus, the Christian need not “declare openly” that he is thinking theologically and can leave any theological reasoning unstated. Malesic does maintain that the Christian should bend the knee of lordship to Christ in his own economic actions. The believer should simply keep his motivation to himself.

The trouble with this way of thinking about economics is that it accepts the Weberian logic that the various fields of human endeavor can function perfectly well without any overarching framework of values acting as a guide. Consider the name of the regional conferences the Acton Institute carries out from time to time: *Toward a Free and Virtuous Society*. Why does Acton choose that name for gatherings that focus to a large degree on the need for freedom in the sphere of economics? Their answer would likely be the same as it was for many in the American founding generation who understood the existence of a vital connection between freedom and virtue. *In order to have freedom, we must govern ourselves. We must have virtue. And virtue has a source.*

To the extent that we are virtuous we can be free in economics and other spheres of life. There must indeed be some overarching framework hovering above setting parameters and pointing to the good. Part of the reason why many American founders, including those without any special attachment to the Christian faith, looked favorably on religious establishments is because they saw the churches as inculcators of virtue and thus as underwriters of ordered liberty—a seminal concept in the development of civilization.

Having mentioned religious establishments, I do not mean to endorse them so much as to acknowledge that values must come from somewhere. Economics does not operate well independent of external virtues and values. Daniel Bell recognized that when he wrote about the cultural contradictions of capitalism. Pure economics, not tethered to some overarching ethos, gives us markets for everything, including those goods and services that are extraordinarily deleterious such as addictive substances, pornography, prostitution, slaves, snuff films, assassinations, and so forth. Markets, alone, give us many of the things that will severely undermine our ability to have free markets and a free society. Capitalism, without virtue, can sow the seeds of its own destruction.

Even if we only consider ordinary economic transactions, it is still the case that markets work best when tied to virtues and values that generate trust between economic actors. With trust, there is less need for the ever-increasing profusion of lawyers, litigation, regulation, and complex contracts that arises in the absence of simple good faith. Legal coercion and forced order is the price of a lack of cultural capital in the form of virtue.

Taking yet another angle on the notion of economics’ being independent from overarching considerations like theology, consider the sort of doctrine that comes

from elevating economic efficiency beyond values some might call extraneous. The one I have in mind comes from the law and economics movement and is referred to as efficient breach. Efficient breach deals with the situation in which two parties have a contract, but one party realizes it could obtain a greater advantage by contracting with a third party. Under efficient breach rules, the party wanting to break the contract would be justified in doing so as long as it could potentially compensate the party now left in the lurch. Note that the idea in efficient breach is *not* that the contract breaker would *actually* compensate the contract partner who has been hurt, but rather that the gains would be sufficient that the loser *could* be compensated. The reason an action of this type can be defended is on the basis of economic efficiency. If the net economic efficiency is greater with one party breaking its promise, then the independent logic of economics (according to this notion) justifies the act. Thus, economic efficiency justifies a lie and the abandonment of a commitment.

Virtue is demonstrably relevant to even a very worldly field of endeavor such as economics. Where does this virtue come from? Unless we believe it to be a mere assertion, virtue must have some foundation. Our faith offers such a foundation and one we believe to be true and accessible to others. The reason we, as Christians, insist on Christ's lordship—not only for us, but for everyone—in areas of life such as economics is because our faith is founded on a real event in time and space (the Resurrection) that has implications for the whole of the creation. Sin is a reality and so is the answer to sin. These realities need not dwell only in private communities and individual lives. We apply them broadly just as did Martin Luther King, Jr., in his magisterial *Letter from Birmingham Jail* and the Confessing Church did with its Barmen Declaration. Keeping strictly to our business here, I suggest it is not difficult to see how the Christian concept of sin and the pursuit of righteousness place valuable limits on economic activity that actually helps to maintain the freedom of the marketplace by preventing it from destroying itself.

To close this round, I do not doubt the wholesomeness of Dr. Malesic's suggestions regarding secret Christianity. Too often, the assays into public life by Christians evoke images of a "man-made" or "counterfeit" Christ, as Eric Metaxas has written of Bonhoeffer's feelings on the matter. However, these poor efforts, rather than leading us to abandon the field in a therapeutic exercise, must be overshadowed by a faith, as Kuyper insisted, which asserts the lordship of Christ over every square inch of creation and is, as Metaxas wrote of Bonhoeffer's faith, "shining and bright and pure and robust."

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

A Surrresponse to  
Hunter Baker

*Jonathan Malesic*  
*Assistant Professor of Theology*  
*King's College*  
*Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania*

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."<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> This insight underwrote Bonhoeffer's call for Christians to be silent until a new (and worldly) Christian language could emerge.<sup>5</sup>

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.

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

A Surrresponse to  
Jonathan Malesic

*Hunter Baker*  
*Associate Dean of Arts and Sciences*  
*Union University*

I would like to conclude this exchange by offering my thanks to the *Journal of Markets & Morality* and the Acton Institute for providing the idea and the forum. Thanks also to Jonathan Malesic for his challenging and interesting arguments regarding the public role of the Christian faith. Although we have not achieved a meeting of the minds, I think we have generated a number of points, which help clarify our respective positions.

Dr. Malesic and I disagree about whether being known as a Christian is a boon or a liability to the person willing to be identified as such. The reality is that it depends on the situation. Don Soderquist, a Wal-Mart executive, is unlikely to gain greater esteem on Wall Street because of his faith. The same is true of other cultural elites. Hollywood stars are unlikely to advance their careers by declaring their faith, and neither do sports stars. Not really. Malesic mentions Tim Tebow as an example of a Christian sports advertising juggernaut, but is the juggernaut status because he is openly Christian? No. Tebow is one of the few players who has detractors simply because of his faith. He gained tremendous acclaim because of his work ethic and what he can do on the field. He would likely be more marketable if he were to tone down his faith identity. I imagine he has already heard that from his agent. I contend that Americans generally are fine with Christians as long as they are not too Christian. Tim Tebow shows his disdain for going along to get along when, for example, he appears in a prolific Super Bowl ad. Readers are free to decide which assertions in this regard ring more true in their own experience. Certainly, it is the case that Tebow, by going public with his faith, has ensured that he will be held to a higher degree of public

accountability and will endure more scrutiny for having done so. The white-hot charge of hypocrisy can only be leveled at those who purport to stand for something. I must also address the political event at Rick Warren's church, which is offered as evidence of the great advantage of being a Christian in America. The candidates appear before the NAACP with regularity. Does this fact suggest the ascendancy of African-Americans in our culture or are we simply observing the timeless operation of politics in our democratic republic? Politicians seek out various demographic groups and ask for their support. That is how it works.

I feel I must take issue with Malesic's portrayal of Michael Lindsay's book *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite*. Malesic contends that "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." Lindsay's book is an in-depth study of evangelical elites, not an indictment, a complaint, or an allegation of evangelical social feather-bedding. He describes their behavior, what they have achieved, and where they could be challenged.

The accomplishments include strategic philanthropy, expansion of evangelical intellectual and cultural influence through the development of networks, significant social movements in areas such as bioethics and the environment, and a diminution of barriers making religious expression in the business world taboo. The networking Malesic mentions is not something evangelicals have used only (or predominantly) as a way of getting ahead. Lindsay tells the story of a meeting of Washington evangelicals (the Faith and Law group) with Steve Case (then of AOL) and Hollywood magnate Philip Anschutz that resulted in commissioning a Harvard study "to monitor the media's effect on children." To quote Lindsay: "This is how evangelical networks get things done."<sup>1</sup> I am unable to see what it is in this portrayal that would cause Malesic to see Lindsay's book as a major support for his own conclusions about secret Christianity. The book jacket extols the evangelicals Lindsay describes as "cosmopolitan" and "well-educated" men and women "who read both the *New York Times* and *Christianity Today*." If I recall, the big knock on evangelicals was once that they were provincial and undereducated. It looks to me as if—according to Lindsay—evangelicals are doing something right.

To the extent that Lindsay poses a challenge to evangelical elites, as I read it, his goal appears to be to highlight weaknesses that should be addressed in order to make their public witness more fully orbbed. For example, many Christian executives have lavish lifestyles that would seem vulnerable to challenge by a world wondering why being faithful does not include better stewardship of

resources. In addition, he was lightly critical of evangelical elites for inadequate connection to local churches. Again, I do not see the evidence that would lead us to take the faith underground. Having read the book carefully, I think the following brief excerpt sums up Lindsay's findings extremely well:

The word "religion" can be traced to a Latin phrase that means "to bind together." In recent decades, evangelical religious identity has facilitated strong ties among *public* leaders. Because religious identities are connected to moral frameworks, a sense of how things ought to be, this shared evangelical identity has endowed the movement with *a seriousness of purpose, an overarching meaning system, and a repertoire of practices—like prayer and fellowship groups—that sustain leaders* (italics mine).<sup>2</sup>

Although Lindsay offers some critique, it is fair to suggest that on balance his extensive study of evangelical elites leads him to see their public presence as a positive social development.

With regard to the example of the Oklahoma home siding contractor and his relatively tactless use of Christian identity to sell his product, I think this is where Malesic's argument fails. Of course, we can always find individuals employing their faith identity in a way we would identify as subpar. An old idea from law school seems to me to apply quite well here. My professors used to say, "Hard cases make bad law." The meaning is that you do not draw your governing principle from unusual cases. Certainly, it is not the norm for Christians who own businesses to make some kind of blatant, tribalistic appeal for the business of others. Just as in the last round, I have to say that we can produce positive examples to counteract these negative ones. So, why let the bad ones rule our choices? I am thinking in particular about an auto repair shop in Houston, Texas, which was known as a Christian business operating on Christian principles. The fact was not cynically broadcast, but people found out and newspapers even covered it. The shop had more business than they could handle because of their Christian commitment to be honest and their fulfillment of the promise that commitment held. I see no reason why that owner should be discouraged from openly telling people that his business belongs to the Lord and that his relationship with God leads him to value true service over pure profit and loss. That business is an effective witness. Indeed, it is a ministry to people in the area. Chick-fil-A and the Cathy family offers another and higher profile example of a Christian business that blesses its community through service and lightly pricks the conscience of the larger society with its Sunday closing standard that surely results in the loss of millions of dollars worth of profit each year.

Malesic objects to some degree to my claim that public Christianity is important because it helps to impart virtue to a given society. He states that if one builds a case for Christianity in terms of its sociological value, then one sets the faith up for a fall when sociologists are able to compile a study demonstrating no positive impact on the society. While I would not want to premise the value of Christianity on some sociological effectiveness index, I think almost any Christian would be greatly disappointed if such a null impact could be demonstrated. If Christ is Lord of our lives, then our lives should look substantially different. In reality, I think it is not difficult to demonstrate sociologically, historically, anthropologically, economically, and so forth, that the long life of Western civilization has been influenced much to the good by the public and vital presence of Christianity, both *de jure* and then *de facto* as part of the culture. If we were to go more strongly in the direction of a secular society, government elites would be stunned at the giant gaps in the areas of health care, higher education, primary education, and various charitable services that would have to be made up by new state institutions.

Christianity is, to some degree, the soul of the system in which we live. Many believe that American society runs quite well on its own independent logic, but the system is not an achievement of its own making. It did not self-generate. Many of the values and understandings on which we rely come from the deep, deep connection of Christianity with our ideas and institutions. There is a desire to be free, to kill the soul of the system or to deny that it exists. I do not attribute that desire to Dr. Malesic but to various actors within the system who see the “soul” as a limitation preventing “progress.” Should that ever happen, we will discover that C. S. Lewis was right about his “men without chests” who are ruled by whatever logic the conditioners decide to apply. It is important for Christians to stand as an obvious reminder to their peers of where we have been and who it is that they claim is Lord, not only of the Sabbath, but also of the other six days and everything that happens on those days, too, not only for Christians but for all the world.

## Notes

1. D. Michael Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 213.
2. Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power*, 214.

## Contributors

**Hunter Baker** is the author of *The End of Secularism* (Crossway, 2009) and currently serves on the political science faculty at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, where he is also the associate dean of arts and sciences.

**John Bolt** is professor of systematic theology at Calvin Theological Seminary. He is the author of *A Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper's American Public Theology* (Eerdmans, 2001) and editor of the four volume English edition of Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* (Baker Academic, 2003–2008).

**Joseph Burke** is assistant professor of economics at Ave Maria University. He teaches courses on microeconomic theory, econometrics, game theory, industrial organization, labor economics, the economics of poverty, and Catholic social teaching. He received his doctor of philosophy degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2005.

**Gregorio Guitián** is adjunct professor of moral theology at the School of Theology of the University of Navarra, Spain. He has a doctorate in theology, as well as a degree in economics, and has published articles in several specialized journals, including the *Journal of Business Ethics*.

**Jonathan Malesic** is assistant professor of theology at King's College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, and the author of *Secret Faith in the Public Square: An Argument for the Concealment of Christian Identity* (Brazos Press, 2009).

## Contributors

**James W. Skillen** became director and then president of the Center for Public Justice (1981–2009) in Washington, D.C., after nine years of teaching college (1973–1982). Among his many books and published essays are *In Pursuit of Justice: Christian-Democratic Explorations* (Roman & Littlefield, 2004) and *With or Against the World? America's Role Among the Nations* (Roman & Littlefield, 2005). He earned his doctor of philosophy degree at Duke University in political science and is currently working on several major writing projects that deal with the foundations of government and civic responsibility, political economy, and religion and politics worldwide.

**Manfred Spieker** is professor of Christian social thought in the Department of Catholic Theology at the Universität Osnabrück where he has taught since 1983. He has served as a guest professor at the Universidad de Valparaiso in Chile (1988), at the Faculty for Catholic Theology in Erfurt (1991), at the Universität Gabriela Mistral in Santiago, Chile (1997), and at the Universität Vilnius (1998). He is also vice president of the Joseph Höffner Society.

# Submissions

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The editor welcomes articles written by professional scholars in economics, theology, ethics, and philosophy. Younger scholars and those in the process of completing doctorates are also encouraged to submit manuscripts for publication. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the journal, the editorial staff requests that articles with a strongly quantitative aspect be submitted to other more suitable publications. Figures, charts, and diagrams should be kept to a minimum.

## Review Process

Each paper submitted is reviewed by the editor for general suitability but the decision of whether to publish is made in consultation with members of the editorial board or other subject matter experts. The review process usually takes between one and three months from the date a paper is received. Authors may contact the editor to inquire about the status of their paper after the third month.

## Manuscript Submissions

Article submissions should be sent to:

Jordan Ballor  
Acton Institute  
161 Ottawa N.W., Ste. 301  
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503  
E-mail: [jballor@acton.org](mailto:jballor@acton.org)

Book Review submissions should be sent to:

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Two copies of the manuscript should be submitted in double line spacing with a standard one inch margin around the perimeter of the document. The author's credentials (i.e., autobiographical data) must be printed on a separate sheet and the author should not be identified anywhere else in the article.

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