

## **The Christian in the Secular World<sup>1</sup>**

The place of the Christian in this present world has always been a crucial problem amongst Christians, but sometimes it has been experienced as a pressing challenge more than at other times. Just having returned from a year abroad, I am impressed with how much this question is presently in the mind of Christians in Nigeria. I think it not far wrong to say that this is presently the uppermost question among Christians. The Muslim challenge in the present constitutional debate is probably the main cause for the revival of deep interest in this question.

As to definitions, the term “secular” has various meanings. One meaning refers to the world outside the church. In this context, there are two aspects to reality, one is that of the church and the other is that of the non-church world. During the Middle Ages in the West, there was no such secular world, for everything was somehow under the authority of the church. The church was at the top of the world and nothing was withdrawn from her authority. Everything needed her blessing, even kings and governments. That situation has changed drastically, so that the area which is ascribed to the church has narrowed down. The church has narrowed down; the secular world has been widened as to its scope.

Another meaning, though related to the first, is the world not divorced from the church, but from God. Under the first definition, we might say that business is secular, i.e. the church does not engage in business. If we apply the second definition, we would say that not only does the church not engage in business, but business and religion have nothing to do with each other. A man’s religion is one thing; the way he runs his business is another and quite unrelated question. The world divorced from God – this is the meaning of secularism I wish to deal with. I feel free to make this choice, for when I was assigned the topic, I was not instructed which of these two meanings to emphasize.

---

<sup>1</sup> Address given to Associate Fellowship of Christian Students, Jos, Nigeria, 28 Sept/1977. *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, p. 167.

In terms of the second definition, the phrase “secular world” is utter nonsense, for there is no secular world, a world divorced from God or religion. The first chapter of Scripture teaches us that God created all reality and He found it beautiful. If God created it, and if He upholds it, if Christ died for it, then how can we speak of a secular world? The term is totally illegitimate for a Christian. Yet, even Christians use it time and again. Why? The reason is historical. Allow me to trace it for you.

The early church existed in a culture that was deeply influenced by Greek ideas. The church itself was influenced also by them. One of the prominent ideas in that world was Plato’s notion of a separation between the spiritual and the material. He taught that real, true reality was the spiritual and that matter, things, the physical were inferior to the spiritual. Thus a man was seen as basically a spiritual soul that was imprisoned in the inferior physical body. The world that Scripture tells us was made by God and which God loves, was seen as basically negative, as evil, as inferior. Physical work was seen as inferior to that of the philosopher or teacher, for such work deals with the material.

This idea is called *dualism*. Reality is made up of two aspects, one of which is superior to the other. This philosophy was taken over by Christians and remains with us, but it is a Pagan idea, not Christian.

It was further developed by Christian theologians, especially by Aquinas, who taught that we cannot know anything about the spiritual world except by revelation, the Bible. Only the Bible can give us information about spiritual things, such as God, salvation, the soul, the church. How could man know anything about the physical, the material world? Well, he did not need revelation for that, but he could investigate that reality simply by the use of his own reason. Let me put it in diagram form:

|        |                   |           |      |            |        |        |
|--------|-------------------|-----------|------|------------|--------|--------|
| Grace  | Divine Revelation | spiritual | soul | theology   | church | higher |
| Nature | Human Reason      | material  | body | philosophy | world  | lower  |

Aquinas intended to keep these two levels together. He said that what human reason discovered in the lower area was never to contradict the truth of divine

revelation, for the latter was the higher of the two. However, later theologians and philosophers separated the two and Humanism appeared on the scene. It said that the human mind is perfect and not touched by sin. It therefore does not need revelation from God to know what is true and right in these lower matters.

The result is a widespread belief in the church that

- (1) These lower concerns are inferior to the higher. The clergy has a higher calling than the businessman or politician. Real Christian service is found only in the church.
- (2) The Bible teaches us how to run a church, but it has little or nothing to say about politics, business, economics. In these areas we simply do our own thinking; we do not need the Bible for them.

These ideas were accepted not only by lukewarm or indifferent Christians, but even sincere evangelicals have adopted them. Western evangelical missionaries of the last century brought the Gospel in those terms. That is the form in which the Gospel also came to Nigeria. And that is why we are now asking the question how to relate the Gospel to the world. Many of us have been taught this dualistic vision and we do not quite understand where it comes from. We sense now that it is not right, for the Bible does not support it, but it has been so ingrained in Christian thinking that we do not know how to account for it. Yet, we are beginning to feel uncomfortable with this idea, for we see that we are now not prepared as Christians to face the Muslim challenge.

Earlier I said that the term “secular world” is nonsense. It is, if you remember that this whole world is God’s, who loved it so much that He gave us His only Son to save it from destruction. Some people may think that the world is not God’s or that God has little to do with it, but that does not change the fact that it *is* God’s. There is no secular world. The whole world is His and therefore, the whole world is *holy*. If anyone is at home in the world, it is the Christian. If anyone is foreign in this world, it is the non-Christian, for he does not recognize the King and His laws or constitution.

At the beginning, God commanded our first father to develop the earth and to rule it under God, to use it, to exploit it in the good sense. First, that meant only farming and animal husbandry. That was service to God. Slowly the secrets God placed in creation were discovered by man. He began to make music and instruments. With Noah we read about boats and carpentry. Slowly man learned how to work with nature; he discovered the laws God put in nature. Slowly man's occupations increased. All this was genuine service to God. Adam was both head of his family as well as king; there was no government apart from his family. Later, we read of the government as separate from family. Human society as well as work became increasingly complex. Business appeared and other trades. In short, all of creation, including human society, experienced a widening, a development with differentiation within each sphere of life.

Unfortunately, because of sin, the work man did was often done in disregard of God and his laws. Man worked as he pleased. He would use his neighbour for his own ends. Man often worked against God and his neighbour.

However, the command to use this earth, to develop it, stands as call to service. Many are the teachings of Scripture that have direct relations to this work and various occupations. But we tend to restrict their application to the church and the personal.

Now, briefly, the question of *how* the Gospel relates to the world. In discussing this assignment with me, someone mentioned manufacturing as an example. Manufacturing as commonly practiced is the producing of goods as efficiently as possible for a profit. Machines are devised for maximum efficiency and the worker operates the machine, but his talents, his comfort etc. are not taken into consideration or perhaps minimally. He has to adjust to the rhythm of the machine, even if operating it tends to dull his senses. The purpose is to make profit. Whether or not a product is good or useful is a secondary concern.

Over against such a secular view, that is, a view divorced from God, the Scripture puts a number of teachings relevant to industry. Talents and gifts – all have certain talents from God that must be developed. Some to manage, some to devise machinery, some to labour. We must all use these talents to build up each

other, to help develop them. Thus, machinery that kills initiative or talent is not Christian. Here is the calling for the Christian industrial engineer. An industry is a community of people with various talents devoted to God and man. Thus, no class struggle between management and worker. We all work together. All our work is to be service to God and man; we are to sacrifice ourselves. This means that we must not engage in ruthless competition or to work primarily towards profits. Yes, we need income, but that is not the primary reason for our work. If manufacturing is service, then we must not produce bad or useless articles. Only those that build up the human community should be produced. In advertising, we may not exploit man's baser motives for greater sales, but even here we must seek to build, to be of service by bringing useful products to the attention of the public in honest and constructive way.

Well, I have only summarized and made hints. I hope that more can be developed by means of the ensuing discussion.

These and additional laws can also be applied to other occupations and areas of life. But not without serious study and prayer.

My basic thrust tonight is to get away from dualism, and to bring before you an understanding of the historical developments that have partially paralyzed the Christian community. Secondly, by means of a brief example I hope to have given you a new challenge and adventure with the Lord, the challenge of full obedience in the world, not in the secular world, but in God's world. Then nothing we do is secular, but it is all loving and obedient service to God – farming, business or preaching. But then all of it according to God's laws – that is the challenge.