The Unity of Life Under God

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ON the coat of arms of the Anglican Diocese of Toronto is a crown representing not the kingship of Jesus as the Christ but that temporal sovereignty signified by the Queen. This crown is both symbol and anachronism.

As a symbol, it represents the way in which Church and State could once be linked in a Christian nation, not because either ruled the other but because both recognized that each was under the one Sovereign who is King of Kings, Lord of Lords, the only Ruler of Princes. It stood for the unity of life, sacred and secular, under the one giver of life. But fine symbol or not, it is an anachronism, telling us what used to be but is no longer. It is like the stage-coach or the paddle-steamer. It is quite unlike the jet-plane or the space-rocket. Between sacred and secular there has developed a deep and wide gulf. The life that was once united under God is now split in two.

This paper will discuss some of the developments by which this situation came about, will assess its merits and faults, and propose certain changes in our understanding of sacred and secular that could contribute towards their reunion.

I

For a starting point, let us take the year 1820. In that year a bill was introduced in the British House of Commons which, in spite of its defeat, heralded the advance of the secularist philosophy which was to gain increasing power as the century advanced. It was not a bill to close the churches, for secularism does not really oppose religion. It aims at restricting religion, at confining it within a compartment of life. The bill thus heralded secularism not by opposing the churches, but by suggesting that part of their province be taken over by the State. It proposed to support public schools by taxation, although the schools were to remain under the Established Church. It was defeated not only because most parliamentarians opposed educating the masses if it cost the country money, but because a majority could still think that education was properly the work of the Church alone.

The bill had a real significance for the future relation of sacred and secular. Those who opposed it unconsciously represented a traditional view which was fast approaching what physicians call "the terminal stage"—that is, the tradition that in a Christian society, sacred and secular should be integrated. Those who proposed it represented a view of life which was to gain increasing acceptance not only in England, but throughout Western civilization, and ultimately throughout those regions where Western culture

was to gain dominance. This view was convinced that life would be better if religion were kept out of it, if the sacred and secular were to each other as oil and water.

As the nineteenth century continued, this outlook gained acceptance until by the end of the century, its dominance seemed decisive. In 1820, the Church was regarded as the primary agency for education, relief, and public welfare of all kinds. The national budget of England did not include a penny for education and welfare, these being paid for by the churches. Poor relief, for example, was paid from a rate struck at the annual vestry meeting of the parish and collected by the churchwardens. But by 1900, the idea of the "welfare state" had taken hold and the Church was being shut up within that edifice of Gothic design—the sacred.

The trend is evident also in the change of attitude towards the Bible. When the century began, the majority understood it not only as a source of doctrine and morals but also as a source for historical and scientific knowledge. But by 1900, it was widely doubted that the Bible had anything significant to say on such matters. It was held that the Bible's message was relevant only to what is now called the spiritual side of life.

The nineteenth century was marked also by the rise of a militant opposition to Christianity demanding that the influence and scope of the churches and clergy be duly restricted. George Holyoake, coiner of the word "secularism," was committed to opposing any religious interference with freedom of thought, speech, and study. That he had to go to prison many times as a result did not deter him or others. Instead it led to an increased determination to confine the authority of the churches within the sphere of their own affairs. With that passion for organized conviction so typical of Victorian England, a National Secularist Society was formed with branches in nearly every corner of the realm, and even a Secular Hall Building Society to help erect new centres where this message could be proclaimed.

It cannot be denied that Christianity enjoyed quantitative progress in this period, but as far as the relation of sacred and secular is concerned, it was a time of retreat, an age when Christianity became a part of life instead of being its centre. The faith which had once been the foundation of the social structure was moved into one of its rooms.

In 1882, Nietzsche said: "God is dead." While the majority were not then ready to proclaim that dictum in words, they were ready to act as though it were true. On the surface, sacred and secular might still preserve vestiges of their former unity, but they were vestiges only. The real foundation of Western civilization had been decisively changed by 1900. What has been called "the post-Christian era" had begun.

In the twentieth century, this trend has continued in spite of so-called "revivals of religion," such as occurred in North America following the Second World War. Regardless of whether churches have been full, as in our suburbs, or empty, as in our inner cities and throughout Europe, the split between sacred and secular has been continued.

Such is the commonly expressed opinion of observers who speak from different religious standpoints. In *Science and Christian Belief*, C. A. Coulson writes:

When we build our University physics laboratories to-day, we no longer adorn their main gateways as the gateway of the Cavendish laboratory at Cambridge is adorned: "The works of the Lord are great: sought out of all those that have pleasure therein." In fact when the Royal Society Mond Laboratory for low temperature research was opened at Cambridge in the 1930's, it was the carving of a stone crocodile that decorated its entrance.[1]

This Oxford professor of mathematics continues to describe the trend in the sciences: "God was found an unnecessary hypothesis in one after another field of study and experience until he seemed to have become a silent actor in the play, scarcely needed even to present himself upon the stage."[2]

Seeing God as "unnecessary" is the outlook of the French Existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, who writes: "Existentialism isn't so atheistic that it wears itself out showing that God doesn't exist. Rather it declares that even if God did exist, that would change nothing. There you've got our point of view. Not that we believe that God exists, but we think that the problem of his existence is not the issue."[3]

The American intellectual historian Franklin L. Baumer writes of this trend: "There is the 'secularist man' . . . the man who has ceased to ask the great religious questions, for whom these questions simply have no relevance to life as he knows it, who sees in life nothing but a brutal struggle for existence."[4]

Paul Tillich endorses this conclusion, writing: "Since the beginning of the 18th century, God has been removed from the power field of man's activities. He has been put alongside the world without permission to interfere with it because every interference would disturb man's technical and business calculations. The result is that God has become superfluous and the universe left to man as its master."[5]

II

Let us now attempt an appraisal of this trend. It would be tempting to look on it as simply the work of the devil which the Church must halt by persuading everyone to become more and more religious. But it is important to avoid such an enticement and to recognize the advantages of secularism. Only then can we see how God has used it, and how our need is not to make a vain effort to return to a past synthesis, but to find a new expression of the unity of sacred and secular under God.

1. C. A. Coulson, *Science and Christian Belief* (London: Fontana Books, 1958), p. 24.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
3. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: The Wisdom Library, 1957), p. 51.
4. Franklin L. Baumer, *Religion and the Rise of Scepticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1960), p. 233.
5. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 43.

First, secularism has benefited humanity by freeing us from the harm wrought by religious conflict. So entrenched is religious toleration in most Western countries and so all-embracing is the current ecumenical spirit that we often fail to see what had to be given up in order to achieve this. Religious toleration did not come to Europe until the seventeenth century, and not until Europe had been torn apart by religious wars. These controversies were based partly on the conviction that everyone in the same state should have the same religion. The cause was not simple oppressiveness on the part of the majority. It was the idea that since religion and life were integrated, everyone must have the same religion. To change to the new idea of toleration meant giving up this view of religion and life in favour of the newly accepted one that religion was a private matter. Only then could various communions coexist. This was a step towards separating sacred and secular, but it did bring religious peace.

Secularism's encouragement of religious toleration was accompanied also by an encouragement of intellectual freedom. The advance of science in the nineteenth century could have been seriously hampered if the churches had been allowed to enforce the restrictions of their traditional understanding of the Bible. The greatly accelerated development of science and technology in the nineteenth century led to much questioning of Christian tradition, especially of the Biblical account of the origin of the world and man. It produced a militant reaction among some Christians who thought the challenge to Genesis was an attack on the Gospel itself. Had it been possible for them to impose their convictions on society at large in the manner of previous times, the freedom of enquiry and speculation, which is so necessary for the advancement of knowledge, would have been seriously limited.

Thirdly, secularism contributed towards the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' social protest. It is true that in the early days of the Industrial Revolution some Churchmen like Wilberforce, Thomas Arnold, Shaftesbury, and the Christian Socialists strove for justice in the name of Jesus Christ. But in the main, the strong protest came from outside the churches.

Why was this? Why did a stronger protest come from such men as Marx and Engels, the French Socialists, the English Chartists, the Fabians, and the like? It was partly because they approached the problem without the encumbrance of being part of an ecclesiastical structure which had become too allied with the ruling powers, political and economic, to protest effectively. In England, for example, the national Church could be characterized as "the Tory party at prayer." On the continent and in North America, a similar *entente* between religion and power was to be found. As a result, the voice of the prophet was not heard as often in the Church as outside it. Had the churches been as all-embracing in the nineteenth century as in the thirteenth, the sad probability is that a much weaker social protest would have been made.

But most important of all the advantages of secularism has been the way it has encouraged the growth of technology. In a culture where the spiritual

is given primacy, there is less likelihood that people will give themselves whole-heartedly to building the kind of industrial society which produces material abundance. This is one reason why the East has not kept pace with the West in material development. The causes cannot be limited to fewer resources and similar factors. The prime cause is that in the West technology has been given an importance which has led men to devote their lives to it with the same commitment as a monk gives to the soul or a scholar to the mind.

If secularism has brought such advantages, why should anyone criticize it? In 1900 there were many who could see no fault in the trend of the century just completed, and who could look to secular progress leading humanity into a new age. But since then, secular progress has been enjoyed without leading us to "the new Jerusalem." The secularist "gods" of science, education, democracy, and so on have been found to have feet of clay, and the secularist "religion" has failed to give humanity the full life so confidently promised. The failure is evident in two ways.

One is that life in the twentieth century has lost meaning for great masses. It lacks purpose, and like wind without rain has the appearance of reality without bringing ultimate satisfaction. Such is the verdict of countless analysts who have probed the depths of contemporary culture, and have discovered there a void, a nihil. A sociologist like David Riesman has reported it in *The Lonely Crowd.* So has such a disenchanted Communist as Arthur Koestler in *Darkness At Noon,* and a despairing Existentialist like Albert Camus in *The Outsider.* Standing outside the circle of faith and unable to slip the bonds of the secularist life, they nonetheless expose the emptiness of that life. They show it to be a life of particular experiences, some painful, some pleasant, but all lacking any final purpose that binds them together in a meaningful whole. Their reports indicate that it is not only Christians, with "an axe to grind," who see the void in today's way of life. It is the common verdict of all who are sensitive to the cultural pulse—the writers who show it in the despair and sordidness of their plays and novels, the artists who show it in the confusion and chaos of their painting.

But though such observers can show us the symptoms, they cannot tell us the disease. We must turn to the Christian theologian because only he can uncover our real sickness and show how man's heart is restless because it does not rest in the one who has made us for himself. Thus in *Courage To Be,* Paul Tillich writes: "Twentieth-century man has lost a meaningful world and a self which lives in meanings out of a spiritual centre."[6] This is the first reason why the split between sacred and secular must not be accepted as an adequate way of life. It enables men to experience the immediate with satisfaction and even excitement, but it has no sense of the ultimate. As a result, even the immediate loses its fascination, for man cannot long persist in activity without purpose. Twentieth-century man has been turning in many directions in his search for meaning. In some parts of the

6. Paul Tillich, *Courage To Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), p. 139.

world, he has accepted collectivism as his means of salvation, finding in the destiny of a state or the promise of a classless society the hope of purpose his own life lacks. Thus people have been willing to exchange their freedom for authority under Fascism and Communism. Their desire to fill the emptiness of life has exceeded the desire to direct their own lives, and they have clutched at totalitarian authority as a way of doing it. Weary of living without God, they have sought a "god" in society.

But let us not think we have escaped this entirely in the democratic West. While we have been spared political collectivism, we have accepted other forms. We have collectivism, for example, in what we can call the Cult of Conformity. It attracts its adherents partly because a person can lose his sense of the void if he fits in with a crowd, to become the "other-directed" man of Riesman. That is one reason why advertisers and opinion-makers can use the media of mass-communication so effectively to persuade us to buy the same product or agree with the same policy. There is security in belonging to the mass. It is almost like returning to the womb.

This Western trend was described well by Nicholas Berdyaev who knew both Communist and Western forms of collectivism. He said: "The domination of the mass and the impersonal collective, which at one place takes the form of a bourgeois democracy with the dictatorship of money although always disguised and secret, and at another the form of the authoritarian state with the openly avowed dictatorship of leaders—this creates a most difficult situation for creative cultural forces."[7]

A second failure of secularism is shown in the way it lowers man himself. Less than a century after Nietzsche claimed God was dead, it could be claimed also: "Man is dead!" That is, man is dead in the sense that he has lost some of his essential humanity by himself becoming a part of the technological world he once thought he could exploit. Once it could be boasted: "Glory to man in the highest for he is the maker of things!" But today there is some alarm that man himself is becoming a kind of thing. The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber can therefore describe human relationships today by the phrase, "I–It," because we can be related to other people in much the same way as we are to things. Tillich can therefore conclude: "Man is supposed to be master of his world and himself. But actually he has become a part of the reality he has created, an object among objects, a thing among things, a cog within a universal machine to which he must adapt himself in order not to be smashed by it."[8]

What is the reason for this? Is it not because we have removed most of life from its relation to the God who is both its creator and its lord? Man is the noblest of creatures only because we have been made in God's image, because God's Son restored us to our true relationship to God, and because God's Spirit ennobles our spirit. When we lose sight of these truths in education, art, industry, government, recreation, and all the other activities of life,

7. Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Fate of Man* (Ann Arbor Paperback, 1961), p. 111.
8. Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, p. 46.

we can be sure we shall lose the nobility which only God can confer. As Robert L. Calhoun puts it: "Our lives have fallen apart because we have lost sight of the meaning and the deep common roots of worship and work."[9] Similarly Berdyaev concludes: "We are witnessing the process of dehumanization in all phases of culture and of social life. . . . Man has ceased to be the supreme value: he has ceased to have any value at all. The youth of the whole world, fascist, communist, national-socialist or those simply carried away by technics or sport—this youth is not only anti-humanistic in its attitudes, but often anti-human."[10]

Thus one of the supreme ironies of history is that the nineteenth century's exaltation of man has produced the twentieth's degradation of man. The Church cannot therefore be unconcerned about secularism. There must be a refusal to accept this separation of sacred and secular with its consequent confining of God himself to "the world of religion," as the Saturday newspapers describe it. For the Church to accept this restricted province which secularism would impose would mean leaving contemporary man to his pursuit of false gods in the vain hope they could fill his void and restore his humanity.

III

But it is not enough to diagnose a disease. One should also attempt a cure, and this is much more difficult. To find the answer to any problem is always more difficult than describing the problem, but it is especially so in this case because no simple answer is possible. In *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr argued persuasively that we must remain agnostic about any final relationship between sacred and secular. The fact is that there are many ways by which they have been connected in the past, and we must therefore be open to new ways of relating them.

This means that Christians must be ready to rethink some views they have taken for granted too long. One of these is the belief that the spiritual is superior to the material, that the sacred is closer to God than the secular. Christians need, for example, to recall how the Bible shows God working through Cyrus and other unbelievers in the days of the old covenant, and to recognize how God works through the secular in these days of the new covenant. That religion has been rejected or ignored by large masses does not mean God has been working only among a faithful remnant. On the contrary, God has been achieving his purposes among a great number who know him not. In the advance of science and technology, in the progress of social justice, in the discovery of new medicines and surgical skills, in the development of our understanding of human nature, God has been working all the time.

The Christian message to the secular therefore need not be a summons to become more sacred in the sense of becoming more religious, but a call to

9. Robert L. Calhoun, *God and the Day's Work* (New York: Association Press, 1957), p. 19.
10. Berdyaev, *The Fate of Man*, p. 25.

recognize the divine ground on which it stands and the divine power by which it lives. Its message should not be an urging that the secular become what it cannot be, but that it appreciate what it really is—part of God's creation and province.

The unity of life under God is therefore not a matter of bringing the secular under the rule of organized religion so that it ceases to be secular. Despite varying degrees of success achieved by this principle in the Middle Ages, it is not possible today. The complexity of life in this age is too much for any institution to comprehend the whole of it. Although Communism has attempted such comprehension, the restlessness of intellectuals behind the Iron Curtain is a constant protest against its adequacy. The enthusiasm with which men of letters and of science in Russia and China have greeted each temporary "thaw" of state thought-control shows how restricted is the effectiveness of this contemporary attempt to comprehend the whole of life in one system.

Yet another kind of unity is possible. Instead of a unity imposed from above, there can be a unity that arises from within. This unity arises from the recognition that all life, be it sacred or secular, comes from God and is accountable to God. It is the recognition that the scientist's truth is also God's truth; that the healing power of the antibiotic is also God's healing power; that the order established by a constitutional structure is also God's order. It is recognizing that beyond the varying particulars of life, there stands a single ultimate.

In the twentieth century, therefore, the Church's message to the secular is not a wistful yearning that it might return to its religious hegemony. The sacred's word to the secular ought rather to be that ancient Stoic dictum: "Become what you are." In effect, the Church should say to the world: "You are not the Church, but you are God's. So live like it."

Secondly, the Church must be ready to turn its eyes outward much more than it has for many a day. In the great missionary expansion of the nineteenth century, it turned its eyes outward to the unevangelized parts of the world. Today, the need is to look outward to the secular with the same conviction and zeal as once Christian vision scanned the horizon "from Greenland's icy mountains to India's coral strand." The mission field of today is not only the unevangelized remainder of the world, but the secularized cultures of West and East alike. The mission field of today lies in the arts and sciences which express themselves as though God really were dead. It lies in the economic systems which conduct themselves as though their manipulation of resources did not matter to the God who made them. It lies in the political structures which fail to recognize the divine sovereignty which judges their sovereign claims. If it is true that secular culture in the twentieth century needs a greater sense of the vertical dimension which would link it to God, the Church needs also a greater sense of the horizontal dimension which would link sacred and secular.

In this age, the real need is for Christians to be concerned primarily about

the secular instead of the sacred, about the world instead of the Church. Failure to see this need remains one of the most serious obstacles between sacred and secular today. The gulf between them is deep not only because of the world's unbelief, but equally because of the Church's self-centredness. The Church of today is often more concerned about its institutional structure than about transforming the world outside its walls.

Is this summons to a greater awareness of the horizontal dimension an invitation to return to the superficiality associated with the liberal "social gospel" of another day? It need not be, since the foundation of the Church's concern for the world can be and should be what the Church believes about God in Jesus Christ. As Frederick Denison Maurice in the mid-nineteenth century stressed, the Church's concern is universal because the kingship of Christ is universal. There is no aspect of life which is free from his sovereignty, and therefore we can know no aspect of life which the Church can justly ignore. The Church's concern for the horizontal results from what it believes about the vertical. Its interest in man stems from its conviction about God. Thus it has a message for the secular—for the arts, for science, for the state, for industry—because it believes in the secular's God.

Can we hope that the Church will look outward with a sufficiently steadfast eye? In some ways, the Church of the twentieth century discourages the Christian who hopes for this. Especially is this so in North America where the real captivity of the Church is not suburban but institutional. The energies, vast as they are, of clergy and people are consumed with maintaining the Church as an institution alongside other institutions. The need for this cannot be gainsaid, but need it mean that institutional welfare is the Church's main, even sole, concern?

That there is room for hope, however, is clear in the new stress on the laity's ministry. Herein lies the most encouraging possibility of the Church extending its influence in a horizontal direction. The laity of the Church are already in the world; if they can be persuaded to use their opportunities for Christian leadership, the Church's message about the world can then be carried into the world.

It is good, therefore, that we are at last swinging away from thinking the only ministers of the Church are those ordained to the ministry of the Word and sacraments, and that the term "layman" means an amateur Christian under the charge of professionals. The Church's message to the secular can be carried there only by the people who spend most of their lives in the secular. It depends on the laity, not the clergy, for its communication. Not a synod passing a resolution, but a Christian legislator exerting a Christian influence in government is the way the political part of the secular can realize the sovereignty of God over it. Not a clergyman censoring novels, but a Christian writer expressing himself in literature is the way the arts can acknowledge their God.

If through the daily life of the laity in the world, the Church thus communicates its message to the world, the gulf between sacred and secular can

be narrowed. But since it is the best hope of achieving this unity, the ministry of the laity requires more understanding than it is sometimes given, even by its most enthusiastic proponents. Too often, they want the laity to exercise their ministry as lay ecclesiastics, thinking that progress is made if some laymen take over part of the Church's bureaucracy from clerics, or participate in conducting the Church's worship. Desirable as such things may be in themselves, they make no contribution to the Church's mission to the world. This can be made only by the layman who is in the world, not shut up behind the Church's walls as an ecclesiastic who wears collar and tie. The Church's mission to the world is served not by laymen who become Church officials but by laymen who exert secular leadership.

The main task of the Church in this age must be seen as lying outside the Church's own institutional life and outside the parish Church's walls. It lies in the world which is God's world and our world. The front-line of the Church is not the communion rail. That is the base where Christ's soldiers and servants are strengthened for their return to the front-line. The front-line is wherever men and women meet together in the common round of life. There Christians are called to proclaim Jesus Christ in the conviction that at his Name every knee should bow and every tongue should confess him Lord to the glory of God the Father.