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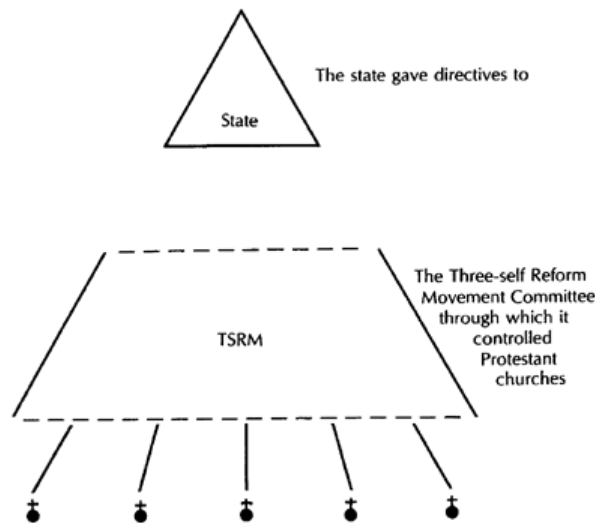
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Seminary. (5) Christian publishers were told to comply with the policies of the new China and most of them were closed down before 1954.



By 1953 all Protestant churches founded by foreign missions were brought under the control of the state through the agency of the TSRM.

Dr. Jonathan Chao is Director of of CCRC, Hong Kong. [p. 78](#)

The Secularization Myth

Harvie M. Conn

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In this article Harvie M. Conn explores the popular wisdom that faith and religion die in the city. As an expert in Urban Missions Conn brings out the difference between secularism and secularization, and rightly concludes that secularism is present in the city to no less extent than in the suburbs. That being the case, Conn calls upon Christians and churches to target the cities and not to flee from them, to analyse the felt needs behind the secularization process and to develop a holistic ministry for the city. With David Barrett's projection of 40% of world population living in the city by the year 2000, Conn's analyses become more imperative than ever.

Editor

Harvey Cox said in the 1960's 'The rise of urban civilization and the collapse of traditional religion are the two main hallmarks of our era and are closely related movements'.¹ Our urban world, he continued, is not persecuting religion. It simply bypasses and undercuts

¹ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (London: SCM Press, 1965), p. 1.

it, going on to other things. Humanity is supposed to have come of age in the city but religion is no longer a part of that growing up process.

A graduate of the University of Tanzania underlines the argument. 'Where I come from religion is a natural part of life. But here, in the urban areas, everything is a hodgepodge. Family and traditional ties are broken, and other influences take over. The church suffers.' Timothy Monsma adds, 'Secularization is growing rapidly in Africa and those who benefit from upward mobility seem the most vulnerable.'² Is it true? Do 'urbanization and secularization go hand in hand as parallel processes'?³

In the United States there have even been some who wondered whether revivals would work in an urban setting. Early nineteenth-century revivalists had already noticed their success was greater in small towns than in cities. Charles Finney, the father of modern revivalism, expressed concern over city people too engrossed in worldly ambitions. 'See how crazy these are who are scrambling to get up ...,' he said, 'enlarging their houses, changing their styles of living ... It is like climbing up [the] masthead to be thrown off into the p. 79 ocean. To enjoy God you must come down, not go up there,' as the city continually tempted.⁴ The piety patterns of the rural church see the city as a secular menace.

CONFLICTING INFORMATION

But is this all true? is secularization one of the basic dimensions of urbanism, an urban part of 'the fundamental difference between ruralism and urbanism'?⁵

Even Harvey Cox has had to backtrack a bit. Almost twenty years after his vision of the modern technological city and its secular style, he has looked again.⁶ Religion seems alive and fresh in the secular city. The populist piety of Jerry Falwell and fundamentalism, and the uninvited voice of liberation theology, are said to have risen from the ashes to challenge our postmodern world. Religion may indeed be returning to the secular city.

The cities of the Third World seem not to have 'been administered such a massive dose of secularization. Those in Latin America are permeated by a popular religiosity with Christian tinting. The cities of Africa reflect the influence of traditional religions—Islamic and Christian—although the distinction between religion and religious institution has begun to make its presence felt. The cities of Asia have their own religious colouring (excluding perhaps Japan and Hong Kong); even Saigon and Hanoi allow Christian religious institutions to maintain a viable presence'.⁷ The resurgence of the Christian church in the People's Republic of China reminds us that faith dies hard. In spite of the Red Guards and the Cultural Revolution, in spite of a massive educational campaign launched by Maoist secularization, religious institutions refuse to stay buried in China's cities.

² Timothy Monsma, *An Urban Strategy for Africa* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979), p. 74.

³ Benjamin Tonna, *A Gospel for the Cities* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1982), p. 91.

⁴ William C. McLaughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: Ronald Press, 1955), p. 119.

⁵ Francis DuBose, *How Churches Grow in an Urban World* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1978), pp. 111, 117–119.

⁶ Harvey Cox, *Religion in the Secular City* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

⁷ Tonna, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

Massive migration patterns into the cities do not dissipate religious commitments. In Lagos, Nigeria, religious groups are among the first organizations sought out by migrants after they arrive in the city. While they ordinarily wait several years to join other types of voluntary associations, they usually find their religious groups within the first year.⁸ p. 80

Even migration patterns from the Third World to the United States show this same stability of commitment to the traditional faith of the homeland. The south end of Dearborn, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit, is a community of approximately 5,000 people, of which over half is of Arab-Muslim cultural descent. A low to middle income working class community, the majority of its members are immigrants. It is probably the largest Muslim community in the United States.

Has the city secularized their commitment to Islam? A 1964 doctoral dissertation emphasizes the contrary. Their faith has acted as a basis for the Unity of the community. The traditional groupings of Islam, both the Sunni and Shi'a sects, retain their integrity and separate identity even in the new setting. Religious adjustments are few.⁹

European migration patterns to the United States from Christian communities yield similar results. Czechs, Poles, Germans, Jews and Irish gathered together in cultural neighbourhoods in the New World. There they shaped the urban villages we call 'ghettoes' in the industrial centres of North America. Here they carried on Old World social, familial and religious customs. 'Carrying their beliefs with them to America, the immigrants attempted to recreate their communal life of the Old World by implanting their traditional religion in America ... With family and job, religion was the focal point of immigrant life.'¹⁰

What is the overall shape of church life in the central cities of the United States? How does it compare to rural America? Russell Hale, in his new book, *The Unchurched: Who They Are and Why They Stay Away*, spent a year studying and interviewing people in selected counties of the nation with exceptionally high rates of alienation from established churches. His 'findings would suggest that, contrary to popular opinion, the unchurched phenomenon in the United States may be primarily rural rather than urban. Such an hypothesis needs further testing. Provisionally, however, one is impressed that ten of the fifteen largest cities in the United States have unchurched rates well below the national average.'¹¹

What accounts for this strong Christian presence in the central cities? The tremendous achievement in evangelism and church p. 81 planting carried on by black churches and black church leaders throughout the century. In 1899, only five black churches were reported in Chicago, although the black population was near 30,000. By 1940, one count, and a very conservative one, located 250 black churches in that city with over 135,000 members. By 1982, Chaney estimates there are close to 1,750 black Baptist churches alone, with 350,000 members. 'Multiply this kind of pattern by all the American cities where there are large black communities—specially black communities that have

⁸ Josef Gugler and William G. Flanagan, *Urbanization and Social Change in West Africa* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 78.

⁹ Atif Amin Wasfi, 'Dearborn Arab-Moslem Community: A Study of Acculturation'. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University (1964), pp. 128–141.

¹⁰ Randall M. Miller and Thomas D. Marzik, eds., *Immigrants and Religion in Urban America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977), p. xv.

¹¹ Russell Hale, *The Unchurched. Who They Are and Why They Stay Away* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1980), p. 173. Compare also: Earl Parvin, *Missions USA* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), p. 249.

developed since 1945—and you'll have a picture of the accomplishment in church planting that has taken place.'¹²

It is a black community, as well, that has not locked up its faith behind church doors. The black 'Bible-believing' community, unlike its white evangelical counter-part, has not suffered as radical a break between a life of faith and its exhibition in urban society and politics. The civil rights movement of the 1960's was fed by churches in prayer on their knees in the streets of Selma and Birmingham. Passivity in the face of urban secularization cannot be charged to Martin Luther King, Jr., or Jesse Jackson. The black preacher has swayed churches in Watts and the Democratic National Convention in 1983. The largest congregation in Philadelphia, Deliverance Evangelistic church, has over forty separate evangelistic ministries and traces its roots to Pentecostal traditions still living in the church. This same congregation has negotiated the purchase of a large piece of property in an area regarded by some as one of the most economically deprived neighbourhoods of the city. In July, 1985, they broke ground for the first of the buildings to go up—not a church but a twenty-one store shopping centre. Following it will be a hospital for the poor, and a day care centre and school for the neighbourhood. And, as a last step, the church building will be relocated in the area where they began.

All of this is certainly enough to question the full accuracy of a 'suburbanization', a concentration in the suburbs, of American religion. And, though a full study of religion in suburban life still remains to be written, enough information is in to question past generalizations. Some studies of church attendance indicate rates are higher for urban than suburban residents. And a 1968 study argues that 'the suburban return to religion resulted from the very forces that produced the suburban migration itself. In the case of religion, the postwar 'baby boom,' coupled with the traditional desire of American p. 82 parents to provide a religious education for their children, was the outstanding factor. As the number of school-aged children in the general population declined, so did the alleged religious revival'.¹³ Suburban Americans are no more prone to religiosity than their urban counterparts. People still bring to the suburbs the spiritual furniture of their previous residence. It has been rearranged, some of it reupholstered. But a chair is still a chair, not a sofa.

PERCEPTIONS AND MISPERCEPTIONS

Before us now are two apparently contradictory perceptions: secularism as the basic reality of urban life, and religion as alive and well in the city. Where does the truth lie?

Probably somewhere in between: the city as both religious and as secular, turning away from God and turning to Him as well. The secularist thesis needs many qualifications. (1) secularism touches rural life as well as urban, suburban and inner city life; (2) migration from a rural town to an urban setting does not automatically guarantee a loss of faith; (3) sometimes faith becomes stronger under urban pressures, more essential in preserving the links with home and kin; (4) some faith systems (like Islam) are more resistant than others to alleged urban corrosion; (5) not all cities in all cultures show the same degree of secularism; (6) secularism may not always be the strongest reason for what some see to be the failure of the church in the city.

¹² Charles L. Chaney, *Church Planting at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1982), pp. 102–105.

¹³ William M. Newman, 'Religion in Suburban America'. *The Changing Face of the Suburbs*. Barry Schwartz, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 267.

And in the same spirit, the religious revival thesis also needs its qualifications. (1) planting churches in the city is no simplistic guarantee of the conquest of secularism; (2) secularization can have a positive effect for church growth in addition to its negative impact; (3) secularism may make itself at home in the inner regions of a faith's worldview long before it shows in external rituals and institutions; (4) the contemporary worldwide spread of western lifestyle and technology is often the seedbed for the spread of secularism as well as an instrument in the propagation of the gospel.

Secularism, we are saying, is not exclusively an urban phenomenon, but it is most certainly a real one. It has a deteriorating effect on faith, sometimes mortal. At the same time, its strength and flexibility can be overemphasized by those already timid toward the city. Misperceptions can accelerate alarm and exaggerate the dangers. Outlining the sources of some of these mistaken generalizations can be p. 83 helpful in keeping perspective. They can keep us from mythologizing the reality of secularism into some myth of overwhelming secularization.

1. Just recognizing that secularization may be mythologized is the first step in making progress. Myths, we argue, are not simply fairy stories created by unthinking 'primitives' to explain why lightning strikes or people dream. They are social fictions, created by the human heart out of its struggle with God, to represent what we want reality to be, not reflect what it is. They ideologize reality, using collected pieces of truth and bits of information (secularism in the city, in this case). And out of this they shape an illusion, something that will evoke vague and generalized images. And something that will help us flee God-given responsibility.

Is this what Harvey Cox has done with secularization in the city? Secularization has lost its negative edge under his handling. It seems interrelated, if not identical, with the Kingdom of God. Is he talking about the cities we are talking about or is he ideologizing an illusion about modern civilization? Is he talking about secularization in any negative sense or is he ideologizing an illusion about human potential and progress?

Do those who fear the loss of faith in the city do the same thing from a reverse direction? For Cox the city becomes a positive image of progress and secularizing change. For us it becomes the epitome of loss and corruption. But for both it is an illusion that motivates, Cox towards the city, we away from it.

In Pharisaic concern over cups and pitchers tainted by city use, we perceive the city as the source of our outside pollution and forget that 'whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him' ([Mark 7:18](#)). Worldliness is mythologized out of the human heart into a geographical area of heavy populations, density and heterogeneity. The Genesis history of Sodom is mythologized into an escape-from-the-city theology. But we forget that Lot's problem was not his making peace with the city; it was his making peace with the violence, the materialism and the sin of the city. That happened long before he went to dwell in Sodom. It happened in the country when he coveted the well-watered land that belonged to Abraham ([Genesis 13:5-13](#)). He could not see the wickedness for the water.

2. A deep part of the myth making comes from the way we see religion. Peter Glasner illustrates the various models created by the science of sociology to define the secularization process of human religions. The models are ideologized by science into social myths. And the myths, he continues, 'are based on the acceptance of reified p. 84 categories produced outside sociological analysis without recognizing them as such'.¹⁴ So, for example, there is a preoccupation in much western sociology with the institutionalized aspects of 'religiosity'. The assumption here is that a usable definition of Christianity must

¹⁴ Peter Glasner, *The Sociology of Secularisation* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 7.

focus on function and be concerned with membership, ritual, attendance. These become crucial elements of a definition of religion. So any move away from this institutional participation involves religious decline and secularism.

Has Africa become secularized on this basis? One counts the number of lapsed Christians and says, 'Yes'. Or one counts the number of growing churches and says, 'No'.

If we are to break with this way of evaluating religion, we will have to see it in a more sweeping, a more holistic, way. Can we do it by saying that human life, in all its entirety, is religion, humanity's integral response action to God? Totalitarian in its scope because Gods demands are all embracing ([Deut. 10:11-12](#), [II Cor. 10:5](#)), its progress or decline cannot simply be measured by church buildings or a lack of them; its measuring stick becomes its commitment to the words of the Preacher: 'Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man' ([Eccles. 12:13](#)).¹⁵

Seen in this way, secularization becomes a problem older than modernity.¹⁶ And one also that cannot easily be identified simply with the lifestyle of the modern technological city only. It manifests itself wherever the human heart struggles to break free from the rule of God.

3. Identifying secularization with the city is an easy myth for North Americans to build. Generally we see ourselves sharply distinct from nature and all other forms of life. And guided by our stress on material things, nature's significance for us is defined in terms of that which can be harnessed for producing material welfare. Belief in the evil of human nature, even if an occasional American professes it, is overshadowed by the view of our ability to change our environment and be affected by it.¹⁷ When we are sick, there is aspirin. When we p.85 are impoverished, there is work to get us what we need. The world and its cities are things we can control and use for self-improvement. The roots of secularism are all here.

How then does it become a myth? Myths are always self-defence mechanisms. Myths keep us from blaming ourselves as the guilty; they seek to fix responsibility elsewhere. Who can we blame? There is always the city. Blame the city for depersonalization, anarchy, anonymity, and crime.

4. The reality becomes the myth when the church is not there to question the function. And all too frequently that has been true. The picture is frequently the same in Africa and Asia. Churches 'have failed to realize fully the tremendous needs of the multitudes who left their homes and went to the cities. Not infrequently, Christians have moved to the cities before the church did so'.¹⁸ Has secularism created resistant cities? Or has church apathy fostered neglected cities? Are the urban unresponsive, resistant or neglected?

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

Secularism is present in the cities, as present as it is in the country or the suburbs. And it has a corroding impact we cannot minimize. How can we respond to it?

¹⁵ Paul G. Schrotenboer, *The Meaning of Religion* (Toronto: Association for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship, n.d.), pp. 4-6.

¹⁶ This is a point I have made earlier in 'The Kingdom of God and the City of Man: A History of the City/Church Dialogue', *Discipling the City*, Roger S. Greenway, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), pp. 17-53.

¹⁷ Edward C. Stewart, *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Washington, DC: Society for Intercultural Education Training, and Research, 1972), pp. 61-65.

¹⁸ Peter Falk, *The Growth of the Church in Africa* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), p. 426.

1. *Target the cities, do not flee them.* Here are some of the church's greatest challenges. Waldron Scott, onetime General Secretary of the World Evangelical Fellowship, tells of striking up a conversation with a young student in Bangkok. 'During our conversation I asked him, "Have you heard of Jesus Christ?" He responded, "Is that a new brand of soap?" At first I wanted to chuckle. Then I realized the enormity of what I had just heard: fully half of the world p. people today—and quite possibly as many as two-thirds—do not know the difference between Jesus Christ and a bar of soap! Yet Dr. George Peters, a well-travelled observer, says, "I find very few of the mission societies who are really specializing in city evangelism".'¹⁹ The question is not, Will the church lose the city? The question is, Will the church ever enter the city?

Everywhere the picture seems the same—not simply that of too many people or even too much secularism, but that of too few p. 86 churches. Bangkok boasts a population of 5.5 million, Protestants and Catholics numbering at most 45,000, but only 102 churches as of 1983. Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka, is the home of over 600,000 people from eight different ethnic groups. Only fifty-one local congregations exist to meet the needs of a land area spread over some 9,000 acres.

The problem is not primarily the dominance of secularism. It is the absence of the church and a Christian response to the need.

Charles Chaney suggests the problem is the same in the United States. He divides America's population into three groups—the Insiders (sincere, ardent believers in Christ), the Sometimers (nominal Christians whose commitment never seriously affects the way they think or act), and the Outsiders (those Who make no profession of faith in Christ at all). The vast majority of the Outsiders and Sometimers, he argues, are living in the great cities of our land. But 'these are the very places where we have the fewest number of churches, proportionately'.²⁰ Spotlighting the Southern Baptist commitment to the city, Chaney goes on to note that 35.4 percent of the American population lives in the twenty-five largest Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSA) but only 8.7 percent of the existing Southern Baptist churches are located in those SMSA's. Less than nine percent of those churches are responsible for evangelizing thirty-six percent of the population.

2. *Create a taxonomy of urban secularism.* Looking at opposing generalizations and misperceptions should say at least one thing to us clearly. Secularism and secularization at this point are categories more sermonic than scientific. The need of the hour is a careful and Christian examination of what makes secularism tick. And more specifically what makes it tick in the city. Until that study is undertaken, little positive good will come of essays like this.

What sort of questions need to be answered in this kind of research? Here are some from my growing list.

a. Does secularization need a more precise definition than the one we have suggested in this article? How can we develop a more precise definition and still retain an understanding of religion that cannot lose the biblical sense of wholeness we have argued for already?

b. Is there a point or points in this secularizing process where people can be said to be less 'closed' to the good news that God reigns in Christ? Does secularization help in the destruction of some faiths and thus remove roadblocks for the gospel? p. 87

It is certainly true that animism in the industrial cities tends to lose its grip on the adherent. Respondents in two Xhosa-speaking communities in South Africa, one relatively

¹⁹ Waldron Scott, *Bring Forth Justice* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), p. 19.

²⁰ Chaney, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

rural and the other urban, were asked whether they had ever suffered a misfortune and, if so, if it was caused mystically (by witch-craft, sorcery, ancestors). Seventy-three percent of the rural population attributed it to such sources but only forty-five percent of those from the city did. 'Rural residents were far more likely than their urban counterparts to mention mystical causes.'²¹

Singapore's recent history underlines this same pattern of the disintegration of animism in the city. The breakdown of traditional Chinese religion, basically animistic at its core, is widespread, people either become Christians or secularists.²² And among those who are so-called secularists, there remains a very positive attitude to religion. In a study of secularist opinion in 1970, reports H. Keith Hinton, it was found that 'eighty-three percent were still interested in religion though not affiliated with religion because Christianity has failed to reach them with the truth'.²³

Hinton's conclusion is a bit more enthusiastically optimistic than I think we can be now about the secularization process. No definition of what he calls 'pure secularism' is provided, no process of secularization is sketched. Instead of saying the secularists 'are mostly open', is the situation not better evaluated by saying they are 'less closed'? After all, judgments as to the winnability of a people for Christ are made not solely on the basis of how close they have come to Christ but also how far away they have moved. And secularization, in its basic thrust, is a movement away. A house swept clean of the demon of animism, unless filled with Christ, may find itself filled with three or five or seven demons of secularization.

3. *Search for the felt needs behind secularization.* What draws people to secularism as a way of life? What frustrates them about secularism as an answer to their questions? Are there social classes that seem more open to its influence? Answers to these queries can start us on the way to creative Christian responses and evangelistic strategies.

Keith Hinton's study of secularism in Singapore, for example, more than just a negative attitude towards all religions p.88 generally. The vast number of secularists in that society are just disenchanted with their old traditional religion. These people are not necessarily closed to the gospel nor even resistant to it.

All this points to what has been called a 'positive' advantage of secularization, an erosion of traditional faiths and a search for new perspectives. Even the Muslim community, one of the most secure religions, can show this same erosion. We noted earlier the general stability of that faith, even after migration to the United States. However, even this now needs qualifications. First generation new arrivals in Dearborn, Michigan maintain their old Muslim values. But among those with a longer history in the United States there is 'a very weak sense of religiosity'. In this group very few conduct daily prayers and participate in the annual fast during the season called Ramadan. None conduct the pilgrimage ritual to Mecca, although some of them are wealthy. The rigid, traditional religion no longer seems fully appropriate for the new social environment. Religion for these generations fulfils the need for nationalist sentiments. From this group an 'increasing number of persons ... convert to Christianity. Although their number is very small, it is increasing from time to time.'²⁴

²¹ William J. Hanna and Judith L. Hanna, *Urban Dynamics in Black Africa* (New York: Aldine Publ. Co., 1981), p. 60.

²² Keith Hinton, *Growing Churches Singapore Style, Ministry in an Urban Context* (Singapore: Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 1985), p. 85.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁴ Atif, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

Tim Matheny has discovered similar circumstances among Arab Muslims of the Middle East. There, in a category of people he designates as transitional Arabs, one finds a people neither traditional nor modern. They are people in motion, people in between. A majority of them were born in the villages and have since moved to the urban centres. In fact, it is the cities of the Middle East that have the highest concentration of Transitionals. Willing to reexamine their faith, open to innovation, they are less bound by a weakening Islamic stronghold. From them comes the largest number of converts to Christianity in the Middle East. In Lebanon, eighty-five percent of the Muslims who have become Christians have been drawn from this group. In Jordan they number seventy-four percent and in Egypt sixty-eight percent.²⁵ Parallel to the secularists of Singapore, these transitional Arabs represent the vast majority of the high school and college students. It is not simply secularization alone that must be studied but the felt needs answered at that point by the secularizing process.

Among the working class people, for example, 'there are many p. 89 secularists whose felt needs refer more specifically to their experience of powerlessness, unemployment, environmental alienation, conflict between class solidarity and the expectations and pressures from the society as a whole. This is especially true in the context of the Third World. Christians should be engaged in solving these problems in their society. At the same time, these secularists need to sense and appropriate the power of the Holy Spirit through the salvation and Lordship of Jesus Christ in the midst of social insecurity and economic powerlessness.'²⁶

Again, many secularists are poor; secularization is not simply identifiable with the privileged. These poorer classes see Christianity either as a threat to their desire to become wealthy, or as a means to keep them forever poor. The Christianity that will best touch them will require 'costly involvement from Christians who exemplify in their own lives the words they speak concerning Jesus and wealth. It is, sadly, often the actions of affluent Christian churches and leaders which reinforce the secularist poor in his position'.²⁷

And how large in our urban societies is that class of secularist now disillusioned with secularism itself? Disenchanted with the very process of disenchantment they have initiated, they find the promises of science and materialism empty and unfulfilled. They turn to the cults in the United States and to the occult in the Caribbean. The revival of animism in the city may point to this kind of frustration. Driven to the point of despair, they may be missed in our diagnosis of symptoms rather than the disease.

4. *Develop a holistic ministry for the city.* 'The great problem stemming from increased urbanization', comments Howard Moody, a New York pastor, "is not that we do not have churches where the people are at or where the great masses are; rather, it is that the very folkways, activities and organizations of the church are irrelevant, sometimes actually anti-urban ... Our whole way of being the church in the twentieth century is shown to be inadequate.'²⁸

²⁵ Tim Matheny, *Reaching the Arabs. A Felt Need Approach* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1981), pp. 5–6.

²⁶ *Christian Witness to Secularized People*, (Wheaton: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1980), p. 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

²⁸ Quoted in Richard J. Tlapa, *The New Apostles. The Mission to the Inner City* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977), p. 73.

Secularization as a process leaves no part of urban life untouched; politics, economics, education, communication are moved by its impact. By contrast, in places like Latin America, 'evangelicals have failed to teach and apply a New Testament social ethic, leaving no p. 90 viable alternative other than Marxist revolution.'²⁹ Church growth, separated from these areas without intention by a strategy concern for numerical and organic growth, can become ecclesiastical obesity. New life in Christ is commonly interpreted negatively—no smoking, no drinking, no parties, no fornicating—and a sharp line of demarcation is drawn between the church (everything good) and urban society (everything bad). Secularization concerns itself with all of urban humanity. But the church reduces the totalistic dimensions of the gospel to a narrowed focus on 'saving souls.' As a result, the church cannot respond to secularization. It has already capitulated to it in the form of a disengagement of the gospel from society.

A biblical call to repentance and saving faith in Christ does not call us away from the city; it calls us to life under the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all areas of the city. Personal commitment to Jesus Christ is foundational. But on that foundation we erect a model house, demonstrating the full implications of the gospel for urban Christians where they live, work and spend their time. 'Occupying until he comes' does not mean we board up our house in the city, and stock it with enough spiritual food to last until the heavenly Landlord comes to break the siege. Between the coming of Christ and his coming again, the heirs of the earth and its cities are pilgrims and strangers. As pilgrims we share Christ's reproach as strangers in our own inheritance. But as heirs ([Matt. 5:5](#)), we exercise dominion over created things. Our stewardship over creation, given in the garden ([Genesis 1:28](#)), and misshapen by sin ([Genesis 3:17–19](#)), is not reduced by the saving work of Christ to keeping the church lawn cut and mimeographing the Sunday bulletin. Creation, and our stewardship of it, is restored in Christ. The tyrant of the creation city was dislodged at Calvary and the cities of the earth have been given back to the rightful Sovereign and his people. Our calling now is to affirm his stamp of ownership on every building, street and institution in the city. We are the city's voluntary tutorial staff, instructing the urban population to observe all that Jesus commanded ([Matt. 28:19](#)).

God's urban policy is more fully elaborated in the New Testament, and Jesus' theme of the Kingdom of God. Here we learn that 'the name of the Lord' we are to spray paint on the walls of the world's cities is Jesus. The name of the Lord has become the name of Jesus, 'the name which is above every name' ([Phil. 2:9](#)). To speak of the kingdom is to speak of Jesus, to enter the kingdom is to believe in Jesus ([John 3:3, 5](#)). p. 91 To see Jesus casting out demons is to see that the kingdom has come ([Matt. 12:28](#)). The preaching of Jesus is the seed of the kingdom ([Mark 4:3–14](#)), his miracles are signs of the power of the kingdom unleashed ([Luke 10:9](#)). The kingdom, in short, is the rule of the King Jesus.

As his kingdom disciples, we wait for his final coming and the consummation of that kingdom. And we wait by seeking first his kingdom and his righteousness ([Matt. 6:33](#)). What is the object of our quest? We are to seek God's righteousness—his sway, his rule, his reign in our lives, and in our cities. In anticipation of his coming, we pray, 'Thy kingdom come' ([Matt. 6:10](#)). Are we praying for heaven to come to earth? 'In a sense ... but heaven is an object of desire only because the reign of God is to be more perfectly realized than it is now ... Therefore, what we pray for is this, Thy kingdom come; *thy will be done* on earth as it is in heaven' ... In my church, as it is in heaven ... in my life, as it is in heaven ... The confidence that this prayer is to be answered when God brings human history to the divinely ordained consummation enables the Christian to retain his balance and sanity of

²⁹ Roger S. Greenway, *An Urban Strategy for Latin America* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), p. 117.

mind in this mad world in which we live'.³⁰ Secularization is to be assaulted day by day by the piercing light of the kingdom.

This is not 'unrealistic optimism' unless your theological perspective has no place for the reality of the kingdom now.³¹ It is balanced by remembering that we are 'people between the times', racked by the tension that still exists between the kingdom of God and the last ditch efforts of the kingdom of darkness in its death throes. In fact, the tension is stronger as we remember that everything now belongs to Christ and nothing can exist outside of him. Our kingdom task in the city is not easy. Jesus came to redeem the whole cosmos, to 'buy back' all things. But until he returns, our interim world is shared with non-Christians. And we are called on to recognize their rights to share with us in the development of the city. These rights, however, are 'founded, not in their fallacious assumption of human autonomy, but in the long suffering goodness of God, who has not withdrawn from the sinner the world his wickedness has forfeited, but has given him its fruit in toil and suffering'.³² p. 92

Sharing all those rights will make our struggle against secularization all the more difficult. But knowing that God has given them ([Matt. 5:45](#)), and that one day they will be taken away must always make our struggle hopeful.

How would we describe the ministry of the Madison Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Paterson, New Jersey? Made up largely of generations of Dutch immigrants to the United States, the church in the 1950's began to face a changing city. Would they stay and minister to their growing black community or would they leave for the suburbs? They decided to stay and be a community church.

Through the sixties, the church developed an intentional neighbourhood outreach and community ministry. 'In addition to the traditional congregational functions of worship and teaching, church members became involved in neighborhood nursery schools, youth groups, after-school centres and other programmes; unlike the denominational exclusiveness of the past, these new ministries were directed to people outside the congregation in the predominantly black neighbourhood.'³³

By the later sixties black adults began to join the church. Within fifteen years, this 'bastion of white Dutch ethnicity' was transformed into a diverse, integrated, multi-ethnic body of believers. Pre-evangelism had become evangelism.

Many of the church's outreach programmes begun in the sixties still function. Church members are involved as a Bread for the World 'covenant church' and help run a food pantry. Some members also work in a prison ministry and a local shelter for the homeless. More recently, members have begun participating in the recently formed Paterson chapter of Habitat for Humanity. Habitat has plans to construct twenty homes over the next five years—a much needed ministry in a city with severe housing problems.

The co-pastors, one black, one white, explain their philosophy of ministry in terms of the Calvinistic theology of their denomination. It is a faith which promotes holistic

³⁰ George E. Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Comp., 1954), pp. 21–23.

³¹ An example of this very misunderstanding of the obligations of a present-future kingdom is evident in: Arthur Johnston, 'Essentials for Urban Ministry', *The Alliance Witness*, Vol. 120, No. 5 (February 27, 1985), 9–10.

³² E. P. Clowney, 'Secularism and the Christian Mission', *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. XXI, No. 1 (November, 1958), 51.

³³ 'Serving Christ in the City,' *The Other Side*, Vol. 21. No. 5 (July, 1985), 8.

ministry. 'An understanding of the word and the deed go together', says one of the two. 'We're trying to claim the Lordship of Christ in all segments of life.'

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