Secularisation and the "Rise" of Atheism[1]

Neil Ormerod

Abstract: *As the writings of Charles Taylor have shown secularism and secularisation can mean different things to different people. We need to distinguish social aspects, such as institutional 'separation of Church and state' from cultural aspects, such as shifting attitudes to religious belief per se. At this level we can identify an increasingly aggressive and vocal atheism claiming an intellectual "high ground". In this regard the paper considers traditional Catholic teaching on faith and reason and the natural knowledge of God, and more recent teaching repudiating Christendom and exploring other possibilities concerning the relationship between Church and politics. Churches need to be able to properly distinguish which aspects of secularisation they can support and which they must oppose rather than adopt a blanket judgment on the whole phenomenon.*

Key Words: secularism; secularisation; Charles Taylor; Australia; Christendom; modernity; atheism; political theology

John Milbank begins his massive *Theology and Social Theory* with the observation that "Once there was no 'secular'".[2] However one might evaluate Milbank's work (and evaluations have been varied), this opening gambit is a timely reminder that the existence of a realm we identify as secular is neither natural nor automatic. In the ancient world generally, not just the Christian/Constantinian era, religion and state often existed as an easy amalgam, each reinforcing the other. The era we refer to as Christendom was not anomalous in world history; rather it was something of the norm. The ability to distinguish the religious from the social and political was hard-fought, on both sides, culminating in the west in our present *modus vivendi* of a "separation" of Church and state. One does not have to look too far back in history to find spirited condemnations from some Church leaders at the notion of such a separation, particularly in the "Syllabus of Errors" of Pius IX in the mid-nineteenth century. And so one of the errors condemned by Pius was "The Church ought to be separated from the State, and the State from the Church."[3] Certainly within Catholicism, one has to wait until the Second Vatican Council before Catholics were able to acknowledge the relative autonomy of the "secular" realm.

And so the emergence of a realm of the secular is a modern construct. It is the product of many forces, social, economic, political, cultural and theological.[4] Increased

[1] This paper is the edited text of a talk given to the Queensland Heads of Churches meeting, 16 March, 2010. The author would like to thank one of the referees for very helpful comments and corrections.

[2] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge, Mass, USA: B. Blackwell, 1991), 9.

[3] Syllabus of Errors, n.55. Available at http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius09/p9syll.htm.

[4] On the theological see Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Gillespie highlights the influence of Ockham and nominalism in the emergence of modernity.

levels of education, democratisation, and economic freedoms all contributed, as did the cultural emergence of what we call secularism, a movement of thinkers and their ideas which sought not just to delimit the role of religion in society, but if possible to eliminate it altogether. Since the breakdown of Christendom, the Reformation, the wars of religion and the Enlightenment, there has been no shortage of thinkers who have been ready to proclaim the end of religion and the beginning of a new and more rational age which looks down upon those who hold religions belief as at best an example of intellectual frailty, and at worst a matter of bad faith.

Nonetheless, the process of secularisation of the social order need not be viewed as entirely anti-religious. Milbank lays some of the credit and/or blame for the emergence of the secular realm at the feet of Thomas Aquinas, whose introduction of the notion of the "natural" as a relatively autonomous realm from the order of grace and the supernatural, paved the way for a theological justification of the existence of the secular.[5] This grace-nature distinction lies at the heart of much Catholic theology.[6] More recently Harvey Cox's *The Secular City,* invited Christians to embrace secularity as a good thing, something Christians should explore and perhaps endorse and promote.[7] And so we must approach the topic with some sense of its ambiguity and complexity, resisting easy characterisations of a historically multifaceted phenomenon.

CHARLES TAYLOR AND THE RISE OF SECULARISATION

Some of this complexity has been captured in the recent work by Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*.[8] Taylor begins his account with a carefully nuanced account of secularisation, distinguishing three distinct meanings that can be given to the term secularisation. These are:

> (1) the withdrawal of God from "public spaces", for example through the separation of Church and state;
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> (2) a decline in religious practice; and
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> (3) "a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."[9]

As Taylor notes, a society can be secular in the sense of (1) but still have relatively high rates of religious practice, as for example in the USA, and so not display secularization in the sense of (2). However, what is of most concern for his analysis is the third sense: "the change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest

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[5] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 406-08.

[6] For an excellent account of key twentieth century Catholic debates on the issue see Stephen Duffy, *The Graced Horizon: Nature and Grace in Modern Catholic Thought* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992).

[7] Harvey Gallagher Cox, *The Secular City: Secularisation and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*, 25th Anniversary ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1990).

[8] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

[9] Ibid, 3.

believer, is one possibility among others … Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives."[10]

Of course many analyses of secularisation are less differentiated than this and tend to lump different elements together. In this work Taylor is responding to two distinct readings of the rise of secularisation. The first reading views the rise of secularisation as a clear sign of decline, a falling away from religious belief and practice, and a collapse into moral relativism and social and cultural decay. This type of reading is common among Church figures who seek to promote a return to the past, where religious belief went hand in hand with strong moral and cultural norms. They tend to focus on the decline of God's presence in the public sphere and bemoan the falling away of religious practice. The second and opposed reading can be found among the proponents of secularisation who view it as a narrative of progress, a sloughing off of the constraints of the past, particularly religious constraints which are viewed as so much superstition, ignorance and fanaticism. The dead hand of tradition is replaced by the march of progress driven by science and technology. These readings focus on the decline in religious practice as a natural consequence of science and modernization. Taylor refers to these as "subtraction stories", stories which view the rise of the modern world in terms of liberation from "certain earlier confining horizons."[11]

Taylor rejects both these readings of the rise of secularisation, and develops a different narrative for its rise as involving elements both of decline and progress. He wants to uncover the moral core at the heart of the rise of secularisation, a moral core which itself emerges from within the Christian tradition. Far from being an alien growth, the progressive elements in the rise of secularisation have deeply Christian roots. This is particularly evident in its appeal to the criteria of authenticity and interiority. Both have strongly Christian antecedents in the unfolding of a modern sense of identity.[12] In this way he seeks to counter a reading which views the present situation simply in terms of decline. On the other hand he argues against subtraction stories of modernity by noting that decline in religious practice is not uniform, and is not a necessary consequence of the emergence of modern science. Neither condemnation nor outright praise is appropriate, rather what is needed is a nuanced account of the dynamics which have led to the present and will continue to shape our future.

THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

It is an interesting exercise to map Taylor's three categories of secularisation against our Australian experience. Certainly we have a de facto separation of Church and state, though not in the same precise sense as the USA. On the other hand, we have an increasing number of politicians, from both sides of the political divide, who are very public about their religious commitments, even as they draw quite distinct political conclusions from those commitments. The last three leaders of the Opposition have had Catholic

[10] Ibid, 3.

[11] Ibid, 22.

[12] It is significant here that Taylor does not speak of the present era in terms of "post-modernity", rather speaking of it as an "age of authenticity." As a designation post-modernity tells us what it is "against" but not what it is "for." Characterising this as an era concerned with authenticity captures more its positive content. Ibid, 473-504. Also see Charles Taylor, The Ethics of Authenticity (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

backgrounds, one a relatively recent convert, while the Christian faith of our recent Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was well known.[13] The Catholic faith of the NSW Premier has also been a focus of discussion. She met her husband at a World Youth Day gathering, has a master's degree in theology and considered doing a doctorate in theology as well. Clearly our current "secular" situation has not precluded active participation in the political process by people of religious faith. In fact so prominent have been people of faith in our political process that it is not uncommon for some people to express concern in "letters to the editor" and various blogs that the secular nature of our institutions might be being undermined.

In terms of religious practice it is clear that many mainstream Christian Churches are experiencing significant decline, both in overall numbers of those self-identifying and in those practicing through regular attendance at church. Overall those identifying as Christians fell from 71% to 64% from 1996 to 2006. Census figure also indicate a larger number of people identifying as non-religious, rising from 16.6% to 18.7% over the same period.[14] However, some churches are experiencing significant growth, particularly Pentecostal churches, though from a much smaller base. They also have significant success in attracting a younger congregation. Some of this growth is from denomination switching, and some from new converts. However, as some of my Pentecostal colleagues have said, "We have a big front, door, but also a big back door." Whether those who leave cease to practice altogether, or move back into other denominations is a question for further research. But it is clear that it is not just a story of decline in practice. Some forms of practice are in decline, while other forms are flourishing. And so the score card is a bit mixed on that front.

On the third notion of secularisation, we are encountering an increasingly aggressive and militant (dare one say evangelical) atheism which is determined to claim the intellectual high ground, claiming that modern science makes religious belief irrelevant and intellectually bankrupt. The charge has been led by Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*)[15] with supporting roles played by Christopher Hitchens (*God is not Great*)[16] and others. These thinkers represent the recent pointy end of the much longer historical movement Taylor identifies as "from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one possibility among others … Belief in God is no longer axiomatic."[17] As Taylor's researches make abundantly clear there is no necessary nexus between the rise of modern science and the decline in religious belief.[18] Nor do most mainstream Christian Churches see any contradiction between faith and science. But nonetheless this position is constantly vocalised both by its high profile proponents, and their cheerleaders who inhabit the blogs of cyberspace.

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[13] It is also interesting to note that the atheism of our present Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, has also been a point of much debate. There was much less debate when Bob Hawke, also an atheist, was elected Prime Minister.

[14] See http://www.dfat.gov.au/facts/religion.html.

[15] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2006).

[16] Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, 1st ed. (New York: Twelve, 2007).

[17] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

[18] Of course this is only a small aspect of Taylor's narrative, which covers more ground than I can cover in this essay.

It is worth making a couple of observations about this apparent rise in atheism. The first is that as anyone who has read them knows, the key authors are intellectually shallow in their handling of the issues. But what they lack in depth they make up for in volume. They hit all the right notes to evoke anti-religious prejudice and their followers respond accordingly. Anyone who has been on the receiving end of blog responses to the public expression of religious belief knows how angry, puerile and superficial the response from popular atheism can be.[19] There is something more than intellectual conviction at work here. The depth of anger speaks of other issues at play.

The second point is to suggest that some of this anger is reactive to the present high profile of religion in Australia and internationally. I would argue that some of this reaction is the result of the terrorist attacks of 9/11.[20] The rise of militant Islamic terrorism is of global concern, but it has certainly put religion back on the public agenda. In fact few of us would have predicted the increased public interest in religious matters that has occurred since that event. And while there is a world of difference between Islamic terrorism and having an overtly Christian Prime Minister, to the current crop of atheists the latter remains a matter of serious concern as well. Religion equals the forces of irrationality, and so anyone with religious convictions by that fact alone cannot be trusted to act rationally in all circumstances. There is almost a sense of disbelief in their writings that anyone of intelligence could still hold on to religious convictions, let alone then go on to attain high political office.

The third point is that in relation to the shift Taylor has identified, Christians have not only been complicit, some strands have actually been at the forefront of bringing such a shift about. As Michael Gillespie in his work, *The Theological Origins of Modernity,* has pointed out, beginning with Ockham and working its way through the Reformation to modernity, nominalism has increasingly diminished our own faith in the ability of reason to know God. While for Thomas Aquinas God's existence can be inferred through a process of reasoning, for Ockham God is beyond the reach of reason, since reason is reduced to mere knowledge of the names of things. This position was amplified during the Reformation with Luther opposing faith and reason:

> There is on earth among all dangers no more dangerous thing than a richly endowed and adroit reason, especially if she enters into spiritual matters which concern the soul and God … Reason must be … blinded, and destroyed. Faith must trample underfoot all reason, sense, and understanding, and whatever it sees it must put out of sight … Whoever wants to be a Christian should tear the eyes out of his reason.[21]

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[19] As an example, one article I had published in the ABC online journal, ABC Unleashed, on a papal encyclical provoked a response from someone claiming that his fifth grade son was more intelligent than Pope Benedict because he did not believe the world was made in six days. It is easy to multiply such examples. It seems clear that such comments seek to demonstrate a sense of intellectual superiority to people of faith. They have a self-congratulatory tone which may speak of an active ressentiment, that is "the re-feeling of a specific clash with someone else's value-qualities . . . what it attacks is the value-quality that the superior person possessed and the inferior not only lacked but also feels unequal to acquiring," to those who believe. See Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1971), 33.

[20] Certainly the event has given rise to a number of studies on religion and violence such as Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003); Lloyd Steffan, The *Demonic Turn: the power of religion to inspire or restrain violence* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003).

[21] This quote is frequently cited on various web sites as coming from Luther, but I have not yet found the original source. See for example http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/14223.htm, accessed 4 August 2006. It is quoted by Walter Kaufmann, The Faith of a Heretic, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), 75. Significantly the

This position was given further philosophical credence with the position of Immanuel Kant, who sought to eliminate metaphysics, placing the existence of God beyond the range of human reason.[22] Kant effectively ruled metaphysics out of court, limiting human reason to the phenomenal world of sense:

> The light dove cleaving in free flight the thin air, whose resistance it feels, might imagine that her movements would be far more free and rapid in airless space. Just in the same way did Plato, abandoning the world of sense because of the narrow limits it sets to the understanding, venture upon the wings of ideas beyond it, into the void space of pure intellect. He did not reflect that he made no real progress by all his efforts; for he met with no resistance which might serve him for a support, as it were, whereon to rest, and on which he might apply his powers, in order to let the intellect acquire momentum for its progress.[23]

Centuries later Karl Barth will echo Luther's position with the words, "Faith takes reason by the throat and strangles the beast."[24] Barth is particular well-known for his rejection of natural theology. Any "god" arrived at through reason would be nothing but an idol.[25] While Catholicism resisted this movement to split faith and reason, with Vatican I teaching that the existence of God can be know through natural reason (a teaching repeated at Vatican II in the Constitution on Revelation, *Dei Verbum*), most Catholics would unreflectingly accept the more dominant stance that such a position is untenable. The inaccessibility of God to reason has become a cultural commonplace, unquestioned and unquestionable from all sides, both secularist and religious. This is congruent with Taylor's third meaning of the terms "secularisation".

Now, if for some four hundred years major parts of Christianity have been saying that the existence of God cannot be known through reason, then we should not be surprised when atheists respond by saying that belief in God is irrational. Since reason is seen as a standard of public accountability, Christian promotion of the idea that God's existence cannot be known through reason amounts to complicity in our own public marginalisation. I have argued elsewhere that for a variety of reasons it might be of benefit to revive a Christian tradition of natural theology, in part to call into question this marginalisation.[26] It is a position not without its difficulties, as again the work of Taylor

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quote appears on a number of atheist websites, and is even printed on a tee-shirt produced by an atheist group.

[22] Kant also declare the immortality of the soul and the existence of human freedom as beyond the reach of reason; but each of these three was a necessary postulate for practical reason.

[23] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Norman Kemp Smith* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1929, 1965), 48.

[24] Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans, trans. Edwyn Clement Hoskyns* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 143.

[25] See Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2008), 158-64, for an account of Barth's reaction to the proposal by Emil Brunner advocating the development of a natural theology.

[26] Neil Ormerod, "In Defence of Natural Theology: Bringing God into the Public Realm," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 71 (2007). In speaking of a Christian tradition of natural theology I am not therefore seeking to promote a specifically "Christian" natural theology, as suggested by McGrath, The Open Secret. It seems to me that this suggestion is fundamentally wrong-headed.

makes clear.[27] But it may well be something we need to consider as a means of addressing the current climate of intellectual hostility to religious belief.[28]

RELIGION AND POLITICS

Perhaps we should now return to the opening comments on the relationship between religion and politics. The present separation of Church and state is a very modern institutional arrangement, which runs counter to the experience of much of human history. The process of secularisation at this social and political level allows for religious freedom to be exercised while preventing the state from arbitrating on religious disputes or allowing for those disputes to intrude into the political process. This was a hard learnt lesson in the west, and perhaps no church fought this resolution more fiercely than the Catholic Church, especially during the nineteenth century. So once again the Syllabus of Errors of Pius IX rejected the suggestion that "Every man is free to embrace and profess that religion which, guided by the light of reason, he shall consider true." Further it rejected the proposition that "In the present day it is no longer expedient that the Catholic religion should be held as the only religion of the State, to the exclusion of all other forms of worship."[29]

However, the persistent consequence of the modern resolution to the tension between religion and politics has been the marginalisation and often silencing of a religious voice in the public arena. Let me recall an incident I remember in our Sydney newspaper, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, many years ago. One of my friends and colleagues, a Catholic priest, had written an opinion piece for that paper on the issue of euthanasia. To my mind it was a well reasoned piece, spelling out the difficulties that can arise if euthanasia were to be legalised. The response of the letter writers was immediate. "Here is the Catholic Church seeking to ram its teaching down our throats. This violates the separation of Church and state."And so on. This type of policing of the boundaries between religious belief and political consequence is a common experience to any public presentation of a "Christian" position on any number of political and moral issues.

A major difficulty we face here is our own inability to articulate an intelligible alternative between a secularism model which excludes religious opinions from all public discourse, and a Christendom model which expects those religious opinions to hold immediate sway in society. We need a publically defensible model of the relationship between religion and politics which allays fears that the religion is seeking to impose its beliefs on others, while allowing for legitimate concerns to be raised. Indeed we need such a model not just to articulate to others, but to help us make sense of it for our own activities in the political realm.

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[27] See his discussion of Closed World Systems in Taylor, *A Secular Age*. Also Neil Ormerod, "Charles Taylor and Bernard Lonergan on Natural Theology," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 74 (2009).

[28] It seem to me that one of the biggest problems with the current abandonment of natural theology is that theologians has left ordinary believers without the intellectual assurances they need in the present climate of intellectual hostility to belief. Even Christians shout down the possibility of knowing the existence of God through reason.

[29] *Syllabus of Errors*, n.15, 77.

Here I would suggest that the first encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI *Deus caritas est* might prove a valuable resource.[30] This encyclical neatly falls into two parts, and it was widely rumoured that the second half had been drafted prior to the death of Pope John Paul II. While the first part of the encyclical provides a fascinating account of the nature of love, the second half was a more hard-headed account of the issues faced by Church agencies and the relationship between faith and politics. Benedict starts his argument by acknowledging that "the just ordering of society and the state is a central responsibility of politics" (n.28). He reinforces the teaching of Vatican II that the state enjoys "the autonomy of the temporal sphere". By identifying justice as the "aim and intrinsic criterion of all politics", Benedict sets the stage for a discussion of the relationship between Church and state, between faith and politics.

What we find in this document is a clear rejection of the Christendom model of Church-state relationship: "it is not the Church's responsibility to make [its] teaching prevail in political life … the Church cannot and must not replace the state" (n.28). How then does Benedict envisage the role of the Church in relation to the political process? Positively speaking he argues that the Church's task is to "inform consciences", "stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice", and foster "greater readiness to act accordingly" (n.28). The Church's social teaching is based on "reason and natural law", "rational argument" so that a "just society must be the achievement of politics, not the Church" (n.28). In fact "the direct duty to work for a just ordering of society … is proper to the lay faithful … called to take part in public life as a personal capacity" (n.29).

It is possible to analyse this proposal in terms of a sequence of mediations, from religious conversion to moral conversion, from moral conversion to cultural transformation, from cultural transformation to political agency.[31] This sequence of mediations both relates religion and politics, and ensures a critical distance between them which respects the relative autonomy of the political realm. What it does not sanction is the direct interference of religion into politics. This temptation, often enough succumbed to, is the essence of a theocracy, giving divine authority, which is unquestioned and unquestionable, over the political realm. The absolutism of such a position is terrifying in its far reaching consequences. Our secular opponents are right to reject such a stance. As conservative commentator Michael Novak suggests, "even philosopher kings, given total power, may sooner or later be tempted to torture others … some pretext is always at hand".[32] Why would a temptation to theocracy arise? Because given the multiple mediations involved, given the time and energy needed to shift cultures towards some normatively perceived political goal, religious leaders and religious people generally must

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[30] One might also refer to Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 197-212, where he considers a number of different models for Church-state relationships, from a variety of authors and traditions. See also Neil Ormerod, "Seek First the Kingdom of God: Church Agencies and Job Search," *Australasian Catholic Record 77*, no. 4 (2000), for a contemporary application.

[31] Neil Ormerod, "God and Politics," *Australasian Catholic Record 84* (2007). Also Neil Ormerod, "The Argument Has Vast Implications: Part II of Deus Caritas Est," in *Identity and Mission in Catholic Agencies*, ed. Neil Ormerod (Strathfield: St Pauls, 2008).

[32] Michael Novak, *Will It Liberate?: Questions About Liberation Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 200-01.

learn to live with and mourn our own failures to change political decision makers.[33] Simply put we will not always succeed, nor should we expect to do so.

Of course such a proposal comes with some significant theological options commonly found within a Catholic tradition, particularly the relationship between faith and reason; only here the context is more one of faith and practical or political reason. It presupposes not a sharp dividing line between the two but a relationship whose boundaries are blurry in some places and sharper in others. But we should not simply accept a secularist account which seeks to police this boundary making it completely impenetrable. And in doing so we may also need to question elements of our own traditions which act in such a way as to support such a separation. We do not want to be complicit in our own marginalization.

Conclusion

In a recently published article within his *Collected Works*, Bernard Lonergan writes of a four-fold distinction between:

(1) A sacralisation to be dropped and

(2) A sacralisation to the fostered;

(3) A secularization to be welcomed and

(4) A secularization to be resisted.[34]

Each of these distinctions requires of us an act of discernment and prudence. What sacralisation is to be dropped? Where is it inappropriate to seek to claim divine authority or religious inspiration? In particular Lonergan refers to the "contemporary movement of secularisation and laicization [which] ... compels us through the force of circumstances to get out of the mental and institutional complex of Christendom."[35] This then is a secularisation to be welcomed. What is the sacralisation to be fostered? Where have we lost a sense of the divine and the sacred? Here Lonergan speaks of the need "not to despise human values but to lift them up ... to promote genuine values without being confined to them and without identifying Christian values with them."[36] In our current situation we might also need to revive a sense of the sacredness of the human person, and recognition of the power of nature to speak to us of the divine presence.[37] What then is the secularization to be resisted? Where are we being denied our rightful place in debates, in institutional settings, and political matters? There are no easy or immediate answers to such questions. These are matters of constant negotiation and renegotiation. Clearly at present there exists a very vocal element in society, some of it driven by a militant

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[33] On the prophetic power of mourning see Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

[34] Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "Sacralization and Secularisation," in *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1965-1980*, ed. Robert Croken and R. M. Doran, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2004), 264.

[35] Ibid. Lonergan is here reporting on the position of Chenu.

[36] Ibid, 265.

[37] One can speak this way without falling into pantheism or paganism as feared by some opponents of modern environmentalism. St Francis of Assisi is a good example of someone who could find God's presence through the beauty of nature.

atheism, which seeks to eliminate religion completely from the public arena. On the other hand, never in my life-time has religion had such a strong public presence in the political arena, with politicians openly discussing their faith and its impact on their political views. The secularists are not getting things all their own way. What we need to be able to do is to articulate a coherent rationale for Christian engagement which allays fears of a return to Christendom, while maintaining the legitimate rights of Christians to at times bring their faith commitments into public debate. I have suggested above that Benedict XVI has provided one such model for this which is worthy of consideration. But failure to do so does a disservice to ourselves and society at large.

Author: Neil has worked professionally as a theologian for close to twenty five years. He is widely published in Australia and overseas with articles in leading international journals. Prior to taking up a career in theology he taught mathematics at the University of NSW. All his theological education was with the Melbourne College of Divinity. He is married with four adult children and has two grandchildren, Caitlin and Mary.

Email: Neil.Ormerod@acu.edu.au