

The Pilgrim's Pathway

**The Bible, the Church, and the World:
A Third Way (6)**

**The Second Way:
Klineanism/Religious Secularism (i)**

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Now that we have concluded our look at “the first way” of relating the Bible, the church, and the world—known as theonomy/Christian Reconstruction—we are prepared to turn our attention to “the second way,” which we are terming “religious secularism.”

In hostile opposition against theonomy/Christian Reconstruction, as well as against manifestations of what is often called “the Christian right” (including those who seek to perpetuate or to recover a “Christian America”) a response has arisen among some Reformed and Presbyterian theologians indebted to the biblical theology of Meredith G. Kline. In this first decade of the 21st century, Klinean biblical theology is being aggressively developed into a related moral and political theology whose recommendations regarding the relationship between the Bible, the church, and the world appeal to a doctrine of natural law and a doctrine of two kingdoms. Because of their direct impact on the faith and practice of members of confessional Reformed and Presbyterian churches, including the United Reformed Churches, these recommendations deserve our careful review and evaluation.

Where are we going?

In the articles being planned for this column, we hope to sketch the contours of Klinean biblical theology, and its application of religious secularism, with the help of several sources.

By way of introducing the implications of this alternative, we will discuss two programmatic expositions—one popular, the other academic—of the direction that some think Christians ought to be taking, recommendations that are quite dependent on the views of Kline.

The more popular exposition comes from Mrs. Misty Irons, whose essays you really do need to read if you intend to grasp the seriousness of what is confronting Reformed and

Presbyterian believers today. The first essay is “Should Biblical Law Rule Society?,” and the second is “A Conservative Christian Case for Civil Same-Sex Marriage,” both of which can be accessed at <http://www.musingson.com/index.html>. (So that the reader may be clear that what follows employs neither *argumentum ad hominem* [or in this case, *argumentum ad feminam*] nor guilt by association, please read this footnote presenting information taken from this same website.¹).

The academic exposition of “the second way” is the book by Darryl Hart, entitled *A Secular Faith: Why Christianity Favors the Separation of Church and State* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006). We plan on reviewing this book carefully. To whet your appetite, consider this plaudit from the book’s dust jacket: “The tapestry that emerges [from Hart’s historical narrative about the relationship between Christianity and public life in America] is a *compelling faith-based argument for keeping Christianity out of politics* [italics added].” Because the proposal of this book is quite consistent with Kline’s paradigm, and is being enthusiastically recommended by some of Kline’s disciples to Reformed and Presbyterian believers, readers of *Christian Renewal* need to study and evaluate it.

In addition to these two sources, we will be introducing you to a third source for analyzing and evaluating “the second way” of relating the Bible, the church, and the world. This source consists of the aggressive proposal of a particular version of what is being called “the two kingdoms doctrine.” By way of preliminary description, it may be stated that this version of “the two kingdoms doctrine” vigorously denies the legitimacy of applying Christian principles drawn from Scripture to matters of public ethics, legislative policy, and cultural influence. This version of “the two kingdoms doctrine” loudly resists the misdirected efforts of many evangelicals involved in “Christian politics” aimed at recovering an alleged “Christian America.”

With much of this resistance one could agree—were it not accompanied by a deeply disturbing corollary. It appears that this particular “two kingdoms doctrine” is also calling into question the historic and heroic efforts of members of Reformed and Presbyterian churches that

¹ “My name is Misty Sayoko Irons. I was born in 1968. I am female, straight and an evangelical Christian of the Reformed tradition. My husband Lee is a former pastor who is currently pursuing an academic career in New Testament Studies. We live in Southern California and have three children.

I received my B.A. from UCLA in 1990 and my M.A. in Biblical Studies (a layperson’s degree) from Westminster Seminary California, in 1996. The views I express on this website do not represent the official position of Westminster Seminary California, or any of the Reformed churches or denominations that I have been a part of. Nonetheless, I believe my theological conclusions are founded upon key doctrines of the Reformed faith that I have studied and reflected upon since my seminary days.”

for more than a century have ^{19} been engaged in such cultural activities as “Christian education,” “Christian political action,” and “Christian business.” Reason enough, then, to pay careful attention to the thinking behind this proposal.

What is “religious secularism”?

The term “secularism” is quite familiar to most of us, since in common usage it denotes negatively the separation of religion from life lived in the world. As a political term describing constitutional government, “secularism” means that the state should not discriminate against any religious or moral commitment, since all people, regardless of such commitments, are equal before the law. A second requirement flows from this, namely, that public policy, public discourse, and public legislation should be free from all religious values. Secularism requires that public society be free from religion, which is defined as personally held belief.

Often the word “secular” is employed as an adjective, as in the phrase “secular humanism.” This phrase “secular humanism” is usually understood to refer to a philosophy that defends human reason over against religious commitment as the basis for moral thinking and moral choices.

The phrase “religious secularism,” however, need not have these negative connotations. We are using this phrase to describe the position of those today who, for a variety of reasons, plead for restricting the validity of the Bible’s moral values and norms to the church. Biblical morality, it is being argued, applies to those who belong to the church, and should not be enforced on those outside the church. The Bible is the guide for church life, not for public life in society. At this stage in salvation history, so the argument goes, the Lordship of Jesus Christ is to be acknowledged and practiced within the institutional church.

In the context of this discussion, the word “secularism” (coming from the Latin *saeculum*, which means “generation, period, or age”) refers to a period of time or an era of time. (On every U.S. dollar bill, for example, appears the phrase *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, meaning “New Order for the Ages.”) A *saeculum*, then, technically refers to a period that is impermanent, a stage of history that is passing. The period between the ascension and return of Christ can be called a *saeculum*, a provisional or in-between time. It is the character of this period that should determine the kind of activity the church undertakes in the world. Indeed, the character of this

period should determine the relationships between church and state, and between Christians and their unbelieving neighbors.

The phrase “religious secularism,” then, describes what is viewed by many as a positive development and an urgent need occasioned by the passing away of Christendom. Many trace the beginning of Christendom to the influence of Emperor Constantine, who in the year 312 recognized Christianity as a legal religion. Soon Christianity grew from its minority status to the majority religion of the empire. When the Reformation dawned, all spheres of life (art, education, business, politics) had been under the control of religion (or the church), a situation resembling the Old Testament theocracy of Israel. Ever since the Reformation, various spheres of life have been “freed” from religious control—such as the state, science, art, education, and the like.

Today, as republican democracy has grown and spread around the world, we witness the enforced separation between church and state, between religion and politics, between faith and science—in fact, between religion and everything else. So we are witnessing the emergence of another phase in human social history, one which allows each sphere to function according to its own inherent norms and values. The church is but one of those spheres, whose unique calling and purpose is to administer the gospel through the means of grace. Religious secularism wants the church to be fully—and *only*—church, not to have oversight of education or politics or science. The state needs to honor the rights of every religion, and thus must serve the interests of no religion in particular. Human cultural activity is non-ecclesiastical, and thus should be free from any particular religious direction and influence. In our post-Christendom, pluriform, multicultural society, the Christian religion belongs, for the time being, in the church.

Meredith G. Kline (1922-2007)

As we indicated above, the biblical-theological basis for religious secularism can be found in the writings and teachings of Dr. Meredith G. Kline.

In 1948 Dr. Kline was ordained as a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. He received his Bachelor of Divinity and Master of Theology degrees from WTS, and his Ph.D. in Assyriology and Egyptology from Dropsie College, and served as a professor of [135](#) Old Testament at a number of seminaries (Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia; Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary; and Westminster Seminary California).

Dr. Kline further developed the biblical theology of Geerhardus Vos, and became a significant exponent of covenant theology in the Reformed tradition. He is well known for his contributions relating the suzerain-vassal treaties from the second millennium before Christ to the covenants found in the Bible. His defense of the framework interpretation of Genesis 1-2 was also well known. Some of his better known writings are *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy, Studies and Commentary* (1963), *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (1968), *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (1972), *Images of the Spirit* (1980), and *Kingdom Prologue* (1986).

Next time we'll look at a popular version of religious secularism from the writings of a number of Kline's disciples.