

The Pilgrim's Pathway

**The Bible, the Church, and the World:
A Third Way (8)**

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

Nelson D. Kloosterman

[Published in *Christian Renewal*, vol. 27, no. 6 (November 26, 2008), pages 36-38.]

A note of caution

In this article, we summarize the more academic exposition of religious secularism offered by Dr. Darryl Hart in his book entitled *A Secular Faith: Why Christianity Favors the Separation of Church and State* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006).

Dr. Hart serves as Director of Academic Programs at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute in Wilmington, Delaware. He is an elder in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves on the OPC's Committee on Christian Education. Having completed his undergraduate studies at Temple University, after which he earned an M.A.R. at Westminster Theological Seminary, an M.T.S. at Harvard University, he obtained his Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins University. From 2000-2003, Dr. Hart taught church history and served as Academic Dean at Westminster Seminary California. Currently, he also serves as Adjunct Professor of Church History, Westminster Seminary California.

Unlike a full-fledged book review, which would set forth an author's thesis together with his supporting arguments and evidence, this article will simply explain the author's main thesis and its implications as much as possible in his own words. In our next article, we will interact with several crucial components of Hart's analysis and proposal.

It is important to note that we agree with many—very many—of Hart's criticisms about the unhealthy mixing of religion and politics in America. We would argue, for example, that both Jeremiah Wright and Pat Robertson deserve the criticism that their brands of mixing religion and politics compromise the unique nature and calling of the church, though clearly these preachers are miles apart in their convictions. Nevertheless, despite frequent agreement with Dr. Hart's description of the symptoms, we are unable to agree with his diagnosis and remedy.

Here, then, is where we need to mention our caution. The reader must realize that our disagreement with Hart's diagnosis and remedy does not logically (or really) compel us to surrender to the disease whose symptoms he criticizes. To reject Hart's appeal to a version of two-kingdom theology that separates politics from religion is not thereby to embrace modern theocracy or the confusion of church and state. To be sure, this mistaken conclusion is being loudly proclaimed by some defenders of Hart's version of two-kingdom theology, but we refuse to surrender to such a mistaken either-or. With this caution in mind, we continue setting the stage for our defense of a third way.

The mistake of faith-based politics

“Since the election of Jimmy Carter to the presidency in 1976,” writes Hart in his opening sentence, “the wall of separation between church and state in American life has taken a substantial beating from the tsunami of faith-based politics” (3). Why this negative judgment? Because “the efforts to use Christianity for public or political ends fundamentally distort the Christian religion because it is essentially an otherworldly faith” (16). Preparing his readers for the inevitable shock of his thesis, Hart alerts them to the isolation and narrowness of his position by acknowledging his dissent not only from Jerry Falwell (a conservative mixer of religion and politics) and Jim Wallis (a progressive-liberal mixer of religion and politics), but also from John Calvin and John Paul II.

Hart is suspicious of the current friendliness between religion and public life for two reasons. First, this friendliness tends to obscure the truth that “Christianity has historically been an exclusive and an intolerant faith” (9). Because of this, any Christian-friendly politics either is ineffective in a pluralist society (where toleration is essential), or threatens to erode this historic nature of Christianity. The second reason for suspecting the current friendliness between Christianity and politics involves the serious misunderstanding about the essence ^{37} of the Christian religion. The thesis of Hart’s book is that in its classic formulation, the Christianity expressed in the Protestant traditions of Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican communions has very little to say about politics or the ordering of society. Though central dogmas (such as people being created in the image of God) have clear implications for public life, Christianity classically has avoided making specific public policy recommendations based on Christian arguments. Attempts by Christians to support political policy *with Christian arguments* have fundamentally

misconstrued the Christian religion. Hart argues that Christianity's basic teachings are virtually useless for resolving America's political disputes—a helpful thing, really, since then the dilemma of relating Christianity to public life (specifically politics) disappears.

For Hart, “Christianity is essentially a spiritual and eternal faith, one occupied with a world to come rather than the passing and temporal affairs of this world” (12). Using any religious faith (whether Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism) for public purposes, according to Hart, necessarily employs the social parts of religion apart from its doctrinal foundation. This inevitably domesticates and dilutes Christianity's deeper significance by placing it in service to standards that are alien to its essence.

The author appeals to the Bible for his recommendation to separate politics from religion. “In both Old and New Testaments, the ethical instructions given to Jews and Christians were for the believing communities themselves, not blueprints for public morality among the Chaldeans, Philistines, Romans, or Greeks. To follow either the law of Moses or the teaching of Christ, a person first had to affiliate with the Jews and Christians respectively, by worshiping their God and renouncing all others” (93).

The mistake of neo-Calvinism

As part of his chapter on “The Dilemma of Compassionate Conservatism” (209-239), Hart presents a section entitled “The Dualistic Challenge,” wherein he analyzes and rejects the neo-Calvinist solution offered by Dutch Calvinism.

Throughout the past century, evangelicals engaging in compassionate conservatism have followed a formula furnished by mainline (liberal) Protestants who had combined the doctrines of the kingdom of God and the sovereignty of Christ in a way that permitted religion to insert its moral concerns into all areas of life. The inspiration for this contemporary American evangelical engagement has come from Kuyperian Calvinism, with its premise that “all of life is religious.” This Kuyperian influence on a wide circle of evangelicals in North America has yielded a strategy, says Hart, that is open to question. The Kuyperian view of the antithesis between Christians and non-Christians leaves little room for compromise, and cannot deal adequately in a pluralist context with nonbelievers and idolaters. Given the neo-Calvinist presupposition that a state is either God-honoring or God-denying, theocracy becomes at least theoretically plausible as a form of modern government. This “all-or-nothing logic” embedded in appeals to the

Lordship of Christ fails to do justice to “the reduced character of Christ’s sovereignty in the Christian era” (230). Moreover, Christ’s kingdom as revealed in the New Testament is fundamentally different from the kingdom of Israel in the Old Testament. “The kingdom of Christ [is] a spiritual entity, not a political one, . . . for Christians, the equivalent to Israel’s theocracy [is] the church, not the state. The Lordship of Christ, then, [is] in the Christian era to be seen and employed within the institutional church” (230-231).

The remedy, according to Hart, is a return to the Augustinian dualism between the eternal and the temporal. This dualism was allegedly developed into the Lutheran (and Calvinist) distinction between two kingdoms, the civic kingdom and the spiritual kingdom, which contrast arises in turn from the distinction between law and gospel. Distinguishing these two kingdoms helps to prevent confusing them. This also prevents confusing the Bible, which is the guide for church life, with reason and prudence, which are to guide political life. According to Hart, conservative Lutherans also distinguish between the church as an organization and the church as individuals—the former charged with administering the means of grace, the latter consisting of Christians engaged as citizens in society. Hart commends this “dualistic vision” as the best way to protect the church from compromising its identity by mixing religion and politics.

Dare to be a Daniel

In his concluding chapter, entitled “A Secular Faith,” Dr. Hart summarizes his position. In this context the word “secular” does not entail the negative connotations of “secular humanism,” but points rather to the word's etymological meaning of “era” or “period” of history, the time ^{38} between the ascension and return of Christ, in which the functions of religion (church) and politics (state) are separated. Here the difference between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church provides the key. While the political and the religious were fused together in Israel, Christianity separated these in a way that made no provision for a Christian ruler.

The history of Western civilization has witnessed the gradual “secularization” of life, by which Hart means that various areas of life have been liberated from the domination and rule of the church. Science, art, music, and politics are examples of such de-sacralization. Part of this development of Western society is the disestablishment of the church, which means that the state does not endorse or protect any particular church or religion. Christians today need not—indeed,

they may not—seek to replicate Israel's theocratic pattern of integrating cult (worship) and culture. Rather, Christians live “hyphenated lives” as Greek-Christians, Roman-Christians, and American-Christians. Since Christ and his apostles left us no blueprint for a Christian civilization, using Christianity for political ends fundamentally misconstrues the Christian religion. Christian-inspired public policies, social arguments, or political proposals are inappropriate. Just as Daniel lived in Babylon as a God-fearer, maintaining the purity of his worship without seeking to transform Babylonian culture, so today Christians are called to live as exiles and pilgrims. For this reason, integrating faith and politics is not our calling today. Although Christians may, and should, participate in public life, they should do so as citizens, not as Christians.