

Mission and Strategy

From Sacrilisation to Secularisation

The conversion of Constantine in 316AD was a turning point in the history of Christianity. With the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire the process of the sacrilization of society began across Western Europe. This process reached its height in the period from the beginning of the 11th century to the end of the 14th century. Christianity was then at the zenith of its power throughout Europe. All the major institutions of society were controlled by the church. Since then there has been a gradual erosion of power from the church. This erosion has largely been due to the process of secularisation.

Secularisation is an historical process peculiar to the Western world. For the purposes of this paper we define secularisation as a social process that removes the institutions of a society out of the control of religion and brings them under the control of the state.

In Western nations, particularly in Western Europe, the process of secularisation has been at work since the Reformation. Secularisation has taken place on a number of fronts but there are three major strands. These are: *the Control of Institutions, the Promotion of Tolerance, and the Privatisation of Religion*

1) The Control of Institutions

This is the process whereby the State takes over responsibility for institutions initiated by the church such as hospitals, schools and welfare provision. This first strand was the one most in evidence in the early days of the Post-World-War 2 period. The introduction of the Welfare State in 1945 was a landmark in secularisation. The objective of the Welfare State was to take care of every citizen from birth to the grave. Until that time there was only minimal State provision for the relief of poverty including unemployment and sickness benefits. The church, however, for more than 100 years had been active, providing poor relief and various forms of welfare.

Schools and hospitals had both been founded by the church but it was not until the 20th century that the State began large-scale building of schools and developing the cottage hospitals in rural areas and taking responsibility for the large Christian foundations in the cities such as St Bartholomew's and St George's in London. This process of secularisation has slowly moved across most social institutions in Britain since the middle of the 20th century.

A good example of secularisation is to be seen in the field of community relations. In the 1950s when immigrants from the Commonwealth first began coming to Britain there was no organised welfare provision other than that provided on an *ad hoc* basis by churches. Following the Notting Hill riots in 1958, the Commonwealth Immigrants Committee was established under the chairmanship of the Archbishop of Canterbury. This then became the Race Relations Commission and finally it evolved into the Community Relations Commission as it is today.

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2) The Promotion of Tolerance

The second strand in the process of secularisation is seen in the growth of tolerance. In Britain the first signs of this growth of tolerance were to be seen in the 17th century when those who held views contrary to the State religion were offered the same privileges accorded to the adherents of the State Church. The Act of Toleration (1689) allowed Dissenters the freedom to worship according to their own conscience, but it did not allow them to have a university education or to hold positions under the Crown.

As society became more tolerant the Church's traditional teaching on moral values became sidelined. The two outstanding examples in the past generation have been abortion and homosexuality. The 1970s campaign 'a woman's right to choose' undermined the church's teaching on the sanctity of human life. Public opinion today is firmly in favour of abortion being freely available despite biblical prohibitions upon murder.

In the same way the forces behind the homosexual lobby have gained both political power and media attention to achieve their objectives. This is despite the fact that less than 2% of the national population is homosexual. Tolerance for minority groups has become a major social value. In July 2003 the Government used its large majority to ensure the passage of a measure legalising the adoption of children by same sex couples, thus further undermining biblical teaching on the family. .

3) The Privatisation of Religion

The third strand of secularisation is to be seen in the gradual process of relegating religion into the private spheres of life. The privatisation of religion in the western world presents the most serious challenge to the church. The end result of this process would be, not simply the dissolution of State churches, but the disappearance of institutional churches altogether. This is becoming increasingly likely due to the financial pressures caused by declining congregations and lower church income while the cost of maintaining ageing buildings and large administrative structures continues to rise. Additionally, pressures are being put upon churches through the tightening of charity law, through taxation, through employment law and through the enforcement of European regulations.

All three strands of secularisation are still active today, although since the 1980s it has been the second and third strands that have been producing the most noticeable changes in society.

Engaging the Culture

Within the European Union there are powerful forces of secularisation that are motivated by a strong anti-church spirit. This is particularly evident in France where anti-clericalism is strong. It may be that every semblance of 'Christendom' that once dominated Europe will have to disappear before Christianity is sufficiently de-institutionalised to be able to rediscover the genuinely creative spirituality of First Century New Testament Christianity. The Christianity of the Early Church had no expectation or ambition to take over the instruments of government or to dominate the social structure of the Roman Empire. The values of the Kingdom as taught by Jesus had little to do with the values of the world.

It may be that only when secularisation has removed the influence of Christianity from all social institutions that new forms of Christian community will be discovered in a church-less society. But Christians will need to discover new ways of engaging the culture. Instead of regarding all forms of secularisation as inherently evil and subversive of biblical values there needs to be a rediscovery of the very nature and purposes of the God who is revealed in the Bible.

If Christians are to recover their confidence in the gospel in a secular society there has to be a form of deprofessionalisation of religion. Every Christian needs to know the faith for themselves and not be clergy dependent. For this to happen the faith of every believer has to be rooted in a personal relationship with God so that they are able to engage the culture at every level, in the work place and in every other sphere of life.

Changing the Church

The British Church Growth Association has carried out extensive research as part of its Natural Church Development Programme. This looks at the eight 'quality characteristics' of the congregation to give a health reading for the church. Their research shows that across all denominations the lowest category in the UK is 'empowering leadership'. This reveals the extent to which the clergy still hold dominance over the laity, not only in matters of faith but also in the organisation and governance of the church. It indicates that the Church has not changed fundamentally since the days of feudal society when the priest and the squire were the only ones who could read the Bible which gave them enormous power over the people. There is a real need for lay people to be empowered to carry the gospel out beyond the church walls.

In today's society where the gap between Church and the majority of the population is becoming wider every year there has to be a radical change in the relationship between clergy and laity if the church is to survive. Evangelism and teaching can no longer be left to the professional ministers, it has to be seen as the shared task of all believers as it was in the days of the Early Church.

If ministers are to exercise empowering (or 'enabling') leadership there will have to be changes in the training offered by seminaries, most of whom still train theological students for the kind of ascribed-status role of ministry that was relevant in the 19th century and early 20th century but bears no relation to the needs of reaching a highly secularised population in post-modern Britain.

Equipping Every Believer

It is not necessary to wait for the disappearance of all forms of institutionalised Christianity in Britain in order to engage the culture in creative and progressive ways. This can be done through a movement for 'Community Transformation' that mobilises the laity who are daily at the front-line of engagement with the non-Christian world.

Despite the steep decline in church attendance during the 1980s and 1990s the church in the early years of the 21st century still has five million people attending every Sunday. If these people were confident in their beliefs, secure in their faith and committed to communicating their faith to others, this would have an immediate effect in beginning the long process of culture change necessary if Britain is to avoid falling into the morass of moral anarchy and social chaos that will be the inevitable outcome of present trends.

There are Christians in every sector of the economy but most of them would find it quite difficult to articulate their faith in simple compelling terms and most would be too nervous even to make an attempt. The institutional church is still strong enough numerically to play a vital part in community transformation if its leaders (and especially the clergy and ministers of parish and neighbourhood congregations) could catch a vision and be prepared to play a different role from the traditional expectations of the pastoral ministry.

Changing the Role of the Pastor

Many biblical scholars believe that one of the ministry gifts described by Paul in Ephesians 4 is that of pastor/teacher rather than the separate roles of pastor and teacher. If this became widely accepted and adopted as the norm it would have far-reaching effects in redirecting the energies of the minister in equipping the front line Christians for service at the point where they engage the non-Christian world.

If we are to see an effective movement for community transformation in the UK, the primary task of the minister has to change. His role has to become that of ensuring that every church member is instructed in the elements of the Christian faith and helped to be confident and competent in sharing the faith. The minister thus becomes the '*enabler of mission*' rather than the *doer* of mission. This would have a transforming effect in the life of the church as well as in society.

Establishing Biblical Principles

Engaging the culture through creative and dynamic dialogue is an important part of community transformation. It is essential to keep in mind the objective of changing the *culture* rather than changing the *structures* of society. Of course, structures will change, but it is *cultural change* that has to be the primary focus in order to get the right emphasis. We are not seeking to reverse the process of secularisation or to re-establish medieval Christendom with the Church in control of all institutions.

Certainly, we want to see structural changes in line with the biblical principles of justice and mercy, equality of opportunity, the sanctity of life, and affirming the worth of each individual. It is when a society has structures that are based upon ultimate values that the corporate health of society is ensured and the highest standards of personal morality are encouraged and promoted; standards such as integrity and truth, faithfulness and commitment, love and loyalty.

If the culture of a society is based upon affirming ethical principles and social values it does not need to have its organisational structures controlled by the Church. If the Church is successful in communicating the values of the kingdom as taught by Jesus, society does not need to be policed by the Church! Such a society will be led by the Spirit of God rather than driven by fear of contravening rules. This, of course, is an idealistic situation. But it is, nevertheless, one to which Christians should be aiming. And this is the objective of community transformation.

Mission Statement

There is a twofold objective of a ***Movement for Community Transformation***

1) **Individual** To bring individuals to a knowledge of the love of God, to an understanding of what God has done for us through Jesus, and to a life-changing acceptance of the gospel and the teaching of Jesus that leads to health, happiness, personal fulfilment and the promotion of the good of society and to the kind of discipleship that eagerly seeks to share the faith with others.

2) **Social** To work towards the transformation of society in which biblically-based values become integrated into the culture of society (and ultimately affects its structures) and protect the rights of individuals while promoting the common good and the prosperity of society in a global world.

Strategy

1) Reaching Individuals

The church as an institution has lost a great deal of credibility over the past forty years. It now has very little power to reach the unreached in post-modern Britain through traditional methods. Mass evangelism is ineffective; process evangelism e.g. Alpha, is having some success yet is limited and slow. Therefore we need to look for other methods of reaching people with the gospel. A productive method is through contacts in the work place.

a) The strategy being pursued by Clapham Connections is:

- (i) to encourage churches to offer help in faith-sharing to their members who are on the front line in the market place.
- (ii) to offer similar help to Christian Associations for equipping their members
- (iii) to provide course material on 'How to Share your faith'

b) an example of a different kind of outreach is being set up in the USA where Christians have bought a telephone company and are working on a multi-dimensional model of rapid exponential expansion. They have expressed a willingness to help in the UK. They telephone or e-mail a message every day to participants. These are recruited through the churches using lay people to reach their friends or work colleagues. An anglicised version of their material could be available soon.

2) Social Change

a) Christians who are able to share their faith and who have a mission to change the values of society can be reached and mobilised for action through Christian Associations, prayer groups, Christian Unions, lunch-time meetings and a wide range of other groups. Their task will be:

- (i) to promote the formation of Strategy Think Tanks within each profession or each sector of the economy to produce creative strategies of change
- (ii) to produce networks of contacts in every sector of society so that policies of change can be introduced into each institution
- (iii) to mobilise Christians throughout every sector of the economy to put pressure upon Parliament to influence legislation.

b) In order to give cohesion and direction to a 'Movement for Community Transformation' a national Think Tank needs to be formed whose object is:

- (i) to co-ordinate goals in line with overall objectives
- (ii) to encourage research on strategic issues in society
- (iii) to formulate national policy
- (iv) to engage the post-modern culture with the gospel story and its relevance to current issues
- (v) to use the media effectively to change cultural values

to carry out lobbying on a mass scale on crucial national issues; e.g. a million e-mails to Downing Street on crucial issues.

This paper goes alongside the Position Paper

*A series of concept papers under the heading **Community Transformation** is available*

– see web site or request separate list