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The Secularization of the Church

Wednesday, December 10, 2008

Secularization is the process by which a society becomes more and more distant from its Christian roots. Though the formal sociological theory is more complicated than that, the essence of secularization is the fact that the culture no longer depends upon Christian symbols, morals, principles, or practices. While most of the world is resolutely unsecular, much of Europe is pervasively secular — and this includes Great Britain.

Nevertheless, the secularization of society is one thing, but the secularization of the church is another. Yet, at least one major leader of the Church of England now assumes what can only be described as a secular vision of the church.

Writing in a new publication of the [Institute for Public Policy Research](#) in London, Dr. John Sentamu, the Archbishop of York, calls for the Church of England to represent people of all faiths, and those of no faith at all.

Writing in *Faith in the Nation: Religion, Identity, and the Public Realm in Britain Today*, the Archbishop argues that the Church of England deserves its place as the established church of Great Britain because it now serves as a “public utility” serving the common good.

As *The Times* [London] reported the story:

The Church of England should be open for use by people of any religion or none, like a hospital, says Dr John Sentamu, the Archbishop of York.

There is a strong case for regarding the Church as a public body that does not exist simply to serve believers, he argues. Whether or not most people attend regularly is irrelevant.

This is a strange and pathetic vision of the church. No longer the assembly of believers, the church is now defined merely as a public utility. What does this public utility do? It exists, he argues, in order to provide service such as education, funerals, and a context for important national events — such as, he suggests, the funeral of Princess Diana.

In [his chapter in the book](#), Archbishop Sentamu argues that the Church of England serves as a public utility that offers services “at the point of need for populations who will sooner or later require their services.” Quoting researcher Grace Davie, a specialist on religion in Britain, Archbishop Sentamu explains that “the fact that these populations see no need to attend these churches does not mean that they are not appreciated.”

This has to be one of the strangest and most unbiblical concepts of the church ever to reach print. The church is now to be more or less on-call for a population that sees no need to attend these churches but nonetheless is assumed to appreciate the fact that they exist. Confused?

Well, the Archbishop goes on to cite Grace Davie again in proposing the idea of “vicarious religion.” As she explains, “vicarious religion” is “the notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number who



(implicitly at least) not only understand, but quite clearly approve of what the minority is doing.”

Finally, the Archbishop argues that the church provides “faithful capital” for the society at large, building community and relationships and social cohesiveness. Of course, as he acknowledges, all this is supposed to come without much (if any) emphasis on actual Christian beliefs or teachings. As a matter of fact, he assumes that most people will never attend church anyway. Evidently, the Archbishop no longer sees that as much of a problem.

This is the end result of liberal theology — a thoroughly secularized church. This Archbishop celebrates multiculturalism and religious diversity. No urgent concept of evangelism is to be found in his essay, for he appears to believe that no such effort is needed.

Archbishop Sentamu effectively erases the boundary between belief and unbelief, suggesting that the church belongs to believers and unbelievers alike. The saving message of the Gospel — the message of salvation from sin through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ — is replaced with a social function. The Body of Christ is transformed into a public utility.

In Matthew 16, Jesus states that his church is built on the confession that he is “the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” But in the church of liberal theology, any belief (or no belief at all) will eventually do. Furthermore, no one actually needs to come. Nothing of eternal significance is hanging in the balance anyway. A clear proclamation of the Gospel and the bold preaching of the Word of God may be missing, but the architecture is grand and the music is glorious.

Of course, Archbishop Sentamu is attempting to argue for the continued existence of the Church of England as an established state church. His argument represents what happens when the interests of the state are all that remain. But Christians in America — which thankfully has no state church — are not immune from the same temptation to reduce the meaning and mission of the church to social capital and public utility.

This is ultimately where liberal theology leads, and where the church meets its end. The gates of hell will easily prevail over anything reduced to the status of a “public utility.”

Photo: Interior of [Yorkminster](#).

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