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# SACRED AND SECULAR CURRENTS FOR THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN AFRICA

Gregg A. Okesson

In 1965 Harvey Cox wrote *Secular City*, which chronicled the increasing secularisation of society and the need for talking about God in distinctly non-spiritual ways. Over the years, Cox slowly began to change his views on this subject, culminating in one of his most recent books, *Fire from Heaven*, where he explores the rise of global forms of Pentecostalism. In the Introduction to this book he says, 'We are definitely in a period of renewed religious vitality, another "great awakening" if you will, with all the promise and peril religious revivals always bring with them, but this time on a world scale'.<sup>1</sup> This 'turn about' in Cox's writings is representative of many contemporary religious thinkers, especially in light of the rise of new religious movements (often linked formally or informally with Pentecostalism). Hence, the secularisation thesis, vigorously argued and defended over the past thirty years, is being contested and reshaped by resurgent forms of global religiosity.

The situation in contemporary Africa provides colourful illustration of this reality. In 2006 I attended a conference at Cambridge University where historians from around the world met to discuss 'Ethnohistory and the shaping of Identity in Africa'. Almost all presenters delivered papers that chronicled the impact of Christianity in the formation of modern, African societies, until one young American scholar spoke on some topic related to Zimbabwe. At the end of his presentation, there was a time for questions. One older historian stood, cleared his throat, and asked this young man how he could expound this topic

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<sup>1</sup> Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1997), p. xvi.

without once mentioning Christianity and its subsequent impact on the development of Zimbabwean society. The man was clearly embarrassed and apologised for this oversight, admitting that no study would be plausible if it did not acknowledge these factors.

The 'sacred' or spiritual presents one of the predominant ways many Africans think about and/or shape their world. Traditional religion(s) were often oriented around the divine, or sacred, and permeated all facets of life. They focused on how the spiritual affects such 'mundane' realities as agricultural cycles, birth, death, and developments within the community. With the coming of Christianity, the sacred developed new expressions, sometimes mirroring the enlightenment influences from European and Western culture, and other times blending with traditional religion(s) to cultivate new autochthonous representations. Usually, however, there was an intermingling of the two, where Africans critically adopted, re-interpreted, and created new formations of the sacred in modern societies. One noteworthy example would be the impressive rise of African Pentecostalism on the continent, articulated by Ogbu Kalu as the 'Third Response' of Africans to Christianity, after Ethiopianism and Zionism.<sup>2</sup> Some scholars are estimating by the year 2025 there will be over 600 million Christians in Africa,<sup>3</sup> significantly contributing to the shift in the statistical and cultural shape of world Christianity from the North to the South.

Yet, we should be careful about not reading a Western, sacred-secular dichotomy into the religious landscape of Africa, by limiting this influence only to overtly spiritual forms within Christianity. Africa's encounter with the enlightenment was often indirect, mediated by the trader, colonist or missionary,<sup>4</sup> and therefore subject to critical appraisal and/or re-expression. One of the greatest heritages that many African cultures possess (I believe) is the creative and imaginative way(s) that they deal with the sacred and secular. Some scholars, such as Ellis and Ter Haar, argue that no study of modern African politics is tenable without understanding the religious dimension. The general thesis of their book, *Worlds of Power*, explains, 'We contend that it is largely through religious ideas that Africans think about the world today, and

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<sup>2</sup> Ogbu Kalu, *Power, Poverty and Prayer: The Challenges of Poverty and Pluralism in African Christianity, 1960-1996*, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000), p. 104ff.

<sup>3</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Ellis and Gerrie Ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2004), p. 16.

that religious ideas provide them with the means of becoming social and political actors'.<sup>5</sup> If this is true, and certainly it is compatible with earlier traditional religious beliefs, then African theologians must take very seriously the confluence of the spiritual and secular. More specifically, the general premise of this study argues that the curriculum of African theological institutions should reflect a creative and flexible relationship between these elements in the formation of ministerial leadership for today's Africa.

### Understanding the Terms

Before I proceed to develop this thesis, I must outline some general parameters for understanding these terms. As stated above, I am hesitant to provide Western, post-enlightenment definitions to the sacred and secular, yet acknowledging that these concepts have relevance for the discussion in a global and 'modernised' world. The word 'secular' comes from the Latin, *saeculum*, indicating 'race' or 'generation' but also relates to the French word, *siecle*, which means 'age' or 'century'.<sup>6</sup> It came to its contemporary usage through the identification of 'secular' land as distinguished from 'regular' monastic properties. This concept was especially prominent from the confessional wars in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and resulted in growing scepticism with ecclesiastic authority.<sup>7</sup> This mistrust of the Church corresponded to a narrowing of the 'sacred' (and/or spiritual) sphere of influence; while, at the same time, the enlightenment brought great confidence in the possibilities of the 'secular': most evident with the rise of positivism and empiricism. The scientific method provided achievements that further widened the (perceived) gulf between sacred and the secular, often placing people's trust in the latter. In the words of David Bosch, 'With the "supernatural" sanctions (God, church and royalty) gone, people now began to look to the subhuman level of existence, to animals, plants, and objects, to find authentication and validation for life. Humanity derived its existence and validity from "below" and no longer from "above"'.<sup>8</sup> This

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Fox, 'Secularization', In John R. Hinnels (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 291-305: p. 292; Charles Chikezie Agu, *Secularization in Igboland*, Studies in the Intercultural Study of Christianity, No. 50 (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), pp. 20-21.

<sup>7</sup> See Wolfhart Panneneberg, *Christianity in a Secularized World*, (London: SCM Press, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 263.

confidence in science, corresponding to a narrowing of the religious domain, has led to what is commonly called Western 'secularism', which is an ideology where God, religion, or the sacred is removed or trivialised within the public arena. Yet this is not the only manifestation of the 'secular'. For the purposes here, secular will refer to material or physical realities: whether nature, humanity, or related disciplines (purposely avoiding Western, value-laden concepts such as 'secularism' or 'secularisation' which may or may not be of relevance for African modernity). Therefore, this article suggests a variety of forms of secularism that may exist in different contexts.

The sacred likewise often derives its contemporary, Western colourings as the antithesis of the 'secular'. However, some such as Mircea Eliade have found it a subject of intense scholarly interest. Eliade investigated religions from around the world through the lenses of what he calls *hierophany*, the manifestation of the sacred. His largely phenomenological approach to the sacred has focused on the *numen*, or, feelings of religious awe that can be located in particular areas in the world.<sup>9</sup> John Oman similarly defines it from its supreme value or absolute worth as compared with the 'common'.<sup>10</sup> In either case, religion, most people believe, is the domain of the sacred and where the *numen*, or supreme value, orients the rest of life. However, ecclesiastical abuses have often contributed to a value-negative perception of the sacred, as something very powerful but susceptible to distortion. Evangelicals have often reacted against the elevation of the secular (arising out of the enlightenment) and sought to represent the sacred (or, more commonly, the 'supernatural') as the substance of 'real' life. For them, the secular reveals only the temporal, while the sacred points towards the eternal. Hence, the dichotomy between these concepts continues (Ironically, Western evangelicalism has often, unknowingly, become agents of secularisation through perpetuating a supernatural-natural dichotomy).

These concepts are further complicated by the ways scholars of religion have dealt with them. At times, Western 'secularism' becomes an ideology that is opposed to the sacred; at other times it represents personal and human morality. Likewise, secularisation may indicate the gradual withdrawal of religion from influencing society; or, it may even reveal a stream of influence evident from within Christianity. There is no consensus regarding these terms,

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<sup>9</sup> Veikko Anttonen, 'Sacred', In Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (eds.) *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 2000), pp. 271-282: p. 272.

<sup>10</sup> John Oman, *The Natural and the Supernatural* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931), p. 59, 65.

except that they are to be differentiated from one another, and often, I might add, to the detriment of each.

Therefore, in order to avoid this confusion, I will be speaking about 'currents' in the sacred and secular, and consciously avoiding such value-laden terms as Western 'secularisation' or 'secularism'. My use of 'sacred' will be sufficiently general in order to designate an association with the divine – often represented through theology or religion – but not autonomous as if with its separate sphere of influence. Likewise, as stated above, 'secular' will refer to physical or material realities. African culture(s) usually refuse to accept any dichotomy between the sacred and secular, and this article acknowledges the same, yet seeking to be cautious not to blur them together. Therefore, as I will argue, there is still legitimacy in talking about them, but in imagery that refuses any dichotomy. Hence, for the purposes of this paper I will talk about 'currents' of the sacred and secular.

In any given stream there may be multiple currents, some pushing, others pulling; at moments they may act together, and at other times they are to be distinguished and contrasted, seemingly moving against each other. Yet the stream always moves in one direction. The currents are integral to the water, and contribute to its particular identity. This imagery attempts to overcome the impasse created by post-enlightenment perceptions of the sacred and secular. It allows for healthy distinctions between the terms but without the historic antagonism they often elicit.

### **Theological Education: the Modern Predicament**

The context for this study is the contemporary predicament of theological education in Africa, and in particular, within Kenya. Among the private universities currently chartered by the Kenyan government, 6 of 7 arose from the work of mission churches or Christian organisations and incorporate some aspect of theology in their curriculum. Of the seven, only one is a predominantly theological institution – Scott Theological College – and many people question whether the Kenyan Commission for Higher Education (CHE) will ever grant a charter to another predominantly theological institution. Because of this, and/or for other reasons, several other theological institutions are significantly diversifying their curriculum and following the Christian 'Liberal Arts' model, common within American higher education. This movement towards non-theological disciplines, in fact, has been building for a long time, and a brief historical excursus may demonstrate this.

One of the oldest missions organisations in Kenya is the Africa Inland Mission (AIM), which founded the Africa Inland Church (AIC). When AIM first came into Kenya, it viewed education as one of the primary means for evangelisation. Most western missionaries served as teachers, and by 1920, AIM had over 1500 students enrolled in its various schools throughout the region.<sup>11</sup> Yet, what had initially been the strength of the mission would soon become problematic as Kenyans' appetite for education grew disproportionate to the commitment of the AIM to develop and sustain quality programmes of learning. A 'thirst for education' had been unleashed.<sup>12</sup>

In subsequent years, the AIM saw itself at odds with many of the educational developments within the region. Initially, the colonial government came alongside the mission societies in order to assist them in the educational work. Yet, the AIM received this with suspicion. Would government assistance affect the AIM's commitment to 'faith giving' and therefore not soliciting funds for its operations? Furthermore, would the focus on education detract from the 'real deep work of God'<sup>13</sup> (evangelism); especially as the government increased its standards for all educational institutions?<sup>14</sup> Finally, over time, as learning continued in many other mission organisations and new programmes were developed that expanded beyond the theological curriculum, the AIM was fearful of the secularisation of such learning.<sup>15</sup> The root of this fear arose from within the Church as well as from the 'secular' authorities. In 1948, the elders of the Mbooni Station (in *Ukambani*) penned a letter to the President of the AIM expressing concern for their relationship, asking for financial support of educational programmes, and entreating the AIM for higher education. They wrote: 'They [the AIM] also should aim in giving our people higher education, without mixing Education with preaching business, simply because if there is no Education nothing of importance can be done, as blind man cannot lead another blind man'.<sup>16</sup> The plea for learning 'without mixing education with preaching business' should not be interpreted as a call for Western secularism

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<sup>11</sup> John A. Gration, *The Relationship of the Africa Inland Mission and its National Church in Kenya Between 1895 and 1971*, Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1974, p. 160.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 163.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 162.

<sup>15</sup> Kevin Ward, 'Africa', In Adrian Hastings (ed.) *A World History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), pp. 192-237: p. 219.

<sup>16</sup> Gration, *The Relationship*, Appendix C, pp. 387-389: p. 388.

(although the AIM might have interpreted it as such), but instead as a commitment for quality education inclusive of the various disciplines: where 'sacred' and 'secular' are fully integrated.

Almost sixty years later, it should come as no surprise that quality and multi-disciplinary education remains a predominant feature within Kenyan society. This is particularly the case for technology and the 'hard' sciences, as the government attempts to face food, health, security, and communication challenges within its region of the world. Furthermore, many foundations and NGO's privilege monies to the sciences and technology. What does this mean for theological institutions? For one, physical realities are of great importance and need active engagement by theology. Yet this can take many forms, and such institutions must choose a model for the integration of theology with the 'secular' disciplines. They may follow the trend toward Christian liberal arts education; retreat into a 'spiritual' and protectionistic posture, separating theology from the other disciplines; or, create new paradigms for the relationship of the sacred with the secular. Furthermore, if they are to embrace this third alternative (which is clearly in the interest of the author) then such institutions need to look for resources not often found within corresponding Western institutions, which often linger with a post-enlightenment hangover. This is not to argue that we should abandon the Western liberal arts model, but to argue that African theological universities should draw upon resources found within their cultures to create alternative models.

### **African and Non-Western Currents of the Sacred and Secular**

The next section of this paper will draw upon thoughts of African and non-Western scholars in order to construct some general parameters for the relationship between the sacred and secular. These are not to be taken as exhaustive on the subject, but as an entrance into creative integration of the sacred with the secular – as complementary currents flowing in the same direction.

#### ***Harold Turner and 'Mediated Immediacy'***

Harold Turner, one of the foremost experts in 'primal' or new religious movements in Africa, has undertaken some imaginative steps toward defining the relationship between the sacred and secular. His article, 'A Model for the



Structure of Religion in Relation to the Secular'<sup>17</sup> seeks to explore some of these by using his research into 'primal' religions. He begins by 'tipping his hand' and sharing some presuppositions that he brings to the discussion, foremost among them that a human exists (ontologically) 'through the totality of his relations with the universe around him, in its sacred and secular aspects'.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, that the divine 'is mediated to man by and through his "world" or situation and in no other way'.<sup>19</sup> These two points illustrate Turner's highly dynamic relationship between the 'sacred' and secular', where the latter serves as the direct means for knowing and experiencing the former.

Turner proceeds to explain several different models for the relationship between these elements, discounting both 'secularism', where the sacred and secular are divided into separate spheres; while also opposing pantheism, where the supernatural absorbs the world, blurring all distinctions. He speaks in terms of a 'spatial model', where the various elements are envisaged as spheres and illustrated through circles, accompanied by arrows to show interrelationships. However, this may also be one of Turner's weaknesses, as the dynamic elements between the sacred and secular may resist such spatial conceptualisations. This might be where the illustration of 'currents' may be more effective than structural diagrams, as they can actively move into each other, through the other, and yet remain relatively distinct in their force.

His model, as explained earlier, wants to include the entirety of the world (human relationships, the physical world, interactions with self, and the divine) and he proceeds to explain various kinds of interrelationships between these, demonstrating the deficiencies of each. This brings Turner to his model of 'mediated immediacy'. He says, 'Each of the three basic relationships (nature, others and self) is in fact always interconnected with the other two kinds and mediated through them, so that the growth of knowledge and experience in any one sector always depends on a concomitant development in the other two'.<sup>20</sup> Hence, religion involves a multi-faceted array of interrelationships. These 'secular' subjects provide the immediate means for humans to interact with the divine: to know and serve Him.

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<sup>17</sup> Harold W. Turner, 'A Model for the Structure of Religion in Relation to the Secular', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 27 (1979), pp: 42-64.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 42.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 50.

True religion does not issue from the rejection of the secular for the sacred, nor by the substitution of an alternative and higher more spiritual way, the direct route of the model. Nor does it emerge from the unbeliever's absorption of the sacred into the secular, but rather from the continuing distinction between the two so that there may be mutual interaction in everchanging ways and with certain tension that is resolved from moment by moment by the act of faith.<sup>21</sup>

Hence, for Turner, the distinctions are necessary as they serve the means for explaining the other – especially as the secular reveals the sacred. This elevates the secular to a noble and spiritual purpose and prevents humans from interacting directly with the divine, by passing the world, and so sacralising themselves. It likewise provides the means for critiquing all other religions, which he does with all the biases of his own presuppositions. Working through the secular, in this manner, provides the locus for the enacting faith in the world.

Turner's model helps to understand many of the African traditions, where the physical world and ritualistic devices provided the conduit to the world of spirits.

The concept of 'mediated immediacy' plays with words in such a way to illustrate 'togetherness', yet without blurring distinctions between the sacred and secular. He does the same with transcendence and immanence, trying to achieve a balance between them, but only eliciting further questions by the reader. Furthermore, by utilising the secular as the means to the sacred, the former is elevated in status without being idolatrised or confused with the divine. This 'de-sacralisation' provides a needed balance to tendencies within African religions to divinise the spiritual leader as the one in greatest proximity with God and who has *direct* contact with the divine. However, Turner's model contains elements that may lead to greater confusion. For example, while he adamantly defends the thesis that the secular acts as the direct mediator for the divine, he is less sure of the opposite hypothesis, where the sacred mediates the secular. To his defence, he does hint in this direction,<sup>22</sup> but his reluctance to admit this correlation may reveal certain biases, questioning the holistic nature of the model. Furthermore, he fails to provide adequate safeguards to protect the secular from certain abuses with its association with the divine. If his model protects humans from sacralisation, does it do the same to other physical

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. pp. 57-8.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 58.

realities? In other words, if the world mediates the divine, can the world become divinised (even if in a secular manner) through this process? Such examples might be the 'Prosperity Gospel', materialism, or even the scientific method. If the physical world acts as the predominant conduit for the expression of the divine, what safeguards the secular from such distortions of proximity and purpose? This demonstrates the need for carefully expounding the dynamics between the two, being careful to provide ethical parameters for the interrelationship. Notwithstanding these concerns, Turner's model provides a very interesting articulation of the dynamic relationship(s) between the secular and sacred, and one founded upon African traditions.

### *Secularism in Africa*

Aylward Shorter and Edwin Onyancha's book provides a sociological/theological critique of the modern urban predicament, and therefore, another way of looking at these issues. While Turner appeals to the primal religions for direction, Shorter and Onyancha attempt to guide urban Christians through the crisis that they believe is modern, Western secularism. As such, they begin with Western-laden definitions, opting to focus upon secularism according to its associations with secularisation: 'the situation in which the secular is observed to dominate or even replace the sacred'.<sup>23</sup> Their book moves quickly from definitions to phenomenology, where they focus on urbanisation, unbelief, consumer materialism, and its effect upon various aspects of culture.

Yet, before they move toward the general purpose of their study – to critique Western forms of secularism and their impact on urban culture and religiosity -- they posit another kind of secularism which may bear more similarities with African traditional religions. Utilising the work of Mary Douglas, they briefly discuss secularism as a 'cosmic religion' where nature functions as the mediation with the sacred. This is important, they argue, because it may provide the Church a means towards evangelising those who become disheartened by Western secularism, and who lapse back into various forms of 'cosmic religion'. Unfortunately, this was casually mentioned, but never fully developed.

The remainder of their book is an interesting treatment of Western secularism as it arises within African, urban culture. It is filled with many

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<sup>23</sup> Aylward Shorter and Edwin Onyancha, *Secularism in Africa: a case study: Nairobi city* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1997), p. 14.

captivating stories and images of contemporary relevance. One of its strengths comes as a general sociological study of the various elements of urban culture, and anyone familiar with Nairobi will recognise the portrayal of youth and/or *matatu* culture. Furthermore, the last chapter presents their strategy for the 're-evangelisation' of people in a mostly secularised climate, where they denounce militant forms of evangelisation and promote human participation and social transformation of urban culture. Their ideas are constructive and provide a needed balance to many contemporary conceptualisations of evangelism where spiritual power functions as force, rather than authority.

While the book provides a helpful contribution to the discussion of secularism in modern Africa, it also has notable shortcomings. Foremost among them is the reductionism of secularism to consumer materialism. While this certainly is a form of modern, Western societies, and a distorted one at that, nevertheless it remains just one feature of Western secularism. Furthermore, the authors failed to connect traditional African emphases upon the material (communicated earlier as 'cosmic religion') to the corresponding rise of consumer materialism in modern Africa. This would have enabled them to identify *unique forms* of secularism within the African context – a missing element in their discussion. This is to argue that African communities are not idle or passive in their receptivity to global, cultural flows, but 'answer back'<sup>24</sup> and interpret such things with their own meanings. In other words, we cannot provide a direct correlation between Western secularism (as identified in the West) with the same in the modern African context. The similarities are, in fact, great, but a direct correlation discounts any unique African contribution and may appear as a subtle form of imperialism.

Finally, and central to this paper, the authors attempt to articulate the dynamic relationship between the sacred and secular. They say,

Sacred and secular represent two different ways of seeing and experiencing the same reality. They are, as it were, two different levels or planes, which, in themselves, are not in competition or conflict. At the sacred level, reality is experienced as being under the governance of God.... The secular, on the other hand, is the same reality construed as being accessible to humanity and under its control.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Bodil Folke Frederiksen, 'Popular Culture, Gender Relations and the Democratization of Everyday Life in Kenya', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26:2 (June 2000), pp. 209-222: p. 211.

<sup>25</sup> Shorter and Onyancha, *Secularism*, p. 13.

Yet, the above definition struggles to communicate interdependency. If, as they say, the two elements are the same, yet on *two different levels or planes*, they do not touch each other, and their agreement is based upon avoidance rather than active integration. This is clearly not the intent of the authors, but they devote most of their time to discounting insidious forms of Western materialism, rather than actively promoting the kind of integration implied by holding these elements together. In their last chapter, they do hint in this direction, by relating the 'new evangelism' with social action and the need for 'more human and participatory',<sup>26</sup> emphasis as the Church engages with the modern context. This, I believe, provides us a step toward reconciling the sacred and secular, and the most important contribution of this book.

***Vinoth Ramachandra:***

Finally, I will borrow some insights from outside Africa, but with a kindred perspective of looking at such issues from the non-Western world. Ramachandra is a Western-educated Sri Lankan who has been very influential in engaging various forms of Western modernity from an evangelical perspective. His article 'Learning from Modern European Secularism' provides a balanced treatment of Western secularism, with particular application to the Church in the majority world.

In this article, Ramachandra begins by identifying many of the Western elements of modern, secular societies (de-sacralisation, scientific rationalism, differentiation of state, economy, and civil society) and notes that they are rapidly becoming contemporary features of non-Western societies.<sup>27</sup> He takes the reader back to the historic conception of these modern elements, which, he proposes, arose from within Christianity. Although Ramachandra is not the first to demonstrate how such values as equality, freedom and human rights came out of Christendom (re-shaped later by the enlightenment and modernity), he brings a unique contribution by articulating their importance for non-Western societies. He proceeds with numerous examples of positive influences coming from Western missions to Indian and African contexts: ranging from translation work to medical developments. These and their European values brought such 'secularising' tendencies to such societies, enabling them to place high commitments upon education, build appreciation for local cultures, emphasise

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 134.

<sup>27</sup> Vinoth Ramachandra, 'Learning from Modern European Secularism: A View from the Third World Church', *European Journal of Theology* 12:1 (2003), pp. 35-49: p. 36.

the scientific method, and give greater accountability to political leaders. Hence, while 'secularism' is often associated with the enlightenment, the author wants to demonstrate that it had earlier origins within Christianity.

These examples lead Ramachandra to oppose any false dichotomies; instead, he argues that the antithesis of secular is the eternal, demonstrating that in the present age the sacred and secular belong together. Christianity is committed to the 'secular' because of creation and the incarnation, and 'called to anticipate God's reign in the ordering of human life'.<sup>28</sup> With these thoughts, he proceeds to provide a balanced assessment of modernity, arising from its Christian heritage, and explore how the lessons might assist majority world peoples with their encounter with modernity. He asks, 'If, indeed, modernity is the prodigal son of the Christian narrative, then what would the return of the prodigal – the 'recapitulation' (apokata-lessein, Eph 1:10) of modern society in Christ – involve?'.<sup>29</sup> The remainder of the essay is a theological treatment of 'secularism', calling Christians in the non-Western world to learn from these historical lessons as they encounter unique associations between the sacred and secular in modern societies.

Bonhoeffer provides the primary avenue for exploring these concepts as he articulates a 'worldly' Gospel in a distinctly secular world. God has been pushed to the edges of the universe, writes Bonhoeffer, and Christians too often accept that they must only speak about him in these margins. Instead, He must exist within the 'centre' of the world and humans should speak about Him in distinctly 'secular' and worldly ways. Instead of relativising God, Bonhoeffer's treatment opens the entire universe to Him, and places humanity in the midst of it all. In his 'Letters and Papers from Prison', he says,

To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to cultivate some particular form of asceticism (as a sinner, a penitent or a saint), but to be a man. It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world.<sup>30</sup>

These thoughts stand in contrast to frequent attempts to posit a 'sacred' domain where one is free to worship and believe without the pressures of secularity.

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<sup>28</sup> Ramachandra, 'Learning', p. 38.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 39.

<sup>30</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letter of 18 July 1944* (London: SCM Press, 1953) as cited in Ramachandra, 'Learning', pp. 40-41.

Instead, Bonhoeffer argues, it is precisely amidst the secular where true belief occurs.

This brings Ramachandra to the subject of the Image of God, where the 'secular' receives its ontological basis for dignity and human equality. Rather than sitting back and accepting these modern notions as something exclusively for 'secular' governments, Christianity must claim them for itself, as its rightful possession. Hence the author says, 'Injustice is a violation of God's own being'.<sup>31</sup> These thoughts re-orient theology in relationship with the other disciplines. Instead of being a separate academic specialty removed from the other academic subjects, theology needs to actively engage within the world, for the world. Ramachandra is less lucid regarding how this might appear. He does suggest that theologians need to 'help artists, economists, entrepreneurs, doctors and other professionals to think through in Christian perspective their "secular" callings'.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, he opposes treating non-Western societies as 'exotic', where African studies (for example) might involve dealing with separate and distinct issues from the global and 'modern' world. This has been the tendency of many contextual studies and often promoted by Western scholars fascinated by romantic images of the 'traditional'. Yet, if God exists in the 'centre' of the modern world, then theological engagement must deal with distinctly modern issues, such as the exploitation of the environment, consumer materialism, political corruption, technology, science, and other interactions with the 'secular'. He pictures a wide range of 'contextual secularisms',<sup>33</sup> each connected but distinct from what we see in the Western world.

The next step in Ramachandra's thinking -- though not developed in this article -- would be to suggest some imaginative ways where non-Western theology may assist the Western world in its engagement with the secular. Let me take this as my point of departure and proceed in that direction, yet with the intention of specifically applying the insights to theological education in Africa.

### **A New Model: Christ, Humanity and 'Mediated Immediacy' with the world**

The previous authors are dealing with what it means to 'be Christian' within the secular world. For Turner, primal religions teach us that there is no immediate encounter with God, but only through the world around us. Hence,

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<sup>31</sup> Ramachandra, 'Learning', p. 43.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p. 45.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 46.

the 'secular' becomes the sacrament of our worship. Shorter and Onyancha allude to the secularity of 'cosmic religion' in ways echoing Turner, but turn their attention against Western materialism and the ways that it distorts African cultures. They suggest that a return to traditional African spirituality with its emphasis on humanity and participation may provide a 'new evangelism' for people disheartened by Western secularism. Finally, Ramachandra suggests that the antecedents of Christianity's contribution to Western modernity may provide resources for Africans (and other non-Western theologians) to interact with various modernities. He sees the theological method as actively involved in these various 'securities' and essential to the 'recapitulation' of the modern world for Christ.

Before returning to the context of theological education in Africa, let me briefly suggest a different theological paradigm for the relationship between the sacred and secular. I will borrow from the various authors in articulating or framing this model, yet expounded through the incarnational theology of Paul's letter to the Colossians.

***Christ, 'reconciling all things to himself':***

In his letter to Colosse, Paul addresses a church beset by philosophical and ideological forces in their world that often privileged the spiritual. There was great confusion, one might say, between the sacred and secular, where a mixture of Jewish and Hellenistic beliefs distorted their understanding of Christ in the world. Ralph Martin summarises the situation as he hypothetically asks two questions which might have been in the minds of these first-century Christians: Firstly, 'Where is God's true presence to be found and how may mortal man gain access to that presence?'<sup>34</sup> This led some to worship of angels (2:18), and perhaps proto-gnostic ideas regarding 'elemental spirits of the universe' (2:8,20) as a means toward obtaining mediation with God. Secondly, Martin poses a related question: 'How may a person prepare himself for a vision of heavenly realities as part of his rite into the divine presence?'<sup>35</sup> This brought various Jewish philosophies regarding food and drink (2:16,21), as well as other regulations toward the ascetic treatment of the human body (2:23). These beliefs treated the secular with relative contempt in relation to heightened emphasis on the sacred. The material, in other words, often inhibited true

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<sup>34</sup> Ralph Martin, *Colossians: The Church's Lord and the Christian's Liberty* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1972), p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7.



spirituality; by treating the human body with disdain, one might gain greater audience with God, through the spirits.

Later in the same passage, Paul turns his attention against misconceptions of the secular and the reductionistic views that often correspond to the denigration of the physical body. These include, 'sexual immortality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry' (3:5). In other words, when Gnostic or ascetic views misrepresent the body, it often leads to the loss of values and morals which under gird the secular and give it meaning in the world; this results in greater licentiousness and a focus upon raw desires. Hence, as the church in Colosse elevated the sacred, they succumbed to sensuality and unfettered emotions that compromised their Christian integrity.

Paul's answer to the confusion was to present Christ as the 'image of the invisible God' (1:15) over the entire cosmos. He is the source and *telos* of creation (1:16-17), as well as the 'firstborn from the dead' (1:18). This places Christ before, after, and through all of creation, so that 'in everything He might have the supremacy' (1:18). Hence, the currents flow together in and through Christ as He unites the world to Himself, and Himself to the world, accomplishing the reconciliation of 'all things to Himself' (1:20).

As Paul continues the epistle, he expounds on this concept of 'reconciliation' by stressing the full humanity of Christ (1:22 and 2:9) and how His life (including, among others, the death, burial, resurrection and on-going supremacy) relate directly to the world. This was especially important in light of the philosophies that privileged the sacred over the secular. This 'fullness of the Deity' does not exist as some esoteric notion of spirituality where humans need to escape the physical in order to experience or relate with the divine. Instead, it is precisely in the secular that the sacred lives and whereby the world is reconciled to Christ. Furthermore, the concept of 'secular' is further clarified to the substance of humanity, implying an anthropocentrism within the world. However, unlike secular humanism, this is a Christocentric anthropocentrism, whereby Christ is connected to humans, and humans with the rest of the world.

### ***Humans, 'the fullness in Christ'***

This concept that I am calling 'Christological anthropocentrism' arises from 2:9-10, where Paul connects two statements: firstly, where he says 'For in Christ all the fullness of the divinity lives in bodily form', and secondly, where he declares, 'and you have been given fullness in Christ, the head over every power and authority'. The humanity of Christ relates the sacred to the secular by transforming humanity and repositioning it within the world. In Christ (ejn

Cristwv), humans represent the visible and instrumental Body of Christ on earth. Yet, Christ is the head of this anthropocentrism. The word 'head' (kefalh/) can indicate 'authority' or 'source'; or, in this case, there may be an intermingling of both meanings. By repeating the concept of authority through two words (kefalh and ejxousi/aB) Paul may be emphasising the supremacy that Christ has over all things. Alternatively, if he has in mind kefalh as 'source', this would make Jesus the genesis and *telos* of all authority and power, bringing the reader back to the earlier Christological passage in 1:15-20. Lightfoot takes this direction and speaks of Christ as the 'centre of vital force, the source of all energy and life'.<sup>36</sup> Later, Paul alludes to this meaning when he speaks of one who has 'lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow' (2:19). In either direction, or a combination of the two, the passage makes clear that Christ is the centre of the cosmos, and that believers enjoy this privileged identity from (and in) Him.

Christians 'participate in the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4) by being the fullness of Christ in the world. Through circumcision (2:11), burial and resurrection with Christ (2:12) believers experience the entirety of Jesus' humanity in order to participate fully within the world. This is no supra-human or metaphysical orientation, but instead involves the renewal of humanity for the recapitulation of the world.

We participate in the full humanity of Jesus Christ as the source and growth of our own humanity, bringing together the sacred and secular in human communities (the body) as we interact with the world. This authenticates the secular as the locus of Christian faith, without privileging it, or distancing it, from the sacred. Furthermore, as humans grow in Christ and 'put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator' (3:10), the intimacy between the sacred and secular grows with greater congruence. Yet, concomitantly, humanity transcends the present world. Paul says, 'Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God' (3:1). This reminds us that the 'secular' enjoys a future that supersedes this present world and any attempts to

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<sup>36</sup> J.B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Colossians and Philemon: A Revised Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1961), p. 183. This has interesting correlations with Tempels' concept of 'vital force' as foundational to humanity and the African cosmos; see Placides Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1959).

crystallise the divine into a particular moment or human representation amounts to idolatry.

### ***Christ and 'mediated immediacy' with the world***

Finally, these thoughts suggest that believers interact with the world only through Christ. Paul very carefully outlines his teachings to counter the philosophies apparent within the church of Colosse. He likens them to a shadow, which give an indirect and distorted appearance of something, in contrast to 'the reality' that is 'found in Christ' (2:17).

The ensuing images of dying with Christ (2:20) and being 'raised with Christ' (3:1-2) communicate on-going participation with Him as the means for engaging within the world. This is no escapism, but provides significant powers (see 2:10 and vs. 15) for confidently living amidst the world.

I would suggest that we take Turner's concept of 'mediated immediacy' and reapply it to this Christological anthropocentrism. For Christians, the world is not experienced directly (or, unmediated), but only through the entire humanity of Jesus Christ. This is similar to the direction suggested by Shorter and Onyancha, where their 're-evangelism' would take Africans back to a human and participatory Christianity, in reaction to the de-humanising influences apparent within consumer materialism. Likewise, it reminds us of Ramachandra's call for the 'recapitulation' of the modern world for Christ. Irenaeus' work, *Against Heresies*, lies behind Ramachandra's assessment as the early church father sought a Christological foundation for encountering Gnosticism with its distortion of humanity and the world.

Since Christ is the creator, the *telos*, and the reconciler of the world who lives in bodily form, the Christian life has a very 'worldly' orientation. The secular, in this regard, becomes the locus of our faith and enjoys a privileged status by means of the humanity of Jesus Christ. This stands in marked contrast with the ideology of secularism where it is separated from the sacred. On the other hand, since our lives 'are hidden with Christ in God' (3:2) our humanities transcend this temporal world. This prevents the idolatrous notions associated with locating the sacred as a permanent feature within the secular. Hence, the sacred and secular are co-joined in Christ and therefore in us, but only as humans live the fullness of God in the world. Wolfhart Pannenburg says,

The difference between the spiritual and the secular is the expression of the eschatological awareness of the transitoriness of the world, in the face of which the church with its liturgical life conveys participation in the

ultimate reality of the kingdom of God, albeit in a merely symbolic, sacramental form.<sup>37</sup>

This enables believers to fully engage within the world as the creation of God, and to simultaneously await their final redemption in Christ. Everything passes through Jesus Christ (as evidenced in the Body of Christ) to authenticate human existence as we 'put to death' those aspects that distort humanity, and 'put on' those which lead to fuller expressions of real humanity. The source of human existence comes through connection with the 'Head' (2:19), and any other configuration leads to gross distortions of the world and/or humanity within the world. Or, as Ramachandra says elsewhere, 'Our humanity is not something that comes between us and God. On the contrary, it is precisely in our humanity that we are called to be bearers of the divine glory, the means by which God is made known'.<sup>38</sup> This Christological anthropocentrism posits a responsibility for humans within the world, to instil it with values and meaning that derive from 'fullness in Christ'.

To neglect this role, is to essentially marginalise Christ within the world; in effect, to say that Christ only relates to some separate (and contrived) 'sacred' sphere of influence, and to relegate the world to licentiousness that arises when the secular loses its moorings from the sacred. However, to interact directly with the world without the immediacy of Christ is to transfer sacred powers to the secular and hence idolatrise certain aspects of the physical world: whether science, materialism, or the human body. I would argue that the dichotomies arising from the enlightenment have led Christians in both directions: either to abdicate their responsibility within the world or to sacralise the temporal by the sacred powers of humanity. Furthermore, I would argue that Africans should greatly contribute to this discussion through their rich heritage of creatively and imaginatively holding together sacred and secular currents.

### **Currents in the Sacred and Secular for Theological Education in Africa: Way(s) Forward**

As we return to the context of theological education in modern Africa, we should note the formative currents of the sacred and secular that have shaped this continent. No history of democracy or the formation of African societies is plausible without discussing spiritual (and primarily, Christian) influences.

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<sup>37</sup> Pannenberg, *Christianity*, p. 23.

<sup>38</sup> Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission: Beyond the Pluralist Paradigm* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), p. 252.p. 252.

Similarly, no study into African religiosity is tenable without exploring the 'secular' or material aspects of it. These currents have contributed to the rise of a formidable and multi-faceted African Church that is significantly reshaping global forms of Christianity.

A stream may move in one central direction, but possess multiple currents, shaping the way that it cuts through the land; furthermore, a larger body of water such as an ocean may contain innumerable currents, affecting the way the ocean moves, and providing transport for ships and animals. In either case, a body of water has intrinsic unity to itself despite the presence of these multiple flows: sometimes as they move into each other, as at the confluence of a stream; and other times as they act against each other, such as when the waves are breaking on the seashore. Nevertheless, the currents are integral to the shape and character of the water.

I would propose we view the sacred and secular in a similar way. Jesus Christ is neither exclusively sacred nor secular, but is both, and in unique ways. The Chalcedonian affirmation reminds us to hold in tension the distinct, but co-joined aspects of his Person, and the same ought to be true for the representation of Christ in the modern world. 'For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form' (Col 2:9). He is the perfect confluence of the two currents and the place where they flow together with seamless fluidity. To receive Christ is to receive the world of Christ with a mandate to reconcile all things to him.

The rise of Christian 'Liberal Arts' education in Africa clearly represents secular currents upon the sacred, as if responding to something that has been neglected and needs a more viable representation. This constitutes one expression of their relationship and may be healthy so long as the pendulum does not swing too far to privilege the secular against the sacred; or, where the confluence of the sacred and secular amounts to 'baptising' Christian terms as a veneer over secular disciplines. This latter danger is especially prevalent when theology has been relegated to some distant corner of academia, and/or when Christian lecturers are ill-equipped by the Church to deal with the various currents in society. The effectiveness of Christian Liberal Arts Universities in African will be tested by their ability to integrate the sacred and secular together; and, in this regard, we should be cautious about following Western forms of it, where the integration may be less pronounced.

Another option would be for theological institutions to imaginatively construct new relationships between the sacred and secular. This would enable

them to maintain their 'mission' of existing specifically for training ministerial leadership, while exploring alternative ways for theology to impact society. Robin Gill presents three possible relationships for theology and the social sciences, whereby: (1) The sciences assists theology in understanding the context in which theology is being practiced; (2) the social context influences the shape of theological exploration; and finally (3) theology acts as an independent variable influencing social context.<sup>39</sup> Most theological institutions grudgingly, in one way or another, acquiesce to the first by including a smattering of non-theological disciplines into their curriculum. The historical context of missions in Africa provides some painful lessons of the second relationship, where missionary transmission carried Western culture along with the Gospel. Finally, Africa provides one of the strongest case studies for the importance of theology as an independent variable. As stated earlier, Christianity (including its theological affirmations) has dramatically impacted the development of politics, education, and other aspects of society in Africa.

The principle of 'Christological anthropocentrism' presents the case for the Body of Christ to intentionally live its theology within the centre (ala Bonhoeffer) of society. This means, among other things, that theological institutions must relate primarily with humanity, as they prepare men and women for guiding the Church into this kind of active engagement: the reconciliation of all things into Christ. Evangelicals must not fear the 'secular' forces within the world, since being united with Christ comes with its own authentic secular powers. Furthermore, the principle set forth in this essay of 'mediated immediacy' reminds believers that before they engage with the world, they first relate with Christ; and, thereafter, they only relate with the world through the body of Jesus Christ. This is no retreatism, but conveys a posture of the Church existing in the world for the world. Furthermore, if churches took this kind of active engagement seriously, they would better prepare Christian professionals for 'thinking [and living] Christianly' about their particular discipline or area of expertise. This guards against the tendency of 'baptising' secular concepts with a thin Christian coating as if uncritically stamping them with some kind of Christian legitimacy. This may do more harm than good; for, to 'Christianise' in this regard is rarely to affect the underlying values that give the secular any real meaning in the world.

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<sup>39</sup> Robin Gill, 'Sociology Assessing Theology' In Robin Gill (ed.) *Theology and Sociology: A Reader* (London: Chapman Publishers, 1987), pp. 145-160: pp. 147-8.

This essay argues for the creative and purposeful confluence of the sacred and secular within theological education in Africa. The integration should not be indicative of some grudging appeasement of a 'secular' accreditation body, but an active and intentional integration of Christ for the world. As those with 'fullness in Christ', we see Christ as the beginning, the *telos*, and the reconciliation of the world. What is more, we need to resist building little earthly kingdoms through our institutions, as if idolatrising the temporal. 'For you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory' (3:3). These words remind us that all attempts to localise and reify the divine within earthly representations will ultimately fail.

Finally, and foundational to the thesis of this paper, what form(s) might theological institutions adopt for the confluence of the sacred and secular? Firstly, we should avoid separating general education courses from theological content. General courses such as history, social sciences, and languages need the moorings of theology and the values inculcated from the divine in order to situate them within the world. This is not to uncritically stamp them with some external validity, but to look for ways in which God's truth has already authenticated them within His world. Furthermore, theological studies should never be divorced from worldly realities, as if some isolated sacred sphere existed somewhere in human existence. *Each course being offered by the institution needs such integration*, rather than trying (awkwardly, at best) to pull together separate disciplines into a cohesive whole. The presence of various disciplines does not mean that integration ever occurs. An Institution may have an impressive array of various courses, covering a wide range of disciplines, but present them as isolated or compartmentalised units. If theological institutions are going to maintain any viability in modern Kenya, they must strive for active and intentional integration of sacred and secular (or, commonly stated: theology with other disciplines). This must be their contribution to higher education, and ultimately to society as a whole.

Furthermore, the curriculum must deal with issues of relevance within the modern world, not of some 'exotic' variety. As such, the question of relevance is often best answered by alumni and stakeholders within the institution and rarely by academicians. Such topics might include: a theology of money; Christ and reconciliation; Ethnicity; or, the Holy Spirit and human power. Furthermore, ecclesiology provides many opportunities for exploring the confluence of the sacred and secular, such as Church and politics, the Church and social transformation and/or a responsibility for the environment. These topics have often been overlooked by evangelicals, often suspicious of the 'secular' or liberal agenda. Similarly, while it is likely that Christian 'Liberal

Arts' may contribute to these discussions, their focus may be different than those of theological institution, which seeks to inculcate such visions for ministerial leaders.

Related to this, one should not underestimate the significance of sacred or pastoral powers in today's Africa. While other parts of the world have experienced a de-sacralisation of spiritual authority, Africa continues to demonstrate re-expressions of the sacralisation of power, especially evident within many Pentecostals and African Initiated Churches (AICs). In other words, spiritual authority has enormous influence on Church and society: this may arise from within the Church itself, or as political leaders strive for 'sacred' powers to elevate their own status and legitimacy. The dangers of sacralisation are well-documented, resulting in uncontested powers for the self-promotion of leaders at the expense of the followers.<sup>40</sup> But, we might ask, if there are other forms of sacralisation than this? Are there some 'sacralities' that might actually lead to the growth of the Body of Christ as it relates to the world? This, I have argued, may be apparent through the concept of Christocentric anthropocentrism. Irregardless, the purpose of this discussion is to highlight the prevalence of spiritual power in Africa and the subsequent need for active and intentional integration of the sacred and secular currents within theological education. In other words, this is to say that theological education will continue to play a prominent role in the development of modern African society, and institutions should not re-write their mission statements, or re-orient their curricula, as if responding to an apparition that looks like Western secularism. Spirituality or the sacred continues to exert significant influence in modern Africa and theology must responsively communicate this within broader 'secular' realities.

This brings us back to a suggestion by Ramachandra, where he proposes that we envisage a wide variety of 'contextual secularities'.<sup>41</sup> Related to this, we might broaden his statement by likewise asking if the same could be true for 'contextual sacralities' (albeit ones without privileging some humans at the expense of others in greater proximity to the divine)? We need the freedom to imaginatively explore such inter-relationships and what they might mean for education in modern Africa, without the default mechanism of copying other

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<sup>40</sup> Kwame Bediako, 'Unmasking the Powers: Christianity, Authority, and Desacralization in Modern African Politics', In J. Wiffe (ed.) *Christianity and Democracy in Global Context* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 207-229.

<sup>41</sup> Ramachandra, 'Learning', p. 46.



structures or 'cutting and pasting' from Western curriculum. Unfortunately, the financial pressure within African institutions often prevents this contemplative and imaginative endeavour, resulting in a rush to launch new programmes and make oneself more viable and marketable. Such pressures may not be avoided, and so institutions may need to commit themselves to a never-ending process of redefinition and self-critique, where the curricula remain 'open' and continually reformulated and re-expressed. In other words, integration must be a continual process where tension is embraced and maintained for the value of what each of the elements may contribute to the whole.

This essay does not posit one particular model, but a wide range of contextual secularities (sacralarities?) as the sacred and secular currents flow together for the constitution of the Body of Christ in the world. This is to argue that the relationship is highly dynamic and intensely theological. The Body of Christ should not be marginalised to some peripheral or exotic role within society, for we are the 'fullness of him who fills everything in every way' (Eph 1:23). Therefore, when an institution declares within its mission statement that it exists for the Church, it says something impressive and with world-affirming implications. The currents rush together as a torrent of water cascades over the landscape. In Christ, and through the Church, they receive their mission: to irrigate a dry and arid land, desperately needing sustenance.

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