

7-1-1979

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Recommended Citation

Badertscher, John (1979) "Privatization and the Church's Ministry: Reflections on Society and Church," *Consensus*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol5/iss3/3>

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“Be on your guard; do not let your minds be captured by empty and deluded speculations, based on traditions of human teaching and grounded on the elemental spirits of cosmos and not on Christ.

“For it is in Christ that the whole being of God dwells embodied, and in Him you have been brought to completion. Every power and authority in the cosmos is subject to Him as Head. In Him also you were circumcised, not in a merely human way, but by having self-centredness cut away in the circumcision of Christ. For in baptism you were buried with Him, and in baptism you were also raised to life through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. For though you were dead in your sins, uncircumcised in your very being, He has made you alive with Him, having forgiven all your sins. He cancelled the bond which stood against us with its requirements. He set it aside, nailing it to the cross. He cut away the cosmic powers and authorities, exposing them publicly, triumphing over them in the cross.” (Col. 2:8-15)

PRIVATIZATION

AND THE CHURCH’S MINISTRY

Reflections on Society and Church

John Badertscher

It has been fashionable over the last two decades for churchmen to assess cultural trends, hoping thereby to be able to tailor the church’s ministry to the needs of society. What follows attempts both to share in that assessment and to question some of the assumptions which lead us to think it is necessary. Following the rising tide of nationalism among Canada’s intellectual elite, some Canadian churchmen have sought to make the ministry more attentive to Canadian particularities. This is no doubt salutary, especially among groups like the Lutherans, whose leadership must be responsive to agenda developed elsewhere. However, those who have looked most searchingly at the Canadian situation have concluded that its most salient feature is our thorough integration into a religio-cultural complex usually called “The American Way of Life.”¹ While being Canadian can perhaps help us gain the perspective of greater distance on

1. A good account of Canada’s situation is George P. Grant, *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: Anansi, 1969). The best exegesis of the religious implications of the “American Way of Life” is still Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (New York: Doubleday, 1955).

this phenomenon, what follows will be descriptive of a North American rather than a strictly Canadian situation.

This analysis, far from assuming that this situation contains some revelation of the divine purpose to which the church's ministry should conform, will look at current trends as a manifestation of the "cosmic powers and authorities," the "elemental spirits" of which St. Paul wrote in his letter to the church at Colossae. It will be argued that, while the cultural situation being described is an unavoidable aspect of the world to which we are called to minister, its character is contrary to the nature of the Christian community and, to the extent that we are unaware of it, is subversive of that ministry.

The beast we are about to describe can best be named "privatization."² It hides itself well, being cloaked by unquestioned values we all live by, sometimes to the point of idolatry. But it can be spotted by scrutinizing some of the absurdities and contradictions of our way of life. Let us look for such evidence first in the world of politics, and then see if we can track the beast even into the religious sphere.

PRIVATIZATION IN POLITICAL LIFE

One feature which must strike anyone with an historical perspective as unusual about contemporary political life is the scope of responsibility with which government is charged today. Our governments, provincial or federal, are expected to regulate the economy. They are held culpable for unemployment, inflation or depression, and any slackening in the pace of economic growth or technological development. Whether in or out of power, parties justify themselves to voters on these grounds. The policies they espouse are basically economic strategies.

Although this seems normal and right to us, it is in fact remarkable. Until well into the 20th century, no government on earth had ever accepted such a sphere of responsibility.³ Governments were to defend the nation and administer civil and criminal justice, to enact laws expressive of the moral vision of the community, circumscribing individual behaviour in the name of some higher and common good. Today persons are elected to public office on the strength of promises to protect individuals from that kind of limitation. This may take a banal form, as in Sterling Lyon's desire to "free Manitoba," or it may take a noble guise, as in Jimmy Carter's campaign for "human rights." But if governments have become anti-governments in that sense, it is not because their mandate has shrunk. It has instead moved into the economic sphere, so that I now expect government to see to it that I am employed, that my wages can command a steadily increasing share of the goods on the market, and that enough others are similarly treated so that there will be a demand for the goods I produce.

One remarkable aspect of this development is that few people seriously think their elected officials have any aptitude for this task. Rather, political parties are characterized as being friendly or hostile to business, that is, to the managers and technicians

2. The writer is indebted for an awareness of this phenomenon to Jurgen Habermas, particularly his *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975); and to Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

3. This is not to say that governments were uninterested in economic affairs, only that they did not accept responsibility for them.

who run the large and therefore successful corporations. If the population judges these corporations to be benevolent, if people sense that they have a reasonable opportunity to share in the rewards of their operations, the former kinds of parties will tend to come to power. But if the economy seems not to be delivering the goods, the tendency will be to support parties which promise that the efforts of government technicians will complement or even supplant those of the corporations.

That primary public reality in which we live is not really public at all, but private, is signaled by the sudden shift in the sphere of government responsibility from the enforcement of a moral vision, seen in Canada as recently as the Prohibition laws of the first third of this century, to the management of an economic system. But since those who vie for office cannot be assumed to know how to do that (indeed, one can doubt whether anyone does — no theologians ever asked their adherents to take more on faith than do the contemporary schools of economics), since politicians are to be selected on grounds extraneous to their responsibilities, there is a considerable effort to find some relevant grounds. This has generally been done in Canada, as in the other Western democracies, by psychologizing the politicians. Is he sincere? Does she have charisma? Is he forceful? In this way the private life of the politician is everybody's business, and politics becomes a kind of theatre, a form of popular entertainment produced by parties and consumed by voters.

Some objections can be anticipated at this point. One might be that the economy is not private. On the contrary, the futility of politics is due to the economic inter-relatedness of life in the modern world. Politics is limited to nations but the economic system, far from being private, involves the world as a society. Life is not being privatized, but rather socialized. People are coming to realize that their lives are interdependent, and that the welfare of each is tied to the welfare of all. So one might say.

Life is indeed increasingly socialized, but this socialization is simply one aspect of privatization. The point is that a group of persons in a genuinely political community act together on the basis of mutual deliberation and choice. When we speak of Society we are not referring to that kind of action. The word we often use with "social" is "system." We live within systems, social and economic. A system is precisely an arrangement which works independently of mutual deliberation. We may try to change "the system," but only into another system, another kind of society in which people's "needs," which are fundamentally private in character, will be better met.

A political community will argue about and act toward some understanding of a common or public good which is not dependent upon and transcends the needs of any of its constituent persons, though each contributes to it and finds fulfillment in it in some way. But a society, which is what we live in, has no common good beyond its survival or perhaps growth as a social organism. The strongest piece of evidence for privatization may well be our inability to talk about or make sense of any notion of a common good, except in terms of an equality of private goods. And all of these goods are perfectly exchangeable. Which is more valuable — makeup or medical care? Football or food? Horseraces or houses? We have a way to answer that question — it is decided by the market. The market is the public space in a socio-economic system.

But there is no debate in a market, only bidding. We cannot know why our neighbour prefers Brand X, only that he buys it. All goods are commensurable in the market, because "good" is measured only by how many will pay how much. In the

market I vote with my money on the basis of my desires, which on the one hand are purely and privately my own, and on the other are determined by the goods that are available in my socio-economic system. In our society politics becomes a marketable commodity, in which I pay for my personal preferences with my vote, and for the preferences of the majority with my taxes (if, that is, the preferences of the majority are not too severely circumscribed by “the system”).

A second objection may arise at this point. Isn't the provision of the necessities of life the most obvious sort of common good? Isn't a healthy economy necessary if people are to be fed, clothed, sheltered and educated? What good are moral preachments if people are starving?

Of course, it is impossible to live well unless one is alive. So if a healthy economy means providing the necessities, then governmental economic responsibility is action for a common good. In developing countries such as China or Zambia or Ecuador where the struggle for the necessities is an overriding concern, one does find a kind of public life, a sense that each person has some stake in the well-being of the whole, so that many people understand themselves in their work to be serving their political community. But that is not our situation here in Canada. We now have the capacity to feed, clothe, and house all our people adequately. But that is not a common goal, and as a result we do not do it. We have the capacity to produce far more than the necessities, but the market cannot distinguish necessities from luxuries. All goods are commensurable. So we have the irony of a sense of public good in some relatively totalitarian countries, while in our democratic society the question of a common good cannot even sensibly be raised.

What “goods,” then, are being sought by the persons to whom we minister in this increasingly privatized world? Most of them want “jobs,” or at least the heads of households do, and many find a sense of meaning in their lives by pursuing success in these jobs. But it is rare indeed to find someone who finds their work meaningful because they are doing something to serve others, something that contributes to a good independent of the vagaries of the market. Indeed, the reason so many of us are anxious about “job security” is our realization that what we are doing does not really need to be done; the demand for our product might very well disappear. Ecclesiastical professionals may have a hard time appreciating that anxiety, but the university in Canada has been privatized in that way. To a frightening extent we academics lack the confidence that we are truly needed in any sense that transcends public whim. Our professional self-esteem is incredibly dependent on the number of consumers who, for private reasons, enroll in our institution and our department.

Our other “public good” is the flip side of “a job.” We see ourselves as consumers, and most of us want to become better consumers, qualitatively and quantitatively. But consuming has an inherent emptiness which most people sense, even as they are driven by it. The thirst to transcend this privatization will not be suppressed, so we look for meaning in life in the encounter with others on the level of inter-personal intimacy. Many look to sexual liaisons for this meaning, but most of those in the churches see family life as a fuller, richer context for the inter-personal search for meaning. Neither romantic love nor the family, of course, are able to bear that kind of freight, and thus we have the paradox of marriage becoming increasingly popular and important at the

same time the institution of marriage becomes increasingly fragile.

What can we now say about the unquestioned values — the “cosmic powers” — behind the privatization of political life? I can see at least two, and they are closely related. These are democracy and freedom. The reader may be a bit breathless at this point, being unaccustomed to thinking of democracy and freedom as having a demonic aspect. Of course, this is not a proposal to do away with them. But we should be aware of the weaknesses of democracy, as well as its strengths. And we need to be aware of the democratic way in which freedom is affirmed in our world.

Democracy is the name for constitutions in which everyone has some share in ruling. Everyone — the rich and the poor, the wise and the foolish, the virtuous and the vicious. Democracy is only possible to the extent that we can suspend our judgment about whose voice is worth hearing. In democracy, everyone has a say. But that very suspension of judgment is the basis of privatization, because if each one's values and judgments are as good as another's, there is no need to justify my choice to another. What is unnecessary is also inappropriate. I go my way and she goes hers, and the calculus of public opinion registered in the privacy of the ballot box says not who was right but who, for now, will prevail. Democracies can very well pursue the common good when war or famine threaten, but when war becomes impossible and the necessities can no longer be distinguished from the luxuries, democracy tends to be empty of public meaning, and politicians are just applicants for temporary managerial positions.

When that happens, government itself becomes at best a necessary evil, an efficient or inefficient servant of the system. We want to limit government in the name of freedom. No symbol stirs modern man so profoundly as freedom. Yet how narrow our understanding of freedom has become, even as our passion for it has intensified. Rousseau wrote, over two centuries ago, “Man is born free, yet everywhere he is in chains.”⁴ Our perception of the situation is perhaps neither so dogmatic nor so dramatic, yet we experience our own paradox of freedom. Everywhere people expect and demand freedom, yet increasingly experience a sense of restriction in their lives. Why is this so?

Rollo May, giving lectures from a forthcoming book on freedom, recently spoke of an essential freedom we have, one which the circumstances of life cannot qualify.⁵ But such freedom is very private. It cannot appear in public, for if it is independent of these circumstances it is purely a state of mind. We may appear to be determined by culture or social class, or even literally imprisoned, but inwardly we are free. Dr. May suggested, however, that if freedom is going to be effective in our lives — that is, if it is to appear in public — it must be linked with courage. That admission fascinated me; for courage, temperance, wisdom and justice are the four cardinal virtues of classical Christian ethics. Yet the need for freedom to be linked with virtue is precisely denied by those who seek, like Dr. May, to articulate the modern notion of freedom, for modern thought has absolutized freedom.

In a world committed to democracy, freedom cannot be limited by virtue. Freedom and virtue are divorced, or at least have a legal separation, but freedom apart from

4. *The Social Contract*, translated and edited by Charles Frankel (New York: Hafner, 1955), p. 5.

5. Rollo May, “The Paradoxes of Freedom”; a lecture given at the University of Winnipeg, October 19, 1978.

virtue is private. When the voter marks her ballot, no one can know whether she is acting from resentment, from envy, from fear, from impulse, or from a carefully reasoned decision about justice in that situation. It is not even proper to raise the question. Freedom, for us, is freedom from any kind of self-limitation. If we ask what the purpose of freedom is, some might try to answer in terms of self-realization. That is, we must be free so we can maximize our abilities, fulfill our potential. But without a reference to virtue, to some objective standard of human good, such an answer is empty. Nothing can be said about the actuality which might correspond to that potentiality. Our absolute freedom demands that we answer as Yahweh did on Sinai: "I will be what I will be." (Exodus 3:14) But that is an answer appropriate to God alone.

Privatization, then, is the process by which freedom is absolutized, and separated from virtue. Put in more everyday terms, privatization is the characteristic of political life when freedom means doing as I please, making the most of what is mine and my loved ones', and seeking to minimize the sphere that is "ours," that belongs to the political community, that is public.

PRIVATIZATION IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

If we examine the religious situation in Canada, evidence of privatization can also be found there. Take, for example, the phenomenon called denominationalism. While religious pluralism has been part of the Canadian religious situation for something over 150 years, its significance has been changing. What began as an uneasy truce between groups, all of which claimed to embody true religion, has developed into a denial that such a thing as true religion can be said to exist in an institutionalized form. The Roman Catholics, of course, resisted this trend longer than the rest of us, and were accused of treasonous and satanic designs for their pains. But they too are coming around. In Canada we have run well behind the U.S.A. in this trend. The Roman Catholics, Anglicans and United Church all have some small claim and considerable nostalgia to be a national church, and most Canadians are affiliated with one of these groups. But heavy immigration from places other than France and Great Britain, and the increasingly strong influence of patterns of religious life from the U.S.A. have rendered the pretensions of the "Big Three" no longer credible, even to themselves. As a result, religious pluralism is recognized as normative and even desirable, even by people who are themselves deeply loyal to a particular group.

The tolerant and co-operative attitude which characterizes our situation is no doubt far better than what preceded it. We can affirm it, as we affirm democracy. Nevertheless, we should be aware of the full range of consequences. One major consequence is that religious bodies have become voluntary associations. To borrow the phrase coined by Scott Greer to describe the modern residential community, they are "Communities of limited liability."⁶ If you don't like what's going on, you move, rather than taking the enormous trouble required to fix it.

This is not an attitude confined to the petty or the uncommitted. A man whom I regard as a great philosopher once asked me what the Lutheran Church was like, explaining after my description that he was looking for a place to go in case the Anglican-

6. Scott Greer, *The Emerging City: Myth and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1962), chapter 4.

United Church merger went through. When religious bodies are merely voluntary associations, the tendency is for consumer preference patterns to emerge in religious affiliation. People sort themselves out according to personal preference, on the basis of information that is sometimes more and sometimes less adequate. A few years ago I was discussing church policy with another member, very dedicated and devout, of our church council. In the process I made an ill-advised reference to the Augsburg Confession. She was surprised to learn of the existence of such a document, and shocked that anyone might consider it binding on her. "If I had known of such a thing," she told me, "I would have stayed in the United Church." Her decision to become a Lutheran, she informed me, was based on her perception that the church was more democratic, and the worship more dignified.

When churches cannot in good conscience claim to have anything more than a version of the truth, and when the members are so tenuously connected to the Body, it is no wonder that the same churches tend to be preoccupied with questions of institutional maintenance. Indeed, it is a miracle they are not more so. A heavy emphasis on membership, stewardship and ways of building attendance at worship makes sense in such a situation. Matters become frightening, however, when churches begin to show uncertainty about their role and their message, when they begin to do research directed at helping maintain or increase a share of the market.

An Anglican I once studied with told me "You can worship God according to your conscience, but I intend to worship Him as He desires to be worshipped." That's funny at first, but if one thinks about why it's so funny, the thought can be sobering. Surely we need to be aware of this temptation which flows from denominationalism. In the present situation, we could easily be seduced into tailoring our product to the market. Thus we do well to remember Paul's warning: "Be on your guard; do not let your minds be captured by empty and deluded speculations, based on traditions of human teaching and grounded on the elemental spirits of the cosmos and not on Christ." (Col. 2:8) The warning is necessary because the temptation is inevitable, given the dynamics of denominationalism.

If we follow this analysis a step further, we can see why two areas of parish life which we regard as important and work at very hard — evangelism and what we awkwardly call "social ministry" — are a constant source of frustration, trouble and even embarrassment to us.

We are all aware of the difficulties involved in getting lay persons or even pastors to do evangelism. A lack of personal conviction is no doubt part of this problem, but another part comes from the privatization of religion. For some products the hard sell may be appropriate, but religion is too important for that. The fact is, it is in bad taste to talk about religion in our culture, unless we are fairly sure we're among like-minded friends. Even the aggressively proselytizing groups recognize this, and seek to pave the way with some piece of literature which can be considered in private. Lutherans who hesitate to engage in what is called "evangelism" may not be showing so much lack of conviction as proper sensitivity to their neighbours' feelings. In a denominational, hence privatized, religious situation, efforts at evangelism almost inevitably come across as self-serving and, worse, as an invasion of privacy.

Likewise, our efforts at social action are distressingly impotent. Even when we do something well in this area (GATT-fly and Project North are recent examples), it is not

the “cosmic powers” who tremble, but rather some of our own members. Religion and politics don’t mix, they argue. Churchmen should stick to preaching the gospel and leave public policy to others.

Such people are easy to refute, but a word should be said on their behalf, though they probably would not appreciate the help. In a privatized society, religion and politics truly don’t mix. We avoid the pain of confronting that dilemma only by exercising pious self-deception. A recent study showed that a substantial majority of synodical delegates support the work of the churches in social ministry, but the study overlooks the obvious gap between the elites and the masses in our churches. If many of the policies endorsed by our synods were in any danger of being enacted by our governments, howls of protest would arise from the very persons who elected the synodical delegates who passed those resolutions. All scientific studies of North American religion which inquire into this area show the same colossal gap between the “pew-sitters” and their so-called representatives.⁷ Further, those in our congregations who have strong interest in the area are often isolated, allowed to “do their thing” and stage an educational program on occasion, as long as they do not threaten the stability of the institution. This same segregation is manifest to a lesser degree in the higher councils of the churches.

Again, the problem is not just a lack of awareness and commitment. When both politics and religion are privatized, any attempt to relate the two is almost bound to be vitiated. The segregation of religion from politics is a sign of privatization. But if religious faith with no political implications is privatized, and thereby weakened, Christian social action which is not clearly an expression of that faith also has some pieces missing. To put it in an aphorism, both evangelism without a political dimension and social ministry which fails to be evangelical are signs of the privatization of religion.

Of course it is not just lay persons who are privatized. Have you noticed lately a powerful current of uncertainty among clergy about their role and function? Parish administration and counselling, both of which draw heavily on secular skills, appear to be the areas in which contemporary pastors find their work most readily legitimated. Both preaching and the ministry of the sacraments often appear archaic and irrelevant. Pastors are hard-pressed to justify a substantial investment of their time in such activities. In a privatized religious situation, the activities which make most sense are those which maintain the institution and provide a chaplaincy service to that most private of all spheres, marriage and the nuclear family.

The privatization of religion can thus clearly be seen in our evangelism, our social ministry and in the allocation of our pastors’ time.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO PRIVATIZATION

What then is a Christian response to privatization? Again, I refer to the passage from Paul’s letter to the Colossians. “He cut away the cosmic powers and authorities, exposing them publically, triumphing over them in the cross.”

Privatization is one of the cosmic powers with which we have to deal today. If that is

7. One admirable attempt to address the theological problems posed by this phenomenon has been virtually ignored. See Paul Ramsey, *Who Speaks for the Church?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967).

so, then one of the first things we can say on the basis of this scripture is that nothing can be done about the situation. Democracy and denominationalism are going to be with us for some time, and they are good in their own way. Even better, nothing needs to be done. Christ is risen, He is victorious, the gospel is public already.

But this does give us a certain imperative. We ought, in this privatized world, to remember who we are and attempt to do, as well as we can, that to which we are called — to preach the Word, and celebrate the sacramental mysteries of the faith. We are called to bear witness to the truth of Christ's victory, the public act by which he showed once and for all that these powers and authorities do not have the last word, that while they shape our environment they do not determine who we are or can be. Bearing witness to that public event by telling our story and acting it out in the sacraments is itself a public event, a living refutation of the power of privatization.

Preaching and the sacraments, as actions of the Body of Christ and extensions of his ministry, have immediate public effects. They enact forgiveness, creating new possibility for human life. They create the ground of true freedom; not the reductionistic and introverted freedom which seeks to make itself absolute, but freedom in fellowship, freedom for obedience, freedom for justice which takes seriously both God and the neighbour. Preaching and the sacraments are public celebrations of a source of genuine community in which every member has a part; of the giving of a real Law which, because it has the character of love, provides the ground of a truly common good.

Telling and acting the truth in this way, we should realize, are not particularly democratic. Doing these things openly and fearlessly is not going to make us look modern and "with it." Telling and acting the truth will seem to many to be in bad taste, for it constitutes a plain rebuke to the relativism with which we are at home. This is not to say that we are to be authoritarian either, as though this truth were somehow in our own power. On the contrary, a community which has heard the truth and knows it, is a community with a very high tolerance for vigorous debate, because it knows the source of its unity. There is room for all sorts of difference, for the church is far more than a voluntary association, its fragility protected by like-mindedness or silence. Since the church is a supremely public Body, it can afford to be daringly political in its own life, and thus provide a real model and a real service to the civil community in which it is located.

What might this have to say to persons engaged in ministry? One clear implication is that we need not wait for the world to tell us what to do. We have no need of anyone to tell us what is the ministry of the Body of Christ; we need not await the results of any polls. The only question is how, in this particular situation, do we best enable congregations to do what their Covenant with the Lord commits them to do. We may question them, remind them, exhort them, challenge them; but we ought never to act as though Christians didn't already know what to do.

Thus our service will be a participation in the ministry of the Cross, for this is the only way to triumph over the cosmic powers. This service will not be based on market research, either in the parishes or in their communities. We may not be able to give people what they want, and this may often make us appear rather spectacular failures. But anyone sharing in the Cross will no longer be afraid of the appearance of failure. Rather than giving people what they think they want, we will adopt the strategy of Peter in Acts 3: "We have no silver or gold, but we give you what we have. In the name of Jesus Christ, walk."