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# Reformation and Secularity

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## Abstract

Among a growing body of recent scholarship that has shown interest in the genesis, definitions, and assessments of secularism is Brad Gregory's book *The Unintended Reformation*. This essay begins with a brief assessment of Gregory's thesis. By way of response, it then offers four reflections on what are live challenges for those Christian communities committed to a refusal to withdraw from sharing and creating common life with others, and for whom the various reformations of the sixteenth century remain critical for the formation of their identities. The reflections concern (1) the character and conditions of belief; (2) the existence of the church in late Christendom; (3) the church's worldliness; and (4) the character of faithful public life. Each of these themes has pressing implications for the ongoing life of the reformed project.

## Keywords

Reformation – secularity – belief – church and state – public theology

## Taking Some Bearings

Debates about personal and religious liberties can get ugly, even in so-called liberal democracies. They can also be instructive. For some, such debates expose the lamentable erosion of a grander and shared communal story—an account of how we came to be *where* and *who* we are, and so a way to answer the question, “How then shall *we* live?” For some others, such debates expose the myth that such a story ever existed, and that adjectives like ‘traditional’ are considerably more novel than their Galahads would have us believe.

Religious communities are neither disinterested bystanders nor newcomers to such debates. (By comparison, liberal democracy has only just turned up.)

God-botherers of various stripes and creeds have been actively engaged in such for a very long time. In fact, they even wrote many of the rules. In this essay, I wish to offer four brief reflections on what I judge to be live challenges for those Christian communities committed to a refusal to withdraw from sharing and creating common life with others, and for whom the various reformations of the sixteenth century remain critical for the formation of their identities.

One particular misjudgment I have in my scope is that social vision that places the church at the center of things, a misjudgment that sponsors modes of being in the world that are at odds with some of Protestantism's most remarkable instincts. Not everyone shares my enthusiasm for such instincts.

### Brad Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation*

Brad Gregory's ambitious, provocative, and polemical book *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (2012) sits among a growing body of scholarship concerned with the geneses, definitions, and assessments of what many God-botherers often erroneously refer to as 'secularism.' Epigrammatically, his thesis is that liberal modernity is the progeny of the Protestant reformations of the sixteenth century. These religious and intellectual upheavals, he argues, are to be lamented because they are unwittingly responsible for ending over a millennia of Christianity as "a framework for shared intellectual life in the Latin West,"<sup>1</sup> and because they created the conditions out of which grew some of the greatest maladies of the modern world, among which Gregory names individualism, pluralism, skepticism, capitalism, secularism, and consumerism—a smorgasbord of 'isms' that have, he believes, left the world disenchanted.<sup>2</sup> The Protestant response to "the failure of medieval Christendom"<sup>3</sup> was, in Gregory's assessment, to squeeze transcendence out of intellectual and public discourse, and, consequently, to discard

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1 Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2012), 45.

2 For Gregory, Modernity is that reality in which we endure "the liquefying effects of capitalism and consumerism on the politically protected individuals within liberal states, as men and women in larger numbers prioritize the fulfillment of their self-chosen, acquisitive, individual desires above any social (including familial) solidarities except those they also happen to choose, and only for as long as they happen to choose them." Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 378.

3 Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 366.

any meaning from the world that cannot be justified by an insipid and existentially disquiet form of revisionism.

I am not entirely unsympathetic to the charge of disenchantment that Gregory lays at Protestantism's door, especially because behind that door lies a musty room filled with very sober second- and third-generation Calvinists in whose work certain "metaphysical assumptions ... probably did contribute to an eventual conception of a disenchanted natural world."<sup>4</sup> But there remain some pitfalls in Gregory's account, at least two of which share a common problem; namely, the gremlin of an ecclesiocentric vision of human society and of the natural world.

### *Reading History*

The first misjudgment finds expression in Gregory's too-thin reading of the historical data. His casting blame upon Duns Scotus and William of Ockham is an example of such.<sup>5</sup> Just how two philosopher-theologians from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries can be made so directly responsible for what happened in the sixteenth is a difficult, if not entirely new, thesis to defend.<sup>6</sup> To be fair, Gregory is not naïve to the bumps and broken lines in the trajectory, but his polemical tone does not lend itself to the kind of thickly textured account required to flesh these out adequately.

More substantively, countless accounts of violence and hostile polemics notwithstanding, Gregory *underplays* the intra-Catholic divisions, and *overplays* the fixed distinction between medieval Roman Catholicism and Reformation Protestantism. Here he is at odds with evidence that suggests the existence of a more porous and sometimes mutually informative relationship, especially

4 Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 41.

5 Scotus scholars have long argued that the thesis that Gregory (and before him John Milbank and others) repeats is an untenable and oversimplified reading of the historical data vis-à-vis the work of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. See, for example, Richard Cross, "Duns Scotus and Suárez at the Origins of Modernity," in *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric and Truth*, ed. Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 65–80; Daniel P. Horan, *Postmodernity and Univocity: A Critical Account of Radical Orthodoxy and John Duns Scotus* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 83–89; cf. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), xxv–xxvi, 15, 135, 305–306; Gillian Rose, *Dialectics of Nihilism: Post-Structuralism and Law* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 104–108. Also Richard Cross, "'Where angels fear to tread': Duns Scotus and Radical Orthodoxy," *Antonianum* 76, no. 1 (2001): 7–41.

6 The argument was made some years earlier by Amos Funkenstein in *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

at grassroots levels. History is simply never as tidy as Gregory's eristics propose. The realities within and the relationships between medieval and renaissance religions are characterized by what Peter Schäfer, in an unrelated conversation, refers to as "the fluidity of boundaries"—"identities that are less stable and boundaries that are more permeable than has been previously thought and yet increasingly demarcated in order to occupy territories."<sup>7</sup>

In truth, I struggle to fully recognize Gregory's portrait of the Reformation. It strikes me as a long witty threnody placed in the service of an argument that insists that any and every piece of available data be read back into some towering Manichaean saga that blames Protestants for dismantling some imagined and monolithic medieval synthesis. It represents a classic case of drawing up an indictment against the past, and then refusing to let it testify on its own behalf. "Such attention as we give to it is usually vindictive and incurious and therefore," as Marilynne Robinson has argued, "incompetent."<sup>8</sup>

### *Paganizing Secularity*

This relates to a second charge: that Gregory's thesis is intellectually biased because it neglects offering a positive assessment of the liberalizing consequences of the reformers' intentional efforts that made those who welcomed them to be more at ease with secularity *not in spite of their theological convictions but precisely because of them*. Here, I share the Australian Catholic theologian Robert Gascoigne's assessment of Gregory's reading of liberal modernity as one-sided. Liberal societies can and do tell two stories: "a positive story of freedom of conscience and the development of unconstrained community, as well as a negative story of self-centeredness, vacuity, and the commodification of human values."<sup>9</sup> While those who hanker for some near-Edenic past in medieval Christendom will lament that the genie has gotten out of the bottle, those who take their energies from the spirit of the reformations—and particularly those sections of the reformed movements most animated by eschatology—will not grieve that there is no way of getting him back in.

Protestant commitments to the doctrine of providence, expressed, for example, in Calvin's positive assessment of creation as God's "dazzling theater,"<sup>10</sup>

7 Peter Schäfer, *The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 1.

8 Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1998), 182.

9 Robert Gascoigne, *The Church and Secularity: Two Stories of Liberal Society* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 2.

10 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis

or as “a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God, who is otherwise invisible,”<sup>11</sup> and in Luther’s and Calvin’s enthusiastic appraisal of nonecclesial vocations, undermine the old dualisms between so-called ‘secular’ and ‘sacred’ space. Both quoted fondly the psalmist’s words: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.”<sup>12</sup> Luther’s political theology therefore has little qualms about stripping the church of jurisdiction and property, and about empowering worldly rulers to exercise their vocation of *caritas* toward the state’s citizens, and beyond. That creation is God’s and that its flourishing at every level is God’s will means, for the magisterial reformers, that human societies ought to be shot through with deep reverence and thanksgiving for the profound interrelatedness of all aspects of life, and that all of our relationships ought to embody God’s justice, freedom, and enduring commitment to the affirmation of creation’s dignity. They did not, in other words, ever cast the world to the dogs. (Unless, of course, you happened to be an Anabaptist, or some German peasant demanding agrarian rights and freedom from oppression by wealthy aristocrats.)

Of course, the modes of secularity with which the magisterial reformers made their home also assumed the kind of Constantinian arrangements that made their programs of reform possible in the first place and that kept the church at or near the centers of power. While Protestants have not let such arrangements go entirely unchallenged,<sup>13</sup> there remains a pressing summons to reassess them rigorously.<sup>14</sup> Any tradition that finds itself in a situation in which many of the underlying commitments and assumptions upon which its identity was forged are now crumbling has to do some hard thinking about its ongoing character. It is to this matter, therefore, that I now turn by way of a reflection on four areas that arise for me from Gregory’s work, each of

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Battles, 2 vols., *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 1.5.8.

11 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.1.

12 Ps. 24:1. See, for example, Martin Luther, *Selected Psalms 2*, ed. J.J. Pelikan, H.C. Oswald, and H.T. Lehmann, *Luther’s Works 13* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1999), 46–47; John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. John W. Fraser, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries 9* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 222–223.

13 For example, during the seventeenth century the Covenanters in Scotland, and Baptists in England (John Smyth) and the United States (Roger Williams), championed a less cosy relationship between church, magistrate, and state.

14 See Jason A. Goroncy, “Church and Civil Society in the Reformed Tradition: An Old Relationship and a New Communion,” *Reformed World* 61, no. 3 (2011): 195–210.

which relate to the ecclesiocentricity with which he appraises things, and each of which have pressing implications for the ongoing viability of the reformed project.

### Four Constructive Implications for the Reformed Project

#### 1 *Belief beyond Medievalism*

Whatever adjectives one employs to appraise Gregory's thesis, 'novel' ought not to be among them. Indeed, his argument has a long lineage stretching back through Jaime Balmes's work in the mid-nineteenth century; to Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet's *The History of the Variations of the Protestant Churches*, first published in 1688; to early sixteenth-century anti-Protestant polemic, the most entertaining of which was expressed in woodcuts, the kind of propaganda in which Protestants proved themselves to be opponents of equal offense and creativity. It was Balmes, a Spanish Catholic priest, who argued that "if there be any thing [*sic*] constant in Protestantism, it is undoubtedly the substitution of private judgment for public and lawful authority."<sup>15</sup> To be fair, Balmes at least conceded that it was not the intention of the early Reformers—"fanatical," "infidel," and "mad"<sup>16</sup> though they were—to encourage the rejection of authority. But "against their express wishes,"<sup>17</sup> their insistence on the responsibility of believers to interpret the Word of God for themselves led to a disintegration of the power of the magisterium, and so, he argued, to the subversion of morality, the undermining of cohesive political communities, and the triumph of commerce over a truly humanizing civilization. This is the thesis Gregory revives.<sup>18</sup>

15 Jaime Luciano Balmes, *European Civilisation: Protestantism and Catholicity Compared*, 2nd ed. (London: Burns and Lambert, 1855), 2. The first edition of this work was published in 1851 with the title *Protestantism and Catholicity Compared in Their Effects on the Civilization of Europe*. Bossuet was similarly uncompromising: "private judgement ... distinguishes the Catholic from the Heretic." Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, *History of the Variations of the Protestant Churches* (New York: D. & J. Sadlier, 1845), 17.

16 Balmes, *European Civilisation*, 2, 197, 204.

17 Balmes, *European Civilisation*, 2.

18 Gregory is rightly concerned that history not be construed along what he calls "supersessionist" lines that celebrate so-called "modernity," "sophistication," and "enlightenment" as the liberators from the cultural bondages of medieval assumptions (see Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 9–10, 13–15, 29, 53, *passim*), but his assessment that such a move is accompanied by the onset of disenchantment and the abandonment of any kind of "sacramental worldview" (p. 56) is misjudged.

A more compelling account of the story of Western modernity than that offered by Gregory is that made by another Roman Catholic, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. In his essays *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*, Taylor is concerned with what he calls “the conditions of belief.” “How,” he writes, “did we move from a condition where, in Christendom, people lived naïvely within a theistic construal, to one in which we all shunt between two stances ...; and in which ... unbelief has become for many the major default option?”<sup>19</sup> Taylor tells the story of why in a so-called post-secular age “the hegemony of the mainstream master narrative of secularisation” is increasingly being challenged, and of how in our ‘secular’ age, transcendence and immanence coalesce into one disconnected whole in which “believers are beset by doubt and doubters, every once in a while, find themselves tempted by belief.”<sup>20</sup>

The work of many of our best novelists, musicians, poets, filmmakers, artists, and other endangered species attests to the belief that our age is haunted. We no longer need the church to perform this role for us. Jamie Smith describes it well: “On the one hand, ... we live in the twilight of both gods and idols. But their ghosts have refused to depart, and every once in a while we might be surprised to find ourselves tempted by belief, by intimations of transcendence. Even what Taylor calls the ‘immanent frame’ is haunted. On the other hand, even as faith endures in our secular age, believing doesn’t come easy. Faith is fraught; confession is haunted by an inescapable sense of its contestability. We don’t believe instead of doubting; we believe while doubting. We’re all Thomas now.”<sup>21</sup> Reflecting on the work of one of Catholicism’s most gifted writers, Flannery O’Connor, Paul Elie also describes well the character of belief in our time:

We are all skeptics now, believer and unbeliever alike. There is no one true faith, evident at all times and places. Every religion is one among many. The clear lines of any orthodoxy are made crooked by our experience, are complicated by our lives. Believer and unbeliever are in the same predicament, thrown back onto themselves in complex circumstances, looking for a sign. As ever, religious belief makes its claim somewhere between revelation and projection, between holiness and human frailty; but the

19 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), 14. See also Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 530–535.

20 James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 3.

21 Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 3–4.

burden of proof, indeed the burden of belief, for so long upheld by society, is now back on the believer, where it belongs.<sup>22</sup>

This makes religious belief less stable than those who confuse faith with certainties condone. I am not suggesting for a moment that sixteenth-century Europeans could have imagined the world that Taylor is seeking to understand and to map. They couldn't have. But some of the instincts they fostered, birthed against the background of their own turbulent time, remain serviceable for us today. The Reformed project's instincts, if rarely its practice, have been to appraise belief in terms unconstrained by the "protective guardianship"<sup>23</sup> of the status quo. Its instinct, if rarely its routine, has been to lose faith in settled arrangements, and to learn instead the habits "of dispossession, the constant rediscovery and critique of the myth of the self [or of the institution] as owner of its perceptions and positions." This is the kind of thinking that "unsettles all claims to a final resolution of how we define and speak of our interest," and of belief.<sup>24</sup> Its instinct, at its best, has been to relinquish the institutional lust for power, self-mastery, and security. In the sixteenth century, ecclesial movements of reform were able to achieve this, Taylor argues, because they expressed "a profound dissatisfaction with the hierarchical equilibrium between lay life and the renunciative vocations."<sup>25</sup> The buffering of the self and the disenchantment of the world that unintentionally made both the perfectionism after which puritanism longed and the unhinged imagination called 'the 1960s' possible is, according to Taylor, a progeny of the tendency toward antisacramentalism in the reformers and their "rejection of the church's good magic."<sup>26</sup> This move, it is argued, effectively evacuated the presence of the sacred from the world and its social orders. We are no longer haunted by the threats of evil spirits and cosmic forces. In the words of Pablo Neruda, "The world has changed";<sup>27</sup> not in the sense of Neruda's loss of faith in the collective communist vision, but in the sense that when it comes to believing—or to *not* believing—in any—

22 Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 471–472.

23 Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay "On the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 13.

24 Rowan Williams, "Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose," *Modern Theology* 11, no. 1 (1995), 17.

25 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 61.

26 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 72.

27 Cited in René de Costa, *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 89.

thing we are now on our own, and responsible for ourselves. “Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives.”<sup>28</sup> The medieval social space and intellectual imaginary after which Gregory hankers no longer exists, if it ever quite did. Instead, believers and unbelievers alike must now “learn to navigate between two standpoints: an ‘engaged’ one in which we live as best we can the reality our standpoint opens us to; and a ‘disengaged’ one in which we are able to see ourselves as occupying one standpoint among a range of possible ones, with which we have in various ways to coexist.”<sup>29</sup>

Taylor is right to observe that the social imaginary in which moderns live is one in which “the fate of belief depends much more than before on [the] powerful intuitions of individuals, radiating out to others”<sup>30</sup> than it does on the unchallengeable status that a single and common orthodoxy once enjoyed and that Gregory argues is a precondition for making the world intelligible. In my judgment, the modern social imaginary vis-à-vis belief involves both loss and gain. On the one hand, it requires a more deliberate effort for belief to find the requisite shape in communal life, a subject to which I will return. On the other hand, as Taylor observes, “other facets of our predicament in relation to God come to the fore; for instance what Isaiah meant when he talked of a ‘hidden God.’ In the seventeenth century, you had to be a Pascal to appreciate that. Now we live it daily.”<sup>31</sup> There is cause, therefore, to celebrate the situation Abraham Heschel once described thus: “While stripped of pretension and conceit we sense the tragic insufficiency of human faith.”<sup>32</sup>

Into such spaces, Christian communities can recover the shared vocation of being unstable and vulnerable bearers of the live question that brought them to birth in the first place: “Who do you say that I am?” To so proceed is to welcome one of the genius insights of that first generation of Protestants regarding the freedom of the Word unharnessed from but at home among the particularities of any one culture or form, including ecclesial ones, a subject to which we now turn.

## 2 *Church beyond Christendom*

For most of its life, Western forms of Christianity have not heeded the words of the Hebrew prophets to be a sanctuary unescorted by borders or bullets.

<sup>28</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3; see also 309.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 12.

<sup>30</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 531.

<sup>31</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 531–532.

<sup>32</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, “No Religion Is an Island,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 21, no. 2 (1966): 122.

Nor have they placed much store in the warning carried in the words “crucified under Pontius Pilate.” Instead, they have been made inebriated by drinking from the same wells of imperialism that created the empires of Egypt, Assyria, and the United States.<sup>33</sup> In 1648, for example, the Protestant Westphalia agreements suppressed the universalist aspirations of empire in favour of national ones, even while reinforcing the old alliances between throne (or parliament) and altar, albeit now along more local lines. Signs that the keg may be running a little low occasion another opportunity for Protestant communions to dissent from all “stupid allegiance to political authority as if that were service to the church and, *a fortiori*, to God,”<sup>34</sup> and to embrace instead what the Australian theologian Davis McCaughey called a “transitory character.”<sup>35</sup> Here arises the question about the fallenness of principalities and powers that are conjunctive with but not dependent upon or derivative of humanity’s renunciation of life in the sheer gift of God’s Word unbound to any ‘system’ and who acts to undo the scandal that recalcitrance has fashioned, announcing his sole lordship over all things uninitiated by the threat of death, and renewing creation’s vocation in freedom and service. Without minimizing Christendom’s remarkable achievements, it seems judicious, imperative, and overdue for those traditions forged under its assumptions, atmosphere, and protection to undergo appraisal. This, as John de Gruchy rightly reminds us, does not mean “adopting a politically neutral stance or eschewing the responsible use of power.” Indeed, a project like the Reformed project is, after all, essentially public and acutely concerned for the public commons. “The question is not,” therefore, “whether the church is going to use political influence, but how, on behalf of whom, and from what perspective it is going to do so. Is [such influence] going to be used ‘to preserve the social prestige which comes from its ties to the groups in power or to free itself from the prestige with a break from these groups and with genuine service to the oppressed?’”<sup>36</sup>

33 See Richard H. Immerman, *Empire for Liberty: A History of American Imperialism from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

34 William Stringfellow, *Conscience and Obedience: The Politics of Romans 13 and Revelation 13 in Light of the Second Coming* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 49.

35 J. Davis McCaughey, *Tradition and Dissent* (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 1997), 33.

36 John W. de Gruchy, “Toward a Reformed Theology of Liberation: A Retrieval of Reformed Symbols in the Struggle for Justice,” in *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions*, ed. David Willis and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 107–108. Here de Gruchy cites from Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973), 266–267.

For those who hanker after a secure life, a kind of invulnerable area in the world, whatever its form, the Word of God holds out no promise, no escape, no counterfeit security, no withdrawal from the actualities, ambiguities, uncertainties, and instabilities of human life.<sup>37</sup> The idolatry of certainty—whether cultural, political, or intellectual—signals “a withdrawal from accepting the peril and the promise of the Incarnation”: namely, the call to live “an exposed life” before God, one “stripped of the kind of security that tradition, whether ecclesiological or institutional, easily bestows.”<sup>38</sup> This is the church’s atypical and baffling existence. It also goes by another word: ‘discipleship.’ It was this direction toward which a young Dietrich Bonhoeffer was looking when in London in the early 1930s he preached that

Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness and pride of power and with its apologia for the weak ... Christendom has adjusted itself much too easily to the worship of power. It should give much more offence, more shock to the world, than it is doing. Christianity should ... take a stronger much more definite stand for the weak than to consider the potential moral right of the strong.<sup>39</sup>

### 3 *The Worldliness of the Church*

During his first American tour, Bonhoeffer spoke also of a church “beyond religion.”<sup>40</sup> While his now famous wrestlings with the question of a “religionless

37 See Donald M. MacKinnon, *The Stripping of the Altars: The Gore Memorial Lecture Delivered on 5 November 1968 in Westminster Abbey, and Other Papers and Essays on Related Topics* (London/Glasgow: Collins, 1969), 26, 28.

38 MacKinnon, *Stripping of the Altars*, 33, 34.

39 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London: 1933–1935*, trans. Isabel Best (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 402–403.

40 Bonhoeffer’s language of “beyond religion” appears also in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928–1936 From the Collected Works*, vol. 1, trans. John Bowden and Eberhard Bethge (London: Collins, 1970), 113. The idea has three interrelated features. The first is *discipleship*—the response to Christ’s call to follow in such a way that all idolatries and fundamentalisms, especially religious ones, are abandoned as one risks walking into an entirely unknown future. The second is *community*. Whereas in 1939 Bonhoeffer was still envisaging the possibility of Christians living in intentional communities (see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, vol. 5, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996)), his prison theology grappled with the implications of following and meeting Christ in the world. This development is a direct implication of Bonhoeffer’s christology, arising from his conviction that Christ is the end

Christianity”<sup>41</sup> and of “interpreting biblical concepts nonreligiously”<sup>42</sup> seem to have had their main geneses in Karl Barth’s theological critique of religion,<sup>43</sup> it is clear that Bonhoeffer was pressing beyond Barth toward something more as-yet unknown.<sup>44</sup> Neither an “extra” to the normalities of human existence nor a “stopgap” for when we have reached “the limits of our possibilities,” Bonhoeffer’s God is fully present in all of life’s “polyphonic” dimensions.<sup>45</sup> “We cannot, like the Roman Catholics,” Bonhoeffer said, “simply identify ourselves with the church.”<sup>46</sup> For “Jesus calls not to a new religion but to life,” the content of which is a participation in God’s powerlessness in and suffering at “the hands of a godless world.”<sup>47</sup>

Bonhoeffer’s is a call to reject the claim that ecclesiocentricity and the church’s institutional permanence are necessary in order to make the world coherent. He rejects, in other words, the myth that the church is the *telos* of world history wherein, as another has put it, “the whole space at one’s disposal is filled with ecclesiology,” where “the world has disappeared from the

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of all meaningful speech vis-à-vis any distinction between the “sacred” and the “secular.” Third, such communities are characterized by fervent abandonment of efforts toward self-preservation, by an acute loss of power, and by a deep-rooted commitment to prayer and to justice. (In words addressed to Dietrich Bethge on the occasion of his baptism in May 1944, Bonhoeffer noted that “we can be Christians today in only two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among human beings. All Christian thinking, talking, and organizing must be born anew, out of that prayer and action.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best et al., vol. 8, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 389. Dietrich Bethge was the son of his dear friends Eberhard and Renate Bethge.) Such a community is wholly a verb given unreservedly for the world and having, as Bonhoeffer put it, “an unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering of society—even if they do not belong to the Christian community.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928–1936*, trans. Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden, vol. 1, The Collected Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (London: Collins, 1965), 225.

41 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 363.

42 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 455.

43 See, for example, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics 1.2*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. George T. Thompson and Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), § 17.

44 See Tom Greggs, *Theology against Religion: Constructive Dialogues with Bonhoeffer and Barth* (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

45 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 405, 406.

46 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 503.

47 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 480, 482.

horizon,"<sup>48</sup> and where mission is thereby reduced to proselytism into particular cultural forms, often involving "a painful cultural circumcision."<sup>49</sup> Where such a myth persists, the church revolves around what the Dutch missiologist Johannes Christiaan Hoekendijk famously called "an illegitimate center" and takes itself "too seriously."<sup>50</sup> In such a myth, mission means "*churchification*"<sup>51</sup> and is reduced to being "the fundamental refusal to participate in a common history,"<sup>52</sup> that is, a history authorized by a "sacralised and theologically codified culture"<sup>53</sup> called "the church" but which is, in fact, an "*ecclesia in se incurvata*,"<sup>54</sup> a church turned in upon itself.

Here we come to modern Protestantism's failure to know why it exists anymore. As Stanley Hauerwas recently noted, "Protestantism has become an end in itself ... The result is denominationalism in which each Protestant church tries to be just different enough from other Protestant churches to attract an increasingly diminishing market share."<sup>55</sup> Bonhoeffer did not make this

48 Johannes Christiaan Hoekendijk, "Die Welt als Horizont," *Evangelische Theologie* 25 (1965): 79.

49 Johannes Christiaan Hoekendijk, "Notes on the Meaning of Mission(-ary)," in *Planning for Mission: Working Papers on the New Quest for Missionary Communities*, ed. Thomas Wieser (New York: U.S. Conference for the WCC, 1966), 46. Here I think that Paul Tillich's description of the distinct Protestant character is particularly helpful: "What makes Protestantism Protestant is the fact that it transcends its own religious and confessional character, that it cannot be identified wholly with any of its particular historical forms." Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, trans. James Luther Adams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 162.

50 Johannes Christiaan Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out*, trans. Isaac C. Rottenberg (London: SCM Press, 1967), 38. Elsewhere, Hoekendijk warns that "[W]e should be aware of a temptation to take the Church itself too seriously, to invite the Church to see itself as well-established, as God's secure bridgehead in the world, to think of itself as a *beatus possidens* [a blessed possessor] which, having what others do not have, distributes its possession to others, until a new company of *possidentes* is formed." Johannes Christiaan Hoekendijk, "The Call to Evangelism," *The International Review of Missions* 39, no. 154 (1950): 170.

51 Hoekendijk, "The Call to Evangelism," 171.

52 Johannes Christiaan Hoekendijk, *Kirche und Volk in der deutschen Missionswissenschaft* (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1967), 348.

53 John G. Flett, *Apostolicity: The Ecumenical Question in World Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), 202.

54 Hoekendijk, "Die Welt als Horizont," 84.

55 Stanley Hauerwas, "The Reformation is Over. Protestants Won. So why are we still here?" *The Washington Post* (27 October 2017), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/the-reformation-is-over-protestants-won-so-why-are-we-still-here/2017/10/26/71a2ad02-b831-11e7-beg4-fabb0fiegffb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/the-reformation-is-over-protestants-won-so-why-are-we-still-here/2017/10/26/71a2ad02-b831-11e7-beg4-fabb0fiegffb_story.html).

misjudgment—first, because he had no problem with saying the third article of any ecumenical creed. He refused, in other words, to not hope for and work toward the genuine and international unity of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.<sup>56</sup> And second, because in his terms, “The church is church only when it is there for others.” “The church,” therefore, “must participate in the worldly tasks of life in the community—not dominating but helping and serving.”<sup>57</sup> This refrain found echo in the World Council of Churches’ report published in 1967 as *The Church for Others and the Church for the World*. The report grappled with the perception of a growing secularization in the West, pleading that the church not discern in its “change of social function” a “loss or emigration from society” lest it understand mission to be “a counter-attack to restore” Christendom.<sup>58</sup> It argued also that we might be wisest to consider the possibility that secularization might in fact be “a fruit of the gospel,”<sup>59</sup> and a much welcomed invitation to seek traces of Christ’s transforming work “outside the walls of the Church” and among those “who may have little or no connexion with the churches as they are today.”<sup>60</sup>

Gregory’s lament that the collapse of “major features of the Western world today” owe their origin to a Protestant rejection of medieval Christianity<sup>61</sup> masks an unwillingness to consider that, however unintended they may have been, the liberalizing consequences of the reformers’ congeniality with what we today might call ‘secularity’ was a deliberate theological move. It was a move birthed not only from the confession noted earlier that all creation is God’s, but also from the instinct that the hegemony of the ecclesia meets its counter story in the truly catholic authority of the free and freeing Word who “came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.”<sup>62</sup>

56 On Bonhoeffer’s ecumenical work, see Keith Clements, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Ecumenical Quest* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2015).

57 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 503. See also Michael Weinrich, “The Openness and Worldliness of the Church,” in *Reformed and Ecumenical: On Being Reformed in Ecumenical Encounters*, ed. Christine Lienemann-Perrin, Hendrik M. Vroom, and Michael Weinrich, *Currents of Encounter* (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), 1–23.

58 World Council of Churches Department on Studies in Evangelism, *The Church for Others and The Church for the World: A Quest for Structures for Missionary Congregations* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1967), 10.

59 World Council of Churches Department on Studies in Evangelism, *The Church for Others*, 10–11.

60 World Council of Churches Department on Studies in Evangelism, *The Church for Others*, 11; see also 12–15.

61 Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 24.

62 John 1:13.

#### 4 *Faithful Secularity and the Humanizing of the Public Commons*

The one thing that is certain in our current cultural and political climate is that things are “deeply uncertain and fluid.” “There is,” as Rowan Williams has noted, “widespread impatience with transnational institutions, from the EU to the UN, yet equally widespread anxiety about the dominance of a single power. We are increasingly aware of the issues that cannot be solved by single sovereign states on their own—ecological crisis, terrorism, migrancy—yet are uncomfortable with any notion of global jurisdictions.”<sup>63</sup> In addition, there is the profound “discontent of the disenfranchised and insecure.”<sup>64</sup> The global north is increasingly conscious of facing a highly critical, if internally diverse, Islamic world and is struggling to know how best to respond to its presence both within and outside its borders. “Enlightenment liberalism, the self-evident creed of reasonable people, now appears as simply one cultural and historical phenomenon among others. Its supposed right to set the agenda for the rest of the world is no longer beyond question.”<sup>65</sup> Things once seemingly reliable now feel fragile and endangered.

At the same time, how we appraise and navigate secularity itself is also undergoing significant revision. A growing number of historians, sociologists, political theorists, cultural anthropologists, and theologians are debunking the so-called secularization thesis and are proposing alternative accounts of secularity in which “religious and nonreligious commitments and practices interact over time.”<sup>66</sup> Among these is the theological ethicist Luke Bretherton. Rather than Gregory’s nostalgic lament for a return to the ecclesiocentricity of pre-Reformation Christendom, Bretherton offers another vision, a more ‘Protestant’ vision, if you like. Drawing upon insights from Aristotle, Hannah Arendt, Saul Alinsky, and others, and from his own experience with grassroots democracy in the work of Citizens UK, Bretherton’s is a vision of democratic politics and of vibrant civil society expressed in what he calls “broad-based community organizing.” He promotes a vision in which those who carry myriad obligations, commitments, identities, and practices—those representing varying economic, political, kinship, intellectual, and religious concerns<sup>67</sup>—learn to

63 Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 75.

64 Rowan Williams, “Mass democracy has failed—it’s time to seek a humane alternative,” *The New Statesman*, accessed 20 November, 2016, <http://www.newstatesman.com/world/2016/11/mass-democracy-has-failed-its-time-seek-humane-alternative>.

65 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 75.

66 Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 7.

67 See Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 205–206.

coordinate, converge, communicate, debate, clarify, negotiate, and seek to forge a common life,<sup>68</sup> a life that will inevitably call into question the kind of arrangements orchestrated to leave economic, political, and religious elites immune from accountability and from responsible participation in a common social, economic, legal, and political space. Bretherton recognizes that “whereas the medieval city offered one set of political opportunities and challenges, the modern and now world city offers an assemblage of material and social conditions for a different set.”<sup>69</sup> Rather than shy away from or rail against this reality, however, Bretherton leans into its opportunities. He writes:

What community organizing represents is a means of reconstituting, from the ground up, a *sensus communis*, which can then form the basis of a practical rationality on which shared judgments can be made. It does this through assembling a “middle ground” out of the existing traditions, customs, and habits that have poured into the city. The practices of community organizing create the conditions through which a shared world of meaning and action can emerge—albeit one often based on partial misunderstandings and misconceptions.<sup>70</sup>

Bretherton’s is a call to the virtuous pursuit of a shared polis formed “through particular kinds of democratic practices rather than a single tradition, neutral procedure, or agonistic relation.”<sup>71</sup> It is life that presupposes a space wherein active citizenship is organized and exercised through voluntary associations around common interests, goals, and commitments to life’s flourishing. Such a commitment need not, of course, be grounded in any consensus about what constitutes ultimate truth, or even agreement that such an oddity may exist. It requires only that citizens be dedicated to meet in such a space, and a just state that will normalize liberal democracy’s chaotically pluralist character.<sup>72</sup> Here, Bretherton seems to have in mind something like Nicholas Wolterstorff’s talk

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68 Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 8. See also John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy: A Theology for a Just World Order*, Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 7.

69 Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 189.

70 Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 190.

71 Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 192.

72 On which, see Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 32; Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 190; Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 80; Williams, “Mass democracy has failed,” Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 532.

of “integrated existence”<sup>73</sup>—the integration that makes the public square to be truly the square *of the public*.

The plea for better knowledge of and investment in local civic activism echoes that of a growing number of voices concerned to counter the bastardization of democracy as what the Italian social scientist Vilfredo Pareto refers to as “the circulation of elites,” those who have detached themselves from, and become disdainfully imperious toward, those they rule. In the US, for example, Richard Falk has for over two decades now championed the idea of what he calls “globalization from below.” This deeply Protestant-like vision rejects the homogeneity and unity that globalization from above seeks, for a vision instead that “tends towards heterogeneity and diversity, even tension and contradiction.”<sup>74</sup> Much of this tension and contradiction is, as the Belgian sociologist Geoffrey Pleyers has suggested, the fruit of the fact that broad-based community organizing is characterized by *both* “elite cosmopolitan activists” who “share a top-down conception of social change” *and* grassroots activists who reject such approaches as too approximating of the very social machinery they are determined to overthrow.<sup>75</sup> And yet, as has been the case with many ecclesial reform movements, “the core of the alter-globalisation movement and of its innovative potential lies in these conflictive but productive debates and interactions between activists that defend distinct conceptions of the movement process and of the strategies that lead to social transformation.”<sup>76</sup> One recalls here a most attractive and serviceable feature of the Protestant Reformations; namely, that despite the rapid internationalization of the movement, and however disparate in form, its productive energy, like its confessions of faith, was always expressed locally,<sup>77</sup> with voices both from above and from below.

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73 Nicholas Wolterstorff, “The Role of Religion in Decision and Discussion of Political Issues,” in *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate*, ed. Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997), 116. Bretherton’s position is closer to that of Wolterstorff than it is to, say, that of John Rawls’s “overlapping consensus.” John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999), 340.

74 Richard Falk, “Resisting ‘globalisation-from-above’ through ‘globalisation-from-below,’” *New Political Economy* 2, no. 1 (1997): 24.

75 Geoffrey Pleyers, “The World Social Forum, a Globalisation from Below?” *Societies Without Borders* 3 (2008), 79. See also Geoffrey Pleyers, *Alter-Globalization: Becoming Actors in the Global Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

76 Pleyers, “The World Social Forum,” 87.

77 See Jason A. Goroncy, “*Semper Reformanda* as a Confession of Crisis,” in *Always Being*

Lest the liberal state lose its essential liberalism, it must be marked too by a continuing dialogue with religious communities, and those with each other.<sup>78</sup> Viable civil societies in religiously plural contexts presuppose viable interreligious and extra-religious relations, with high priority given to efforts at the local level where the freedom to engage in “convivial and cooperative relations,” however difficult and unstable, and to do so in ways that avoid “religious vandalism,”<sup>79</sup> yields—dare I say it?—signs of the Spirit’s work on the earth.

### Traversing Boundaries

The realities with which I have been concerned in this essay offer both challenges to and opportunities for theologians. We are increasingly working within a reenchanting world whose imagination is being fed from a smorgasbord larger than any single religious or cultural tradition can offer. Such a world moves theology from nearer the center of things (where Gregory and many others would like it to be) toward the discursive borderlands where interdisciplinary conversations and collaborations become normative. If theological faculties have frequently forgotten this habit, let me offer assurance that mine is not a call to novelty (Aquinas, for example, worked in such a way) but to renewed commitment to boundary-traversing discourse undertaken under new conditions of enchanted metaphysics. It is a call also to receive with gratitude what Marilynne Robinson names simply “the givenness of things.”<sup>80</sup> The future of theology means making our way across boundaries, like a small cloud rising over the sea’s horizon, bearing hobbit-like witness to promised rains for a famished land.<sup>81</sup>

When assumptions are challenged, when faith is stirred, when things once familiar become the new unknown, when we find ourselves travelling “too near the mountains” in unguarded territory seldom traversed by ecclesial wayfarers,

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*Reformed: Challenges and Prospects for the Future of Reformed Theology*, ed. David H. Jensen (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 43–73.

78 See Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, rev. ed. (London: Continuum, 2003).

79 Luke Bretherton, “Religious Vandalism or Interfaith Hospitality? Reflections on the Non-Proclamation of the ‘Adhan’ from Duke Chapel,” ABC Religion and Ethics, accessed 17 January 2015, <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2015/01/17/4163809.htm>.

80 Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things: Essays* (London: Virago Press, 2015).

81 Graham Ward, *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory*, ed. David Jasper, 2nd ed., *Studies in Literature and Religion* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), 171.

and when all we have in our kit are “old maps” which are of “no use” in this new terrain, it may be that at that point we have just begun, like Abraham and Sarah and J.R.R. Tolkien’s Frodo Baggins, on a quest that will leave us, and the future, different. My reference here to Mr Baggins is wholly intentional: colourful, noisy, and undersized hobbits enter the quest, as Tolkien reminds us, not to preserve “this or that polity, such as the half republic half aristocracy of the Shire,” but rather to engage in “liberation from ... evil tyranny.”<sup>82</sup> Such words serve as a reminder of the Christian calling too, that this wandering people of God are called not to preserve that familiar life that they had known in the Shire but rather to imagine a future in which all of life’s enemies have been overcome, and to direct all their embodied efforts toward such an end. Along the way, they not only lose their reputation, but they also carry many unanswered questions, all the while knowing that there can be no going back. (Nor, as Frodo was to discover, can there be anything to be gained by going sideways.) But it is precisely in both the refusal to abandon questions and the determination to move forward nonetheless that Frodo and his strange company of friends discover that prudence is not about worldly cleverness but is rather about uncomplicated minds and wills conformed to a life of virtue, of boundless mercy, and of unbending devotion to the destruction of that which would undo their very being. In Protestant parlance, it is a simply that life which is lived under and by and toward the Word alone.

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82 J.R.R. Tolkien, “Notes on W.H. Auden’s review of *The Return of the King*,” in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (London: HarperCollins, 1999), 241.