Secular Christianity

by Brian Wicker

Professor Gregor Smith has done us all a service by writing an important, interesting and honest book.[1] If I want to disagree with him, it is because he has made clearer to me than before what the issues are between secular christianity and that kind of christianity – which I shall call radical or revolutionary – which I think is the only alternative. We now know more precisely why there will soon have to be a frank showdown between two quite different kinds of left-wing christianity. Pace Christopher Driver, we are not 'all brother radicals under the skin' (*The Guardian*, January 13th 1966) and my main debt to Professor Gregor Smith, and the point at which I part company with him most decisively, is that he shows me why his position is not nearly radical enough. Or perhaps it would be better to say he is radical only in a direction which is irrelevant to the real issues of our time, and offers a way of letting off steam through a kind of intellectual safety-valve which, like all safety-valves, works in fact to the preservation of the equilibrium of the present state of things. The trouble with his kind of 'secular' Christianity is that, like philosophers, 'secular' Christians have only '*interpreted* the world in different ways; the point is to change it' (Marx, eleventh thesis on Feuerbach). Despite his protests to the contrary, Professor Gregor Smith is, in this respect, a philosopher, and his secular Christianity is, as I hope to show, a philosophical scheme rather than a living faith.

The showdown between secular and radical Christianity will be concerned with our most basic presuppositions about man's relation to the world. But it will only come when those who have objections to the secular Christian's presuppositions can demonstrate that they have grasped the dimensions of the contemporary crisis itself, and the kind of 'revolution' that is required of them. This is why I cannot myself accept that a book such as Professor Mascall's *The Secularisation of Christianity* is really the beginning of the battle. Despite its effectiveness as a piece of destructive polemic at a high level of philosophical and theological sophistication, it does little or nothing to help those who, while resisting the secularist's seductions, acknowledge fully the depth of the crisis which gives rise to them. Radicalism must show its awareness of this crisis by providing much more than an academic contribution from the study to the solution

[1] *Secular Christianity* by Ronald Gregor Smith, London, Collins (1966) 25/–

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of an intellectual problem. It has to initiate a strategy and a campaign, to make its alliances and to commit itself to action. This is a highly dangerous thing to do: but we live in a dangerous world, and there is no alternative.

The basis of Gregor Smith's book is the belief that the world is now dominated by 'secular man' and his assumptions. As far as they go, he believes these are largely valid. A faith for today can therefore only be of value if it takes these assumptions as its starting point, and shows where they need completion. Christianity is itself, properly understood, the completion of secularism. Secularism is, indeed, a by-product of Christianity and the culture it has brought into being. But, as the author rightly shows, secularism is not just any world-view which denies the reality of religious values. It is a particular world-view, and exerts a particular force in history at the present time. It is more than an intellectual position: it is a way of life. He tries to show us what the essence of secularism is by providing some examples of secularists in action, rather than starting from abstract propositions. The result is of extreme interest and relevance for the present debate. The figures that are chosen to typify secularism have an archetypal role in the book, and it is worth while examining them in some detail.

When I say that, for Professor Gregor Smith, secularism is a particular world-view, I am asserting something that he himself sometimes wants to deny. For he recognises that there are of course many competing ideological secularisms in the world – marxism, racism, nationalism, the 'open-eyed nihilism of a man like Bertrand Russell' etc. But he sweeps all of these aside as equally mistaken. What is wrong with them is that they 'propose a scheme of development for man which is dependent not on man's own nature but on a view of the world' (p. 173). That is to say, they are committed to a particular metaphysical scheme or philosophy. Now, the secularism which (he says) is really characteristic of our world is one that eschews all such schemes, and is eminently pragmatic and anti-ideological. Its model, and one of its founders, is John Holyoake, the nineteenth century secularist campaigner, whom Professor Gregor Smith takes as typical of the secularist tradition that still lives on today. Such a man, we are told, 'disclaims any ambition to be a system-builder, principally because the working classes whom he wishes to serve are "bewildered already by arbitrary systems, and exhausted by the struggle to live". What he offers is "simple directions and practical guidance". Here he stands squarely in the empirical tradition of Bentham and John Stuart Mill' (p. 144. The quotations inserted into the passage are from Holyoake himself).

Now it is important to notice what is suggested as the right Christian response to the kind of challenge thrown down by Holyoake and his successors. For Professor Gregor Smith it is epitomised in the figure of Helmut James Graf von Moltke, a German aristocrat,

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landowner and lawyer who was hanged by the Nazis for his part in resisting Hitler. Moltke wrote, in a letter written shortly before his execution, as follows: 'I do not in the least have the feeling that has sometimes come over me, that I should like to see everything once more. But neither do I feel at all "otherworldly". You see that I am happy as I talk to you, instead of turning to God. There is a hymn with the words "For he who holds in life to thee is ready to die". That is exactly how I feel . . . I believe that I do know that now I live in his grace and forgiveness, and have nothing and do nothing of myself . . . ' It is such a man, we are told, who represents the hope of Christianity: not because of his actions, but simply in virtue of what he is in himself. Now I am not for one moment denigrating an outstandingly brave and good man: but I do wish to draw attention to what Professor Gregor Smith chooses to tell us about him, since this is significant for the assessment of his whole argument. 'He was not a theologian and in most ways he was a quiet and unostentatious man, happiest when he was looking after his estate and trying to make it pay' (p. 17). The picture we get is of a man without any 'metaphysical scheme', apolitical, detached from all social activism until sheer humanity drove him towards revolt, spending his whole life quietly conforming and trying to make his estate pay. We are offered a man who was not concerned with any conscious effort to shape his own or the world's future. His response when it came was a decision of and for the moment, which involved the sacrifice of everything that he had until then taken for granted. It was, clearly, a noble action. But what is not emphasised in Professor Gregor's account, though it slips in almost unawares, is that phrase 'spending his life trying to make his estate pay', and all that it suggests. The fact is that Moltke is being used as a religious model, in abstraction from his concrete position and role in society. He is a model secular Christian in virtue of his words and his intentions; but these are discussed without further reference to the social milieu and the social pressures which interacted to produce them. Whether it is historically true or not, the picture that we get of the typical secular man *in this book* is of one who, precisely because of his political unawareness, his fine, aristocratic, honourable unawareness, is inhibited from making any effective criticism of his society until it is too late. He is detached from politics not (as in an earlier and worthier tradition) because of some mystical union with God, but because society in its actual concrete organisation, its class structure, its economic basis, is profoundly irrelevant to him. This political unawareness, taken as part of a model, reveals the lack of genuine radicalism in the secular version of Christianity.

I have spent some time in discussing this conception of Christian 'secular man', partly because Professor Smith himself makes it the focal point of his discussion of secularism, and partly because it is important for us not to assume, uncritically, the typicality of

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his chosen archetype. For it seems to me characteristic of only one version of Christianity with its heavy debt to German theology (Bultmann especially) and, beyond this, to Heidegger, that it should offer as typical so conservative a figure. Little is heard, throughout the book (except by way of dismissive asides) of any other kind of secularism than this. We should stop to ponder how different a picture would have emerged if, instead of the Germanic cultural influences, the intellectual sources had been Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and behind them Marx.

But there is a further, and more important reason for making this point about Professor Gregor Smith's image of the secular man. This is that the rejection of any ideology, such as marxism, and indeed of any 'view of the world', is crucial to his main thesis about the nature of history, and the historicity of God's dealings with men. The ideologically indeterminate nature of modern secularism is held to be compatible with Christianity because that too is ideologically uncommitted, and has no need of any 'metaphysical scheme'. In fact the two kinds of non-commitment are related: secularism is a product of Christianity itself. This is not to say, of course, that secularism is, by itself, an adequate or even a valid position. But it is patient of a Christianisation which would give it its completion, without any *radical* upheaval in its basic intellectual or moral assumptions.

But *can* there be a faith which is so entirely free from any particular view of the world? Does not the very fact that it is independent of all philosophy mean that it is philosophically senseless? – because compatible with every, and no, philosophy? The claim is made, of course, that faith contains its own intelligibility, and has no need of any exterior help from philosophy. The concept of history, and the associated concept of God as encountered in the otherness of our relationships with people, is used to try to provide this immanent intelligibility. But the claim is not in fact substantiated. For example the distinction, borrowed from Bultmann and his followers, between history as *Geschichte* and history as *Historie*, upon which much of the edifice depends, is certainly a philosophical one, contingent upon the establishment of a certain view of how we arrive at our knowledge of the world. *Historie* is 'the enquiry into the past and the material results obtained by such scientific historical investigation': *Geschichte* is the past as connected to our own lives, here and now in the present, and given meaning by our own contemporary concerns. To conceive of a pure *Historie* which lacked this connection to ourselves is to posit an abstraction, an insignificant item in a natural process. On such a basis you would be unable to go beyond 'the purely spectatorial construction' which resulted from your enquiry (p. 84). Thus 'the Geschichte, the happenedness, the past, is certainly not given existence by our recognition of it; but it is recognised as existing only as it appears in the present as a real event' (p. 85). So far so

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good. It is here being understood that all our investigations, indeed all our perceptions, are impregnated with an 'intentionality' (to use the phenomenologists' word) which links us to the world. Out of this primordial experience the notion of the purely objective has to be intellectually abstracted. But this clear rejection of a naive objecturism, or 'naturalistic myth'[2] does not seem to be compatible with another, equally crucial part of the secularist thesis. This is that, for modern man, the maintenance of a sharp separation of historical 'fact' from 'myth' is unavoidable. It is built into our very post-enlightenment consciousness. In other words we have to keep *Historie* and *Geschichte* in separate mental compartments. 'We simply cannot circumvent the distinctions we have drawn between the construction of the past which may be elicited by historical investigation (*Historie*) and the real happenedness (*Geschichte*) of a past event' (p. 98). Admittedly, Professor Gregor Smith goes on immediately to insist that we cannot separate these two elements in our completed understanding. 'Without some form of remembered past, there can be no *Geschichte*, no past reality: but it is the two together which constitute the unity of the dialogical partner in my present'. But, as his treatment of the resurrection soon shows, this insistence is not enough. The crucial question is whether the completed understanding arises from a putting together of two distinct elements, or whether the distinction between these elements is the result of an intellectual analysis of something which is essentially one with itself. Is *Historie* the product of an autonomous intellectual activity – the scientific investigation of the 'bare facts' – which we then have to put into meaningful relation to ourselves? Or is our understanding of the past a single, seamless web which can, for analytical purposes, be distinguished into *Historie* and *Geschichte* only by the reflective intellect? The way in which the resurrection is dealt with seems to leave little doubt that it is the first interpretation that is appropriate to Professor Gregor Smith's secular Christianity. It is here that, I want to argue, he is mistaken.

Thus, having admitted that, on the basis of the New Testament, 'there is no *Historie* possible for the resurrection as an isolated "fact" ' (p. 101) he goes on to assert that the New Testament accounts *must* therefore be regarded as mythologised legends. 'There is an immense and constant temptation . . . to elevate the legends of the empty tomb (and in a similar way the stories of the appearances of Jesus, and the mythological account of the ascension) into the separate status of objective "happenings".' It is a mistake to see the gospels in this way, for 'we are not asked to believe in the empty tomb, or in the resurrection: but in the living Lord'. (p. 103) But for whom is this a temptation? Surely only for someone who accepts *Historie*

[2] "Naturalism is the myth that there is an external world of objects, existing independently of our forms of description . . . which we can describe, if we are careful enough, just 'as it is' from an absolute standpoint" Alastair MacIntyre, in *Encounter* 1963.

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as a separate autonomous activity which has to do with the investigation of bare 'facts'. It may be a temptation to a person who is already a victim of the 'naturalistic myth': but it is no temptation at all for those of us who are already thoroughly demythologised on that score. If 'bare', 'objective' facts are in any case only parts of a philosophical scheme, the right course is not to try to reconcile them with the *Geschichte* by pretending they are expendable, but to replace the scheme by a more coherent one. The fact is that the New Testament accounts make very good sense as long as the naturalistic myth is studiously avoided.

As a matter of purely objective *Historie* we are told, probably 'the bones of Jesus lie somewhere in Palestine'. This is asserted because the ascension, in the sense of the taking up of the man Jesus to the right hand of God, cannot, on secularist presuppositions, be regarded as a real event. Why not? Because no 'purely spectatorial construction' of it is possible. Since it cannot be pictured by any postulated spectator (the disappearance of Jesus from sight is not more than the outward sign of the true heavenly ascension, and it is the latter that is the event in question) it is not *historische*. But some very odd consequences follow from this thesis. The first is that though it is claimed that the bones of Jesus are somewhere in Palestine, we are not told how any kind of scientific investigation could establish this. (How could any archaeology ever show that *these* or *those* are the bones of Jesus? We know nothing of his skeletal characteristics). Much more important, however, we are asked to believe in the living Lord despite the fact that he is plainly dead. If his body is dead, then *he* is dead – unless a radically docetic christology is being presupposed. Even if the 'soul' of Christ were alive, this would not ensure that Jesus Christ himself – the living Lord – was alive in his own incarnate person. (And it cannot be said that Christ, like ourselves, may still be the same body in glory that he was on earth while not keeping the same actual material constituents. For the whole point of the post-resurrection appearances was to reveal his already glorified body).

The basic trouble is the idea that the *historische* is, ultimately, reducible to what can be observed, or 'spectatorially constructed'. The bare historical facts are those things which have, or could have been seen, or otherwise perceived by some postulated spectator. Now, such a spectator is not thought of as an actual person, seeing things from a particular place and perspective, and with this or that particular cultural equipment at his disposal for describing what he saw: he is a purely ghostly perceiving consciousness whose existence is necessitated only by the 'naturalistic' philosophical scheme. In other words, he is not a real person at all. But if that is so, his deliverances, even if they were available, would have no connection with us, and offer us no *Geschichte*. This is the epistemological contradiction which lies at the basis of the secularist Christian-

ity advocated by Professor Gregor Smith. (That we are tempted to describe such a postulated perceiver as one specially equipped to perceive only the 'bare' or 'hard' facts reminds us of the connection between this kind of Christianity and the bourgeois philosophy and bourgeois politics of Mr Gradgrind. John Holyoake was, of course, a notable contemporary of that gentleman.)

Perhaps an illustration of the difficulties of the notion of a 'purely spectatorial construction' would be useful here. Let us consider some controversial historical claim of a quite familiar kind – say that the bombing of Vietnam by the Americans has been indiscriminate. Can we conceive of any 'purely spectatorial construction' of the actual events that would settle the question by appeal simply to the 'facts'? The data on which the claims of both sides are based consist of numerous eye-witness accounts by reporters. But each of these reporters is able only to see only a few incidents, and no one man's report is enough to substantiate or refute the whole claim. Neither can the question be settled simply by balancing all the reports against each other since it would be necessary to take into account the possibility of personal bias, or accidental inaccuracy, of deliberately staged examples designed to impress reporters etc.; and there is no way of objectively assessing these factors. If the only evidence there is consists of the reports, it is clearly impossible decisively to judge their accuracy by appeal to any process of comparison. Where reports disagree they cannot both be true: but they can both be false. Where reporters are said to be 'biassed' it is we – who are ourselves by no means free from preconceptions – who say so. There is no absolutely final court of appeal along that road. This is why we are tempted – at any rate if we hold to the naturalistic myth – to imagine some totally unbiassed, wholly superior perceiver who stands above all the various claims and somehow is conceived as able to *see* what is 'really' going on. To think that, behind all the reports, there must lie some fundamental layer of bare fact *is* to postulate just such a perceiver. To suppose that we can separate this layer of fact from the subjective impressions of all the reporters is to suppose the existence of someone who can see everything that goes on, from every point of view at once. This is the 'purely spectatorial construction' which, it is imagined, would be produced by the sheer scientific investigation of the 'facts'.

But clearly there is no such omniscient spectator. Talk about a 'purely spectatorial construction' is plausible only because attention is focussed upon the construction, and the role of the actual spectator himself is left out of account. But does this mean that we have to abandon all claim to historical truth? Surely not: for the reports are reports of what has been seen. We are not supposing the reporters to have been dreaming, or having hallucinations. They reported on what they had observed happening. The mistake lies in thinking of the reports purely in terms of 'interpretation' and the 'facts' they

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describe in terms of what has happened, regardless of whether they have been reported. On such a supposition, all historical claims are arrived at by an intellectual combination of two originally distinct elements. But the truth is that reporting is an activity intrinsically geared to its object. Reporting is necessarily reporting *of* something – namely facts. And conversely, the facts are not happenings going on in some totally unreported world. They are intrinsically geared to reportability. Fact and report constitute a single unity. There is no reporting without facts, and no facts which are unreported. History is not *Historie* plus *Geschichte*, facts plus reports. On the contrary, facts by themselves and reports by themselves are abstractions derived by intellectual speculation on the basis of this fundamental unity of *reported facts*.

It is now possible, I hope, to understand why we have to deny that it is the rise of the spirit of scientific objectivity which has forced us to consider the 'bare facts' in a category by themselves, apart from interpretation by reports. It is rather the rise of the 'secular philosophy', or the 'naturalistic myth', that is responsible for this tendency. Science is not – fortunately – committed to that myth.

If the secular Christian's concept of the past is founded upon a self-contradictory epistemology, that of the future is marked by an equal obscurity. As has been remarked in the case of 'reporting', it is characteristic of much secular theology to use verbs that need objects to complete their sense, without any such objects. A kind of portentous vagueness results from this which suggests that awkward questions are studiously being avoided. Thus we are told by Professor Gregor Smith that, through faith in Christ, we are offered forgiveness and a new hope. But we are not told what we are being forgiven for (except where it is suggested that it is forgiveness simply for 'what we are', which seems to reflect ill on the creator, p. 27). Nor are we told what the Christian hope is *in*.

It is certainly not a hope in any 'future state of affairs' (p. 115) such as has traditionally been ascribed to 'heaven'. Presumably therefore it is a hope concerning the future of this empirical life we now have. But even here we are baulked. 'Faith is at no point able to anticipate the future. This is the tragic melancholy inherent in the reality of faith, that it has no fixed future which it may draw into its present forms. Faith does have a form peculiar to itself; but it is the form of hope, of expectation, of patient waiting upon the future which is given again and again by God'. This sentence reveals the quietist trend intrinsic to secularised Christianity very clearly. The author does, admittedly, half-acknowledge this tendency in his epilogue: but he does not eliminate it. Three comments seem to be called for about it, for it is an important element in the whole secularising enterprise.

Firstly, it is in strange contradiction with another part of the general thesis – namely the emphasis placed upon the need to rely

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upon our own human resources, rather than upon divine interventions (whether interior or exterior) to help us out of our troubles. No doubt we have here the tension between Bultmann and Barth being brought out into the open. But to display the tension is not to resolve it. Either we are responsible for the kind of world we try to bring about – and are therefore involved in shaping the future according to some pattern we discern in experience – or we are not – in which case, unless God does intervene, there is no pattern at all, and hence no *Heilsgeschichte* in any sense.

Secondly the refusal to allow any pattern or structure to the future rests upon a lack of concrete thinking about the future as we actually understand it. The wholly open unstructured future which we are invited to accept in pure faith is, in fact, not the future as we understand it at all. My future is first of all grasped as a pattern of envisaged ends and beginnings. Already, as I write this article, I can begin to discern dimly how it will end; and beyond its completion I can see lying before me, on the temporal horizon, a meal, and then another task waiting to be undertaken. Jobs finished, things made, food eaten, music played – these provide me with a pattern of life which also includes, as necessary elements, jobs still to be done, food to be cooked, things half-finished, tunes as yet incomplete. These unfinished things are nevertheless already understood as unities, albeit that parts of them lie in the future, and do not yet exist. It is this pattern of living, working, and making which structures the future and commits me to certain things as yet not realised. We cannot escape our responsibilities by imagining a future wholly open. Because, for me, a future is already taking shape my present responsibility is to take an active part in shaping it as I think it should be. I am intrinsically orientated towards my particular future; and it is more particular the closer it is to the present moment. This is not to deny that there are free choices that I can make, or that there is an element of genuine openness about what is to come. But it is to deny that the future is simply an undifferentiated horizon such that 'Whatever comes in the course of the ongoing structures of society is grist to faith's mill'.

This point leads to a third remark: namely this anti-political, anti-ideological readiness 'for all and every expression' has much the same consequences as a pure fatalism. How can readiness for martyrdom be distinguished on these terms from readiness for Nazism or readiness to use the nuclear deterrent? For everything is grist to faith's mill. Refusal to acknowledge human resources, like refusal to allow the possibility of divine intervention, leads to the blurring of moral distinctions. The man who is prepared to die rather than drop the bomb, and the man who is ready to die in the dropping of it are both equally 'ready'. Readiness for *what* is a question that cannot be escaped.

The mention of dying brings me to the final criticism of secular

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Christianity: it is strangely silent about the problem of human death – despite the fact that this is a problem of extreme modern, secular importance. I have already mentioned that Professor Gregor Smith seems to be very confused about the death of Jesus. This confusion spreads to the problem of our own deaths too. Since the metaphysical scheme upon which secular Christianity rests eliminates from the Christian's concern all notion of the end of the world, it is forced to interpret the eschatological element in Christianity wholly in terms of the present. The last days have not just begun: they are already essentially complete. Faith's experience of forgiveness and hope not only inaugurates them: in effect it contains the whole of the *eschaton*. God's act in Christ 'puts an end to the world and time and history' (p. 116), and in facing it 'we are asked to believe that here we face an end to all our efforts' (p. 108). The version of the 'parousia' here offered to us must, inevitably, rob the future of most of its substantial interest. That is why we are enabled through faith to be ready for *anything* that happens to us: the *actual* future ultimately doesn't matter very much. This future of course includes our own deaths. Since the man of faith 'no longer lives with himself in the world, but in faith he has passed through judgement into life' death becomes an incidental. *How* we die is irrelevant to us now: we are already on the other side of it. But in saying this, we are not being asked to believe in more than a metaphor. Just as the living Lord is only 'alive' in a metaphorical sense – for he is actually dead, and his bones lie somewhere in Palestine – our new 'life' is only a metaphor, and we are only metaphorically taken beyond death. We still have to die in actuality: and we have to do so without any hope in a future state of affairs when we may find ourselves alive again.

What kind of secular man is going to be reconciled to so shadowy and unsubstantial a 'salvation'? Is not all this part of the grey, diluted, spiritualised Christianity which we have been growing out of these past few decades? A Christianity which is worth anything to the modern age will surely have to offer something more interesting and vital, more 'incarnate' than this brand of secularism if it is to say anything useful in the contemporary crisis.

Yet it is a mark of the seriousness and importance of this book that it should stimulate those who disagree with it to examine it very carefully and to reassess their own positions in the light of it. It reveals to us our own limitations and weaknesses as much as its own. By being forced to think out clearly where I differ from Professor Gregor Smith I am put in his debt permanently and would like to register this fact and recommend the book to others who may thereby gain the same benefit.