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David Fergusson, Church, State and Civil Society

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Church, State and Civil Society, David Fergusson, Cambridge University Press, 2004, h/b 0 521 82239 4 & p/b 0 521 52959 X, vii+213 pp., h/b £40/$70, p/b £16.99/$24.99.

David Fergusson's study contributes to current debates about church-state relations in the United States, England, Scotland and elsewhere by arguing that the concrete entity with which churches need to engage is, in fact, civil society. He adduces an impressive array of evidence from scripture, historical theology, ecclesiology and political theory, providing much useful material for practitioners and students to reflect on. Judgments are judicious and often carefully qualified. Fergusson summarizes his thesis as follows: 'The relationship of church to state has often been cast in terms of the relations that obtain between two dominant institutions existing in a close and exclusive partnership. With the end of Christendom, this is now outmoded. A more differentiated approach is required that positions the church in positive relation to a range of other institutions within civil society, this more effectively presenting its public significance.' (p. 1)

The roots of this pluralist consideration of church-state relations lie with Israel and early Christianity, both of which engaged with an 'array of secular forces ... yet these are not to be reduced to one single, mystical entity called the state' (p. 22). Fergusson indeed reminds us that when church-state theory emerged during the second half of the Middle Ages, the state was considered part of a tangible political order which included *communitas*. The state was not, in other words, regarded as a quasi-metaphysical entity but as composed of a variety of intermediary forms existing between governing powers and individuals: corporations, colleges, confraternities, professional associations, and so on. *Communitas* re-emerges in the guise of subsidiarity in *Gaudium et spes*, although is there conceived, Fergusson contends, as the common good rather than a principle of social diversity and toleration. Fergusson provides a good discussion of toleration which recognizes the strong religious impetus behind its growth, but the concept's ambiguity, I would add, must nevertheless always be remembered. The suggestion of a residue of critical paternalism in the 'tolerant' person, and a latent suspicion of difference, is far removed from the joyful embrace of diversity that a full acceptance of civil society on its own terms would require.

A particular concern of Fergusson's is that churches retain the power of prophetic criticism. They need to function 'both as lubricant and irritant', being called to a 'perpetual reserve and criticism of all earthly forms, yet also a recognition that these forms, within their limits, can be providentially ordered' (pp. 192, 23). The Constantinian tradition emerges in opposition to this eschatological provisionality as 'something akin to the imperial cult of paganism' (p. 28). Effective social criticism, Fergusson adds however, does not depend solely on churches confronting the state. The Barmen Declaration, for instance, was drafted by the Pastors' Emergency League and principally Karl Barth in 1934, and portrayed in stark imagery the conflict of church with state. The document's principal weakness was that it contained no real acknowledgement of the German Confessing Church's need to collaborate with other churches, faiths and civil society in its stand against Nazi persecution, and Barth himself later accepted this criticism of it.

A recurring question in Fergusson's study is the extent to which civil society is part of an essentially secular realm in need of reformation, and the degree to which it is already graced. Fergusson reflects, for instance, on the places of marriage and Sunday in contemporary Western societies, identifying a 'sudden departure from earlier ideals shaped by church teaching and practice', although accepting the futility of hoping for a return to those ideals (pp. 95, 112). I would wish to argue that historic forms of Christian living are sometimes preserved within civil society, and that churches need to identify such forms of living as graced and embrace them. Current Christian social ideals often seem to be determined principally by recent cultural mores rather than by rigorous theological and historical assessment. In the case of marriage, the couple's relationship has always been constituted by the partners themselves and witnessed by civil society, with the original priestly role at solemnization being the purely practical one of representing civil society in an era when the priest might well have been the only literate or semi-literate person available in the community to do so. Only much later did he become the official representative of church or state. The continued participation of churches in liturgies constituted by people in relationships requires vastly more theological justification than it has so far received, especially when that involvement acquires prescriptive characteristics. So far as the choice between work and worship on Sundays is concerned, early morning church attendance formerly made both possible. Only in the postwar era of the parish communion movement did the practice of later Sunday morning attendance create the choice between work and worship. It is moreover very far from clear that Sunday has in the past been universally observed as a day of rest in Christian societies: in fact, for women it has often been an extremely busy day, with a whole family at home and the expectation of a large meal. In any case, prior to the large-scale transfer of production processes from homes to factories that occurred as part of industrialization, and the birth of the concept of the ‘working week’, the demarcation between work and rest was far more fluid and flexible, being dependent on the daily and seasonal requirements of both work and religion. Looking further back, Paul Bradshaw has offered convincing evidence that synagogue worship in Palestine was, at the time of Christ, organised to coincide with market days, when the people were in town to do their shopping. In these and other practical matters, pastoral theologians need to spend more time reading social history than they typically do. This would enable pastoral theology to distinguish theological agendas from Victorian social mores with greater clarity, and to rediscover in civil society, as David Fergusson begins to, some different historic ways of being church.

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Exeter
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