David Fergusson, a member of the Church of Scotland, is a Professor of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh. *Church, State and Civil Society* is a revised edition of the 2001 Bampton Lectures delivered at the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Oxford. Its major thesis is that theology should move from what is, perhaps, an over-pre-occupation with church-state issues (itself a kind of residue from a medieval and early modern period where church and state interpenetrated) to a more differentiated approach which understands the church primarily in relation to a range of civil institutions within civil society. Churches can continue to be socially significant without aspiring to function as national or state institutions. Clearly, Fergusson is not enamored of established churches.

In the new secular and religious pluralism which characterizes modern societies, some theologians have seen the stark choices facing the church variations on either withdrawal (following the Anabaptist tradition of the church) or assimilation (what Gibson Winter once referred to as “the suburban captivity of the churches”). For Fergusson, whether one proceeds from scripture or theological argument, churches have an obligation to promote the well-being of the societies in which they are situated. They also retain important public functions. He sums up his themes:

- the separate though related functions under divine providence of church and state; the promotion of the common good by both ecclesial and civil bodies; the necessary interaction of the church with the institutions of civil society; the derivation of political authority from God and its necessary acknowledgement by the consent of those living under its jurisdiction; the dignity of political office; and the recurring injunction to seek the welfare of the city and to offer it critical support. (116)

Assimilation threatens a loss of evangelical and catholic identity; withdrawal evades an ineluctable duty to seek the welfare of the city under fidelity to God.

The initial chapter, “The politics of scripture,” reminds us that early Christianity’s conception of the church in society was rooted in a long Jewish tradition of being a diaspora. Even in Babylon, Jews

---

struggled both to maintain their religious identity yet still accommodate the concerns of the state and civil society. For Fergusson, a key text is *Jeremiah* 29:7 with its insistence that the exiles “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” (7) Early Christianity, unlike some Jewish sects of Jesus’ time, opted neither for complete withdrawal (e.g. The Essenes), nor for political resistance or complete assimilation. It recognized secular authority as deriving from God, mandating a real, if provisional, loyalty to Roman authority. *Romans* 13 minimally presents a low-key, qualified yet still positive account of the capacity of the civic realm to fit into the purposes of God. To be sure, the politics of Jesus (looking to a different kind of polity which reflects the eschatological Kingdom of God) serves to challenge current arrangements and demands, in its controversial assertion of the right to articulate its different vision for social life—even if it can be embodied, in anticipation, only in the church. The politics of Jesus never lends itself easily to Christianity’s serving as “the civil religion” of any state. (10)

A chapter which deals with theological traditions concerning church-state-civil society reminds us that there is no pervasively coherent Christian account of citizenship. *Philippians* 3:20 may speak of “an alien citizenship,” (24) but it would be preferable to speak of a stratified citizenship or one subordinated to the primacy of God’s rule rather than a simply alien identity. Some early Christian theologians (e.g. Augustine) and some of the Reformers (e.g. Luther) tended, following *Romans* 13, to limit the state to exercising its restraining ordinance (to ward off sin and evil). In our own time, many Evangelicals continue this tradition. Yet in Aquinas and Calvin, there is a wider sense of the capacity of the state to promote social goods and in its own real and limited way to anticipate divine rule. Aquinas’ notion of the common good expresses an underlying conviction that the end of each person can be fulfilled only where a range of social goods is realized. The church is no longer to be related only to the monarch (whose legitimate rule is indeed subject to his promoting the common good) but to a web of social groups, organizations and institutions. In Thomist thought, the state has no monopoly in defining or enacting the common good. For his part, Calvin was interested not only in serving God in the secular realm (Luther’s legacy) but actually transforming that realm in a more Godly direction. Unlike the Anabaptists who saw the social role of the church as primarily a Godly counter-cultural witness, Calvin, like Thomas, sought a social theology which conceived of the
rule of God not merely through ecclesial forms.

A chapter on the crises of liberalism serves as a kind of excursus. Fergusson agrees with critics who reject the liberal thesis (as found in the work of Rorty, Rawls, Dworkin, Berlin) that the state must be neutral about all particular conceptions of the good and only pursue procedural fairness. In point of fact, every state faces decisions which privilege one variant of the good over rivals. Liberalism, moreover, relies on what has come to be called “the unencumbered self” which makes any shared or common goods impossible a priori. (59) Liberal individualism downplays the role of embedded selves or any legitimate claims to group rights or representation. As a result, it creates a kind of “establishment” which privatizes, trivializes or marginalizes the religious voice. (61) Religious people, in this view, are always constrained to make any public case in an alien language. Fergusson turns to more communitarian voices, such as Charles Taylor, to argue instead for a politics of recognition where one acknowledges the reality of communal identities. In place of a mere trading and trimming (using a utilitarian calculus or seeking a lowest common denominator), the church (constrained to speak and act in the public realm in fidelity to its beliefs) can form alliances and make common cause with other voices and perspectives. As in social Catholicism, Fergusson opts for a multi-lingual moral fluency which allows religious voices to construe their proposals for civic policy in both theological and secular warrants.

Drawing on the writings of Erasmus and the Geneva Reformer Sebastian Castellio, Fergusson argues that mere tolerance, in itself, is never enough—not itself a pursuit of the common good. But a theological case for religious toleration can be construed around the following major motifs: the example of Christ and his followers; the legitimate limits of state power in enacting the common good; the irrationality of coercion; the sanctity of each person’s sincere conscience; the need for peace, social cohesion and the promotion of civil conversation among those who differ in order to approach a greater approximation to God’s truth (on the indubitable assumption that God is at work in other religions and even in secular movements).

Fergusson claims in an argument akin to Tocqueville’s that the main sociological function of the churches in service of state and society consists in moral formation. Congregations serve as the schools of virtue (including virtues necessary for civil flourishing) for any democratic polity needs. Fergusson’s argument here resonates closely to that of Stanley Hauerwas but he seems firmer than Hauerwas on the ineluctable duty of seeking the welfare of the city and on the positive
contribution that secular authority can make in approximating and embodying elements of the Kingdom of God. Unlike Hauerwas, Fergusson has a notion not only of discipleship but citizenship. Not by chance, then, in a chapter contrasting the Barmen Declaration and the Vatican II document on “The Church in the Modern World,” Fergusson veers closer to the Catholic case based on subsidiarity, solidarity and the common good.

For this reviewer, the thesis that the churches can continue to play a public role, not through the state or nation but through a ramified web of civic organizations within civil society, is quite persuasive. I would have liked, however, some specific appeal to case studies of how this actually works (e.g. by looking at the role of churches in community organizing or interfaith and religious groups in social movements of reform). I would have also liked a chapter explicitly delimiting a Christian theory of citizenship. This learned and readable book, however, is more a theological account of how, eschewing both withdrawal or accommodation, and, without compromising its integrity, the church can and must (with a theological account of that must) not only work with others for the welfare of the city but also bring religious concepts such as forgiveness and reconciliation, respect and true dialogue to the secular realm.

John A. Coleman†

† S.J., Casassa Professor of Social Values, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, California.