June 29

# The new Shofar

, *what we know as "secularism" is actually ancient paganism in modern guise. Since paganism is inherently anti-Christian, this means Christians should oppose both secular politics and secular universities at any cost.*

## The Gates of Hell will not prevail

Roman society was religious through and through. Reminders of the pagan gods were everywhere; and all Romans, to a greater or lesser extent, did homage to them. Roman religion propped up the privileged class of Rome and gave license to their sexual proclivities. This meant that the greatest threat posed by the one God of Christianity, and His revealed system of morality, was to virtually every aspect of settled Roman society: religion, ethics, social order, and sexuality. Rome persecuted Christians because they would not go along with the empire's toleration protocols. To do so would have required renouncing their own faith. The Roman solution to Christian stubbornness was persecution, aimed at the preservation of the Roman way of life.

The Constantinian "solution" of the 4th century did not eliminate paganism. What it did was relegated it to a place in the social order where it was enabled to continue and managed to influence the dominant Christian order in a variety of ways. Paganism was never eradicated; it wasn't even defeated. It simply continued within the framework of Christendom, "under a Christian canopy", reviving at times locally, and at other times—such as during the Renaissance—in a more widespread and "respectable" manner.

## Paganism manifested as secularism

The old rivalry in the West between paganism and Christianity, or between immanent and transcendent religiosities, shows signs of becoming reinvigorated". That is putting it mildly. The Enlightenment, the rise of science and evolution, and the age of modernity and postmodernity were not alternatives to religion. These were all religious movements. What we see in the identity politics, tribalism, relativism, consumerism, and narcissism of our day is only the ancient paganism of Rome, cloaked in appropriate twenty-first-century garb. Today's "secularists" worship history and themselves; they believe that the flow of history has brought their time to light, not unlike the east European intellectuals who capitulated to Marxism in the '30s and '40s.

This explains why, like the ancient Romans, today's pagans cannot be content merely to allow Christianity to exist alongside them. They insist that Christians *validate* their pagan views and ways, which Christians can no more do now than they could in ancient Rome. And when they will not—for example, bake a wedding cake for a gay couple—they must be taken to court and punished. They must be made to bring their religion under the big tent of paganism, or they must be silenced. Christianity needs to be tamed by society or encourages Christians to do the taming.

## A merely privatised faith will not do:

A private religion of personal salvation that did not challenge the public ideology was perfectly safe under Roman law, as it is safe under ours. On these terms the church of the first three centuries could have flourished under the rule of Caesar precisely

as this kind of evangelicalism flourishes under protection of our kind of society. But the authentic gospel cannot accept this kind of relegation… To make disciples is to call and equip men and women to be signs and agents of God's justice in all human affairs. An evangelism that invites people to accept the name of Christ but fails to call them to this real encounter must be rejected as false.

Christian affirmation cannot mean simply the affirmation of a way of personal salvation for the individual. It must mean this, and no less than this. To call men and women into discipleship of Jesus Christ is and must always be central in the life of the Church. But we must be clear about what discipleship will mean. It cannot mean that one accepts the lordship of Christ as governing personal and domestic life, and the life of the Church, while another sovereignty is acknowledged for the public life of society. It cannot mean that the Church is seen as a voluntary society of individuals who have decided to follow Jesus in their personal lives, a society which does not challenge the assumptions which govern the worlds of politics, economics, education, and culture. The model for all Christian discipleship is given once and for all in the ministry of Jesus. His ministry entailed the calling of individual men and women to personal and costly discipleship, but at the same time it challenged the principalities and powers, the ruler of this world, and the cross was the price paid for that challenge. Christian discipleship today cannot mean less than that.

**The Church is empowered to be the face of God active in creation**

The Church is an entity which has outlasted many states, nations, and empires, and it will outlast those that exist today. The Church is nothing other than that movement launched into the public life of the world by its sovereign Lord to continue that which he came to do until it is finished in his return in glory. It has his promise that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. In spite of the crimes, blunders, compromises, and errors by which its story has been stained and is stained to this day, the Church is the great reality in comparison with which nations and empires and civilizations are passing phenomena. The Church can never settle down to being a voluntary society concerned merely with private and domestic affairs. It is bound to challenge in the name of the one Lord all the powers, ideologies, myths, assumptions, and worldviews which do not acknowledge him as Lord. If that involves conflict, trouble, and rejection, then we have the example of Jesus before us and his reminder that a servant is not greater than his master.

It is significant that Jesus chose to deliver this hope-filled guarantee to his disciples at Caesarea Philippi. In that pagan setting, he encouraged his disciples to build a church that would stand eyeball to eyeball with the forces of hell itself, not challenging it by violence but overwhelming it by an alternative message of a different and enduring Kingdom. To the pagan mind, the cave at Caesarea Philippi created a gate to the underworld, where fertility gods lived during the winter. To entice the return of their god, Pan, each year, the people of Caesarea Philippi engaged in deeds, that debased the dignity of the human person, including prostitution and sexual interaction between humans and goats. The only power that can renew the fullness of our human dignity and transform society so that people are celebrated as the living images of God in creation, is the power of the Good News of God 's Reign released through Christian faithfulness.