

## CHURCH AND CULTURE

**Secularism vs. Theism****Choose Theism, the Mysterious Presence of Ultimate Reality**By Jerry Truex; May 30, 2010

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**A. Introduction**

Today we start a four-part series comparing *popular culture* with *the way of Jesus*. We will look at our culture's attitudes toward God, others, self, and life in general and compare them with the understanding of the church. Today we compare attitudes toward God.

Let me begin with a story. When Karissa was three years old, she liked to play hide-and-seek. You know the game. Sometimes I'd hide and Karissa would have to find me (I'd whisper, "Alligator," if she couldn't find me). Other times Karissa would run off and hide and I'd have to find her. When Karissa didn't have enough time to hide well, she would simply cover her eyes, presuming she was invisible. Three year olds do this. She assumed that if she couldn't see me, I could see her.

We do this with God. We shut our eyes and pretend God is not there. This is secularism.

**B. Secularism****1. What is secularism?**

*Secularism* is a dominate attitude in our culture. Secularism asserts that religious considerations should be purposely excluded from civil affairs and public life.

The term *secular* comes from a Latin word meaning "of this world". So secular thought pertains only to the affairs of this world, what can be tested by experience alone.<sup>1</sup> It is assumed that secularism is rationally superior to religion because it sticks to science and empirical data.

Secularism wants us to restrict our focus to science facts and ignore values and religion. That means we cannot talk about God or spiritual matters in public. They must be pushed to the private realm. It means we cannot talk about values or morality either.

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<sup>1</sup> "A term used for the first time about 1846 by George Jacob Holyoake to denote "a form of opinion which concerns itself only with questions, the issues of which can be tested by the experience of this life." See "Secularism," *Catholic Encyclopedia on-line*; <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13676a.htm>; see Holyoake, *The Principles of Secularism* (London, 1860).

We learned to speak *secularize* in our schools and universities. "As with any other language, *seculareze* has a lexicon, syntax, implicit meanings, and biases."<sup>2</sup> When teachers or other public authorities speak the language of secularity, the next generation learns to construct reality through the lens of that language.

Students learn quickly not to talk about God or morality. If a student uses God-talk or moral language—and teachers don't respond or respond negatively—the student quickly learns to extinguish that type of language. The student is unconsciously socialized by secularize.

In secular societies, it becomes "bad manners" to talk about God, values, or inner spiritual experiences. They are off limits.

## **2. Where do we see it?**

We see it in conversations. For example:

Sam is a college student getting straight A's, who came home and admitted to his parents that he routinely cheats on tests. His parents were shocked. They tried to impress on Sam that cheating offends God. And how did Sam respond? "Oh, Mom and Dad! This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Just leave God out of it."

We see it in the recent fall of the stock market and the unraveling of some of our financial institutions (home mortgage companies, investment banks, and insurance companies). A Frontline documentary identified the basic problem as greed and the willingness of such institutions make unethical loans (subprime loans to people who couldn't pay back). They also used "complex derivative formulas" to hide the risk of their investments from regulators and even their clients. This testifies to the pervasive influence of secularism, which denies a High Power to whom we are accountable.

## **3. What is the allure?**

The benefits of excluding God and embracing secularism are obvious. We become completely free agents, able to do what we like. If we dismiss God, we believe we are not subject to God authority or judgment. Put simply, no higher authority, no higher responsibility, no higher obligation other than to ourselves.

We decide the rules we live by. We set our own code of ethics on Monday, and then revise them everyday thereafter as it suits us.

## **4. What are the costs?**

Secularism comes at a cost. Secularism undermines personal fulfillment. Pascal, a 17<sup>th</sup> century mathematician wrote that a "God-shaped void" exists within every human being.

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<sup>2</sup> Alvin Dueck, Kevin Reimer, Lisa Finlay, *Secularity, Psychology, and the Mennonite University, Direction*, Vol. 37. No. 1 (Spring 2008) 38-49, <http://www.directionjournal.org/article/?1506>.

If there is nothing beyond empirical data, and if values are simply personal preferences that can change day-by-day, then life becomes pretty meaningless.

Without God, we turn to other things to fill that God-shaped void. We entertain ourselves to death. We turn drugs, other addictive substances and behaviors, arena sports, thrill-seeking and even violence to hold off the anxiety we feel. But nothing satisfies the anxiety—the existential angst (acute anxiety).

If we were created for loving and being loved by God, then dismissing God as irrelevant would be the greatest tragedy a human could experience. And yet that is what secularism does.

Secularism—living without reference to God—deprives us of the relational experience for which God created us.<sup>3</sup> Secularism exacerbates feelings of emptiness. We become detached from God and others. Secularism leads to isolation, misery, and social fragmentation.

## C. Theism

In contrast with secularism is the way of Jesus. Jesus' Way is a counter-cultural path and it is not easy. Jesus called his path, "the narrow way."<sup>4</sup> The first thing we should know about Jesus' path is that it is theist and, in particular, Jewish theism.

### 1. What is theism?

Theism says that behind the appearances of the universe (or material world) there is an Ultimate Reality (or Spiritual Self) out of which the universe emerged and continues to emerge. This Reality, which we call "God," is *the* Mystery, beyond human comprehension. We can only "talk" about God indirectly with metaphors, stories, rituals, and symbols.<sup>5</sup> This Reality is *personal* (knows and loves us) and *present everywhere* (accessible to each of us), and *purposeful* (has a plan for us).

**Acts 17:28** For 'In him we live and move and have our being';

### 2. God-talk

In our secular world, many people no longer talk about God. They have been conditioned not to use the word or they don't believe in God. Others talk about God, but don't take it seriously.

<sup>3</sup> Tim Riter and David Timms, *Just Leave God out of It!* (Colorado Springs: Cook Communications, 2004) 22.

<sup>4</sup> Matt. 7:13-14.

<sup>5</sup> Biblical faith suggests that God is not directly knowable, but, at best, known indirectly. That is why Moses instructs us not to make images of God, because they would be misleading. That is why Jesus used parables, symbolic actions, stories, images, and rituals. 1 Cor. 13:12. "Now we see things imperfectly ... All that I know now is partial and incomplete."

The word "God" has been seriously misunderstood and misused. Over the centuries, millions of people have been tortured, killed, exploited, and oppressed in the name of God. Wars, conquests, crusades, and inquisitions have been for God's glory. Heretics and witches have been burned at the stake. Politicians use God's name to win elections. Preachers use it to manipulate people. People invoke it to explain something they don't understand.

God's name has been seriously wounded. Many of the images of God—because they are not properly understood in the history and culture in which they arose—are hopelessly useless.

- God as a punishing judge sitting on some throne,
- God as a supreme male king,
- God as a child murder (tenth plague), and
- God as the manipulator of nature and warring tribes.

For these reasons, some theologians want to abandon the word "God". They would prefer to talk about Ultimate Reality, the Absolute, the Divine, Creative Energy, or the Spirit. However, I think we can still use the word "God," if it is properly understood.

There are three things that I think are necessary to properly understand the use of the term "God."

### 3. God as mystery

First, God is mystery. A mystery is something unknown or unknowable. If something is known, it is not a mystery.

Mystics speak of God as unknowable. Aquinas said that we do not know what God is; we only know what God is not (negative theology). In the Bible, Moses was not allowed to "see" God (Exod. 33:20). People were not allowed to make images of God (Exod. 20:4). FG says that no one has ever seen God (Jn 1:18).

**1 Tim. 6:16.** It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. (NRSV)

So whatever God is, "*God is not an object of knowledge. We cannot count God as one of the objects in the world ... God is not a thing alongside other things, or a being alongside other beings. God is not even an invisible being or a hidden being.*"<sup>6</sup>

However, to call something is a mystery does not mean it is unreal. Mysteries are real, but not objects of knowledge. We can know that something *is*, even if we do not know *what* it is.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (New York: Orbis, 2008) 140-1.

<sup>7</sup> Nolan, *Jesus Today* (2008) 141.

Science has made us more aware of mystery than ever before. Science has made us aware that human knowledge can only go so far. What lies beyond is pure mystery. For example:

- Light is a mystery. Under certain conditions it behaves like a particle; under others, like a wave. But it cannot be both simultaneously. It is beyond the human mind and imagination.
- Before the big bang there was neither space nor time. That too is beyond the human mind and imagination. It is a mystery.

Both light and the “something” before the big bang are mysteries, but real. God is mystery, but real.

“What matters is whether God is real to me or not. A mystery can be more real to me than any of the things or people I think I know well. Experienced as mystery, God can be more real and more present to me than anything I can see, hear, smell, taste, or touch.”<sup>8</sup>

The appropriate response to God as mystery is wonder and awe. “Wonder is a form of consciousness that is without words or images or understanding.”<sup>9</sup> When we recognize God as mystery, our response is wonder and awe.

#### 4. God as present (oneness)

Second, God is present. To put it another way, God is “close at hand”; God is so close that Jesus said we are united with God or one with God.

**Mark 1:15.** And saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” (NRSV)

**Luke 17:21.** Nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you.” (NIV)

**John 17:21-22.** <sup>21</sup> that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, (NRSV)

At the heart of Jesus spirituality is the awareness of God as present, near, close at hand, and at one with him. This is the awareness of God that Jesus wants for us. The mystery of God is “within you” (Lk 17:21). God is present and “has come near” (Mk 1:15).

Meister Eckhart said: “God is closer to me than I am to myself.” God is close to us even when we don’t believe in God or when we ignore God. The challenge for us is to grow in the

<sup>8</sup> Nolan, *Jesus Today* (2008) 141.

<sup>9</sup> Nolan, *Jesus Today* (2008) 142.

awareness of God's presence. We must become more conscious of the presence of Mystery within us and all around us. The Mystery is very close to us.

**1 Cor. 3:16.** <sup>16</sup> Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? (NRSV)

### **5. God as personal (loving)**

Third, God is personal. God is not only close to us, but God loves us. The Mystery we call God created you and me. You and I have a place in this universe. It was not our choice, but God's. That suggests that God has a purpose for us, that God cares for us.

It means that you and I have nothing to fear. Nothing can really harm you and me. You and I can feel pain, but real harm is not possible. You and I are loved beyond measure, because you and I are one with the Ultimate Reality that stands behind and within the material universe.

In this realization of oneness with God and the love of God, I realize that God is personal. God is Ultimate Subject, Self. Love is an experience between persons, subject to subject. We have an I-Thou relationship with God. God is the Ultimate Self and we are individual selves within God.

### **D. Conclusion**

To conclude, I have argued that secularism tries to exclude God from public life and therefore, eventually, from personal life. This is harmful because secularism denies what is Really Real. It tries to exclude the Mystery that creates, sustains, loves, and fulfills human beings at the most fundamental level of existence.