

# Present-Day Secularism

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The watershed of all philosophies, or ways of looking at the world in which we live and at our life in it, has historically been the divide between naturalism and supernaturalism. There have been many variations and adaptations on both sides of the divide but, in principle, the issues remain fairly clear-cut and constant. In their application to religion, or to a religious way of life, a few classifications and distinctions should be observed for clarification. Philosophies of religion are attempts to discover and present in a systematic way the truth about religion in relation to life. A religious philosophy, on the other hand, is a way of looking at life and interpreting it from the point of view of a religious persuasion or a particular set of religious assumptions about the universe and our life in it.

## RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHIES: NATURALISM

Within the category of religious philosophies the watershed between naturalism and supernaturalism is still apparent and, in the main, the principles and issues on either side are as constant as they are in the realm of general philosophy. On the naturalistic side are the religious humanists who believe that there is nothing behind or beyond nature and that life is organized around human ideals in the here-and-now. A variation of this allows a theistic view but finds God and religious values in, and confines them to, the natural world. One classification, made by Wieman and Meland, presents the evolutionary theists, the cosmic theists and the empirical theists. All of these find their methods and evidence in nature and the empirical sciences.

## SUPERNATURALISM

For the main body of evangelicals, the other side of the watershed has been the accepted position and still today is a tenable one. God and ultimate reality transcend the supersede the world of nature in a realm of spiritual realities beyond ordinary sense experience. Revelation and faith are sources of religious knowledge, as science and psychology give knowledge of the physical world and of human behavior. There is a sharp contrast between the natural

and the supernatural, and a definite distinction between the secular and the sacred. Furthermore, God, as revealed in Jesus Christ, is personal and not only comes close to man but dwells within the believer to save him from sin and despair.

#### SECULARISM

Originally, secularism was a position which was, for all practical purposes, quite separate from and exclusive of religion. It emphasized the development of the physical, moral and intellectual nature of man, but was at best an ethical system which depended upon the practical sufficiency of natural morality apart from religion, especially theism. Its method was frankly restricted to the human level and consisted solely of material means. It was held that, to a very large extent, the moralizing process in the course of the evolutionary development of man was a merely mechanical one, motivated by natural impulses and cravings within the individual, and unguided by any light or purpose or standard from without or beyond. These and other marks distinguished the position or philosophy of life called secularism from any and all forms of supernatural religion and clearly marked it off from the Christian view of God, man and the world.

#### ATTEMPTED SYNTHESIS

Since it is not the purpose of this article to present an analysis of the philosophies of secularism, but rather to deal with its practical bearing upon our life and experience today, the writer hastens to point out that the crux of the practical problem lies in the attempt to reconcile and synthesize its sharply divergent aspects with the Christian view and way of life. Secularism is not attacking the church from without but undermining it from within. This is an insidious process and tends to vitiate the vitality of the church, rendering it powerless and ineffective. As many individuals who call themselves Christians measure their success in terms of dollars and cents, so the evaluation of many a church is made in terms of the size and complexity of its structure and membership. Progress is estimated more in terms of budget than by soul-burden, and numbers are emphasized at the expense of values. Secularism is no longer apart from and exclusive of religion; it has become a religion and is manifest in many deceptive ways within the framework of the nominally Christian world.

## SECULARISM IN THE CHURCH

The damaging effects of secularism are in evidence both in the pulpit and the pew. The deity of Christ, His virgin birth, His miraculous ministry and His vicarious death are superseded by less dynamic interpretations of the Scriptures and by the doctrine of doing good. The emphasis shifts from the fundamental truths concerning Jesus Christ and who He is and what He came to do, to His teachings and our human attempts to practice the golden rule. Some have insisted that it makes little difference whether we believe Christ to have come “down” from the divine order to be the Savior of the world or “up” from the human order to be our great example, so long as we are in agreement with respect to His teachings recorded in Matthew five to seven. But it seems to me to make all the difference in the world who the teacher is! Either He is the Son of God who became incarnate in human form by way of the virgin birth and the power of the Holy Spirit, or He is just the best of men with no function to perform greater than that of example.

This points up one of the major obstacles to true ecumenicity. How can there be unity among the professing Christians of the world when there are such wide differences among us with respect to our beliefs as to who Christ is, and what are His nature and function? There would be nothing more than organization of a secular nature, and little is to be gained when such is the case. The real strength of any organization is found in its underlying convictions and purposes, and without unity at this level there cannot be true unity at all.

In the pew, secularism is in evidence in terms of indifference to spiritual values and vitality, preoccupation with material things and a corresponding lack of concern for suffering humanity and lost souls. How few have really faced the challenge and caught the spirit of true Christian consecration! If it means anything at all, it must mean the fulfillment of such challenging verses as “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven . . .”—Matthew 6:19,20. “He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly, and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully.” II Cor. 9:6,7. “Ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.” I Cor. 6:19,20.

Accordingly, the life that is pleasing to God is the fully consecrated life in which the chief aim of all activities and pursuits is, not to amass wealth for oneself or his children, but to promote the kingdom of God in the earth and to glorify Him in all things. Of course, there are normal and God-ordained responsibilities that a man must fulfill and, should he not provide for his household, he would be "worse than an infidel." But beyond these normal needs, whatever else we possess or accumulate belongs to God and the cause of Christ. It is not our own, for not even we are our own, since we are bought with a price. If we then appropriate it for selfish uses, we are robbing God; if we put it to the proper Christian uses, the world can be evangelized and Christ's purpose fulfilled in us. Although this view of consecration is considered impractical by many, it is nevertheless more than an abstract ideal; it is the gospel requirement for all Christians. It is also the best antidote for secularism at the general church-membership level.

#### SECULARISM ON THE COLLEGE CAMPUS

On the majority of campuses the very atmosphere is entirely secular, and little or no attention is given to moral and spiritual values. The training is geared chiefly to preparation for work which is measured solely in terms of monetary returns to the worker. The common evaluation is, "He's doing all right, he's making six thousand dollars a year." The criterion is earning power rather than serving power, and the worth of the graduate's education is evaluated accordingly. It is only fair to remark that many leaders in education are calling for a return to moral and spiritual values, but the social and economic forces in our society foster and cultivate the secular to a degree which makes progress toward a more spiritual goal both hard and slow. But the moral break-down is making the need for revival more and more obvious.

Even more disturbing to us is the degree to which the secular attitude prevails among students even on church-related and Christian college campuses. Too often the incentive is the degree, not the educational experience. Tuition is paid and then an effort is made to get by with as little study and work as possible. A typical expression of the attitude is

I wish I were a moment  
In my professor's class;  
No matter how dull they are  
They always finally pass.

One of the major functions of a program of Christian higher education as compared with secular training is to instill in the student the service motive of the revolutionary philosophy of life which Jesus taught and lived. It is far more difficult to provide the kind of educational experience which prepares the student to serve than it is to "educate" the student to earn a livelihood. It is relatively simple to develop the skills for making a living, but more difficult to cultivate the way of life in which success is measured by what one gives rather than by what he gets. But insofar as we do this on our Christian college campuses and in our seminaries we are waging a winning warfare against the paralyzing secularism which is our greatest foe.

#### SECULARISM IN THE HOME

At the heart of our society is, or was, the family. Here are, or could be, wielded the most powerful forces and influences toward the making or the breaking of the social order. But what used to be known as the homely virtues are scarcely cultivated there any more. Many a beautiful cut-stone structure is a mere house, not a home, especially since in so many cases its main function seems to be to hold up the television antenna. In order to live, that is, to provide all of the *things* which all of the neighbors have, it is necessary for both parents to go to the office or the shop. This, along with the child's own crowded schedule, has ruled out the experience of living and doing things together, to say nothing of the family altar. The family doesn't even have its meals together.

Even for the Christian family it is necessary to exert positive influences against these encroachments and toward the real purposes of family living. God and prayer and fellowship could be crowded out by yielding to the pressures and demands of our time. But it is still the duty and the privilege of parents to provide the conditions and the atmosphere in which the children may grow up in "the nurture and admonition of the Lord." Our greatest stronghold against secularism is, or can be, the Christian home. If the Bible is given its proper central place in the home, and if Christ is exalted and recognized as the unseen guest and friend in all circumstances, the integrity of our society may yet be preserved and the moral fiber of our nation strengthened.

## SECULARISM IN THE LARGER COMMUNITY

Machines, mass production, money in staggering amounts and men whose hearts are full of greed and lust combine to secularize the whole pattern of modern life. Current social issues, such as the liquor traffic and race prejudice, when approached from any angle other than the Christian point of view, aggravate the already over-materialistic and un-sacred character of our community and national life. Within this framework we are judged by other nations of the world to fall short of the standards implied in our historical position as a great Christian nation. In fact, many other nations of the world, though non-Christian, are less secular than we, and are confounded by our general materialism.

One of the most alarming aspects of nation-wide and world-wide secularism is the creeping socialism of our time. People are often impressed by the apparent immediate social and economic "benefits" of programs of social welfare, socialized medicine, group-this and community-that. But it must be remembered that any form of socialism, although perhaps not Marxian in the early stages, is a long step toward Communism, and Communism is definitely secular and positively anti-Christian. This is the great secular force which dominates almost half of the people of the world, and is bidding for the control of the other half. This is what makes whatever degree of infiltration they have succeeded in achieving in this country so tragic. And that infiltration has made inroads into religious circles. Here is what J. Edgar Hoover observed recently, "I confess to a real apprehension, so long as Communists are able to secure ministers of the gospel to promote their evil work and espouse a cause that is alien to the religion of Christ—."

In a bulletin released by the congressional committee on un-American activities, we are told just how secular Communism is. "The long and short of it is just this; you cannot be a Communist and believe in God. You cannot believe in God and have a peaceable life under Communism." Now the serious truth is that, by condoning the milder forms of secularism discussed in relation to the church, the college and the home, we are preparing the way for more far-reaching inroads into our society on the part of this more highly organized and destructive form of secularism. And since Communism is propagated by force, a weakened church-school-and-home structure constitutes a vulnerable point of attack.

**CONCLUSION**

Revival in our time is the only answer to present-day secularism. In general this means a revival of the Christian religion. More specifically it means a revival of fidelity to the fundamental truths of the Word of God on the part of ministers and teachers; a revival of concern for spiritual values on the part of all church members, and a willingness to put first things first; a revival of moral and spiritual emphases in the education of our youth, especially on the part of church-related and so-called Christian colleges; a revival of family living around the beliefs and practices that foster reverence for God and respect for human personality, and a rebuilding of the family altar; and a revival of determination on the part of us all that the forces of organized secularism shall not gain control at the national and international levels.

The road is not an easy one but the direction is clear. Complete consecration to God and a strong faith in His power and willingness to hear and answer the prayers of His people; definite commitment to a positive program for and with Christ who is the captain of our salvation and our coming King; and a willingness to stand up and be counted on the side of truth at any cost are definite guideposts along the way.