

## TIME TO CHALLENGE SECULARISM

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Both religion and secularism should expect to have to account for themselves. Neither should be accepted unthinkingly and uncritically. This essay is intended to challenge secularism, which seems to have been piggy-backing on the tarnished reputation religion has incurred, more than on any merits of its own. But: this is not ultimately about an 'ism'; it is about people - people to whom religion can seem quaintly out of place in the modern world, or at least unnecessary. And so it is also about why, for others, faith makes sense and really matters.

Secular reality was not always thought of as secular. Animist religions had thought of the world as inhabited by various gods, demons and demiurges whom people lived in fear of offending, and needed to appease. In that context, human creativity, human responsibility for the planet, science and technology, and human rights could never easily develop. We humans had first to discover that there is one God, who loves us greatly, and wants us to enjoy the world, and harness its energies. The Hebrew scriptures record how an embattled, struggling people experienced that assurance.

Using methods of thought developed by Aristotle and introduced to the West by mainly Muslim scholars, medieval Christian theologians built upon this biblical insight, showing that the world is not a place where we need fear to tread; all of it is secular. This cleared the way for the development of the sciences. This piece of history is sometimes called "secularization". The liberation of secular reality to be its secular self owes much to the faith that came down from Abraham.

This is why members of the Hebrew, Christian and Muslim faiths have been untrue to their own origins whenever they have stood in the way of authentic intellectual, artistic, scientific, social or economic progress, or not respected the proper separation of Church and State; and whenever they have fought each other.

However, to respect and welcome secular reality is one thing - that results from "secularization"; to claim that secular reality is all there is, is another - that is "secularism". Because it reduces all reality to secular reality by not allowing for God's existence, it is also called "reductionist secularism". When God is excluded, even properly secular reality is diminished: it is no longer seen as a revelation of God's purposes, and to be respected. To believers, secular reality is the place where God's love for us and our love for God become tangible - all of it is holy.

Reductionist secularism has devastating consequences at many levels. When people do not know how greatly they are loved by God, they do not know how greatly they matter, or even that they do matter. Is there anything they need to know more than that? After all, 'life isn't fair'; it can take away the ones who mean the most to us; even the best relationships can fail; people can feel trapped in impossible situations...To live in this kind of world, people need a reason for hope that stands beyond the reach of

every disaster, and even uncovers meaning within them. That is what secularism would rob us of, by denying there is a God.

Revealed religion does not invent God to meet our human needs, or to answer our questions, or provide our 'proofs'. Abraham, Moses and the prophets found themselves confronted by the kind of God they were not expecting, and who was not there to answer all their questions. They didn't always interpret their experiences well – that would take time. But, for us as for them, discovering what it means to be so greatly loved by God, many of our questions no longer need to be asked. The discovery is a transformative experience, taking love to new lengths, depths and heights; enabling us to take seriously the real world and our place in it.

It is a discovery that involves Contemplation, Conversion and Compassion. Contemplation is a way of seeing. The Judeo-Christian book of Wisdom speaks of the blindness of those who see the world but fail to recognize its maker. What it says of unbelievers can be said also of sleep-walkers, which is most of us most of the time. We see the world around us without seeing "the presence of the ultimate in the commonplace" (Abraham Joshua Heschel); the "extraordinary side of the ordinary"; (Pope John Paul II). Those who live with their eyes fully open live in constant surprise and wonder at being part of something whose existence, like their own, was not owed to them. In this way, nature itself 'speaks' to them. "All the bushes now burn if you have seen one burn. Only one tree has to fill up with light and angels, and you never see trees the same away again." (R. Rohr).

This contemplative way of seeing becomes a contemplative way of being: This is Conversion. After all, it is not the bushes that burn or light up; it is ourselves that change. We move from taking the world for granted (as if it were not a gift) to treating it for what it actually is. That changes how we relate to everything.

People of all religious traditions have been 'spoken' to like this by the cosmos. Abraham and his descendants found themselves being 'spoken' to also by the events of their history. They experienced a love that was not merited, deserved, or due to them. In turn, they were to love in the way they had been loved: this is Compassion. Without this, society becomes punitive, unforgiving, and not open to new starts or rehabilitation or reconciliation. Compassion is a circuit-breaker; it is not trapped within the cycle of just deserts and pay back and getting even. It is the opposite of self-centred, cruel indifference to the plight of others. It makes possible that shalom which is the calling and mission of the spiritual descendants of Abraham. They betray their own faith when they do not honour that calling.

Reductionist secularism is a grim alternative. Why wouldn't it be? The bits and pieces of a jig-saw puzzle find their meaning within a bigger picture. If there is no God, and no big picture to give our lives meaning, we are like disconnected pieces. Life can become bewildering. A society that trivializes what is sacred ends up making idols of what is trivial. Celebrities, glitter, banality and consumerism make poor substitutes for meaning. Life begins to feel empty. Reporting a recent Hollywood death, the media thought it worth mentioning that she died of natural causes.

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul was scathing in his description of how depraved people became through ignoring God. It seems some things haven't changed. According to a report in the *Sunday Star Times* (Nov. 24 2013), the Department of Internal Affairs had blocked 34 million attempts within New Zealand, over three years, to access child sex abuse sites; New Zealanders seeking child pornography were increasingly demanding younger children and more violent abuse; and globally abuse is becoming more and more degrading.

Society doesn't seem to notice its own contradictions, or even make connections: e.g. we condemn sexual abuse, but treat pornography as a bit of a giggle; we deplore domestic violence, but serve up violence on the media as a form of entertainment. We ignore the dynamics of addiction, and those who are not practised in self-restraint eventually go to any lengths to get what they want. We have become the kind of society in which it is easier to commit abuse without feeling shame, and to boast about it on social media. Victims are perceived as objects, not as persons made "in the image of God".

The apostle's description of dulled minds and folly still fits. Some even do an extra contortion: they "prove" the non-existence of God by excluding from their enquiry anything that cannot be known by the methods of scientific observation! Never mind that some of the conditions necessary for doing science, and doing it responsibly, lie outside the scope of what can be scientifically proved – e.g. personhood, personal integrity, commitment to truth, human freedom, values, ideas, compassion, love...

There are others who have a vested interest in keeping God out: e.g. unscrupulous employers. The Department of Labour has recently uncovered widespread exploitation of vulnerable workers (migrants and young people) and fraud by employers. Suppressing conscience goes with suppressing God.

Yet others subscribe to an economic theory that the sole function of business is to maximize profits, it being someone else's responsibility to take care of the social consequences. And so, jobs can be eliminated and livelihoods threatened for no other reason, ultimately, than to increase profits, even if they are already huge. Workers are seen mainly as cost items, and targets for cost-cutting; disposable. Variations of this practice are even considered normal, acceptable, and simply good business – even by some who profess religious faith. But they contradict their faith, because persons made "in the likeness of God" may not to be treated as we would treat goods and chattels.

This serves to exemplify where faith's emphasis on the dignity of every person, and the State's responsibility for the common good, converge. If it has been misguided on the part of any faith to try to co-opt the State to its own confessional interests, it is now equally misguided on the part of the State to make secularism's confessional interests its own. The practical exclusion of God from the public domain is reductionist secularism's specific agenda. It is not a non-partisan stance. The State's responsibility to promote the common good can involve facilitating the beneficial effects of any cultural vision, of which secularism is only one. The State is properly secular without adopting reductionist secularism's indifference to religion, disguised as neutrality.

If secularism has much to answer for, so too do the spiritual descendants of Abraham, who at least know better, but whose ability to influence society is hampered by religion's ambiguous reputation. In varying degrees we all contribute to this situation by our unfaithfulness. In fact, there is a case for secularism to

challenge believers. Religion is degraded when God is diminished (e.g. by pious practices that suggest people need to earn God's favour, or that would supposedly put God in our debt; or by teachings that put limits on God's presence, love or mercy; or by practices that associate God more with social, political or economic elites; or by those who think their relationship with God can be separated from their relationships with the world around them, or that "going to church" is the main measure of people's faith or faithfulness.) In these ways, religion, too, becomes reductionist. Sooner or later, people seeking God, even if only implicitly by seeking truth, find that reductionist 'religion' – like reductionist secularism - fails to satisfy. This is even before they experience misrepresentations of God by fundamentalism, literalism, fanaticism, or crusades and wars carried out in the name of religion, whether Christian, Jewish or Muslim.

The rejection of diminished religion can reflect the quest for truth that is sometimes implicit within agnosticism's doubts and secularism's indifference. Diminished faith does not always connect with important human aspirations. This justified the Second Vatican Council's claim that "Christians can have more than a little to do with the birth of atheism." (Church in the Modern World, n.19)

It is the fullness of faith that both challenges and attracts. What attracted Moses and the prophets completely transcended their understanding, but could not be ignored. It was an experience of God intimately involved in their lives and struggles, but not at their beck and call, and not answerable to them: "I am with you as who I am" (Exodus 3:1-15). Ultimately, this was the mystery of God's un-owned, self-giving love for all creation. *By surrendering to that love, we become participants in God's love for the world.*

This is the transformative experience that makes us *more fully ourselves, more fully human, and more fully alive*. And it is a worthy alternative for those who discover that secularism is an incomplete way of life.