

## 21/4/2013. *The secular spiritual vacuum: comparative religion and multifaith initiatives*

Religious education lessons at school do not give the Christian view of Christianity, the Muslim view of Islam, the Hindu view of Hinduism *etc.* You get the education system's view of these religions, because the teacher will have been told which parts of the Bible, the Quran and other sacred writings to discuss, and will suggest to pupils which parts are good and which are bad. Those judgements of what is good or bad are made using criteria that come, implicitly, from contemporary British culture – which is secular. So school lessons actually give a secular view of Christianity, Islam and Hinduism; teachers should declare this standpoint. If you want the insider's view of those religions then their scriptures must be allowed to speak for themselves.

Lessons viewing religions from the outside, meanwhile, should include information on how each religion instructs its followers to treat others.

Let us turn the lens round and get a Christian view of the secular belief system. It is a particular belief/faith system, without a god. It accepts the truth of certain assertions made by atheists, rather than by people who claim to be speaking on behalf of a god. Few secular people have made any thought-out declaration of commitment to secular beliefs; they pick them up from the secular culture they live in without being aware of it. Christians who have done the same are the 'church liberals.'

Secularism arose in the 18th century, and won political power in the French Revolution at the end of that century. It has existed for more than 200 years now, and people from other cultures readily recognise it as a specific belief system. Secularism sets 'faith' against 'reason' and it champions reason. This is a category error, because whenever you reason about something you start from things you take to be true – axioms – and use reason to build upon them. Those axioms are your faith. If you are good at reasoning then you might be able to work them out from deeper axioms still, but where do *they* come from? Ultimately everybody has a faith of some sort, even if they do not realise it because it is just 'the way things are' in their culture. Furthermore, to do any reasoning whatsoever you must have faith in reason. The French Revolution witnessed a formal 'cult of reason' in which the main church in Paris (and other cities) was rededicated to the goddess 'Raison' (reason), personified by a woman enthroned in a temple to Philosophy constructed inside the church. But how can you know if your axioms are right and you have the right faith? The Christian answer is through a relationship with God; you know whether you know God. If secular people call you arrogant for that reply, you can say that you are saved by God's mercy, not by any merit of your own, and ask how that is arrogant.

If atheism implies what secular people don't believe in – a volitional spiritual being who guides – then what *do* they believe? The core point of secular faith within our culture is that man can be made good by his own efforts, rather than by divine cleansing. Man is competent to solve his own problems. Secularism holds that whatever goes wrong in life is due to bad luck or ignorance, and whatever goes wrong in society is due to poor social institutions. In that case reason must be applied to redesign our social institutions 'scientifically.' Everything then becomes political. Secularism's solutions are secular education and appropriate social engineering. Some churches have indulged historically in a Christian social engineering which is not the gospel, but does the secular version work? To overcome ignorance, modern European education systems taught more information than ever before to entire populations for the first time in history, but Europe still generated two world wars. And, if it is society's fault, the French Revolution and communist revolutions aimed to reforge society along secular lines to guarantee 'the rights of man,' but they were soaked in blood. (Communism is a secular belief system called dialectical materialism that has given rise to untold misery in Russia, China and elsewhere.) As Britain goes farther off the rails due to secular social engineering, secular zealots redouble their efforts in an attempt to overcome the resulting problems. But this only makes them worse. An obvious example is school sex education and teenage pregnancies.

Secularism's denial that sin and evil are intrinsic to man are why it does not officially believe in punishment, and why it is so impervious to the gospel – if you don't think there's a problem then you'll have no interest in the solution. (That is why hell is so unpopular a doctrine among 'liberal' Christians, for if you don't deeply believe that you deserve hell then you'll scarcely be grateful to Christ for saving you from it, and you will see hell as God's dark secret or the church's rather than see sin as man's, and try to explain it away.)

Teenage rebels and secular activists are always blaming something else: the past, society, or ignorance. Secular zeal for reform is really a form of (self)-justification by works. But Jesus taught us that reform starts with oneself.

Historically, secular humanism took its intellectual roots from Greek philosophy, its inspiration from the physical/material sciences and technology, which were forging ahead in 18th century Europe – secular humanism aimed to develop the ‘moral sciences’ or in other words a science of man – and took its emotional force from gross inequalities in society and the disgrace of wars between Catholic and protestant. These factors all went into the ‘Enlightenment’ movement of the 18th century. When secular people say that Christians have done terrible things in history, they do not realise that men who once shot at each other in Northern Ireland are now good friends because they changed from nominal Christians who said “I’m a Catholic/protestant because my family was” and today say “I met Jesus Christ and now I follow him.” Probably many of the abuses in Europe’s history were done by nominal Christians.

The French revolutionaries’ notion of the ‘rights of man’ has been taken up as the secular notion of human rights. But differing human rights often clash (indicating that the notion is incoherent), and there is no reasoned way to resolve those clashes – only politics. The notion that we have rights simply by being human is a secular analogue of the image of God. The image of God is also why we have a moral compass, even if it is fallen; sociobiologists have given no convincing account of morality. Without God’s authority there is ultimately no morality. That is why Western secular society is degenerating into moral anarchy; and why Russian and Chinese secular communist society, in which everyday morality was lower at the time of Stalin and Mao, was maintainable only by such iron dictators. These messianic types are secular versions of ancient pagan god-kings. In the West, meanwhile, a secular State that declares food, housing and so on to be human rights gains the responsibility to provide them for its people, thereby intruding into all parts of life while erasing incentive to work.

Secular humanism has faith in man, which seems odd when history books are opened. Along with faith comes the worship of man; Olympic opening and closing ceremonies are secular humanist religious ceremonies. But secularism has failed to give people fulfilment, because it cannot give anybody an ultimate purpose. To determine the purpose of something you must look outside it. Man cannot manufacture his own purpose, so that any purpose to human life and the universe must come from beyond it – as in revealed religion. The greatest secular thinkers and playwrights speak with terrible eloquence of life’s pointlessness.

The absence of fulfilment in secularism has evoked responses. The church is growing rapidly in communist China today, while in the West the New Age movement has sprung up to fill the spiritual vacuum. If, however, you believe there is one God who created the human race and the world then, since you are human and live in the world, this is the one god you should acknowledge; the Bible is where you can read his words for humanity. Christian converts from paganism understand the insidiousness of multifaith ritual. So did St Paul: *What fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? ...What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God...Be separate, says the Lord* (from 2 Corinthians 6:14-17). How separate? We should befriend people of other faiths as we find them in our daily lives; we should unite with people of other faiths against secular evils such as pornographic sex education in schools; we should debate people of other faiths in front of uncommitted audiences (including online) so that the audience can see the Christian position set out and defended. But where is the good in taking part in multifaith gatherings in which people discuss their own religions amongst each other? If prayer is offered at such gatherings, to whom? When people say “I want you to respect my beliefs” the proper reply is “I respect you because you are a human being (in the image of God); in particular I respect your freedom of conscience to hold your beliefs; but I don’t agree with them or else I would hold them myself.” I am called to love Nazis but not Nazism.

The hippies of the 1960s picked up multifaith ideas from Indian spirituality, which encourages such syncretism and would regard Jesus as just another holy man rather than the only holy man in an unholy world. After the 1960s these ideas became popular here as the New Age movement. Science fiction bookshelves were replaced by sword-and-sorcery fiction. New Agers engage in pick-and-mix spirituality. I call it occult humanism, because the choice is made by the humans involved. The hippies saw the faults of Western ‘modern’ society clearly enough, but they had nothing better to put in its place. They were part of a

shift in thought from secular modernism to postmodernism, which holds that you should choose your own way because there is no ultimate truth – a terrifying nihilism. Differing religions are supposedly just different paths up the same mountain. But if you look deep enough you will find that their scriptures are irreconcilable; it is a secular conceit that secular people understand those scriptures better than their own followers. There is only one Creator, who has one Son. The New Age, in contrast, regards Jesus Christ as just a great moral teacher, one of many holy men (with a ‘Christ spirit’ – be wary of this phrase). His moral teaching *was* great, but he also claimed all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt 28:18). No other great moral teacher has done that, only cranks. And no crank has been a great moral teacher. So even in earthly terms Jesus was unique. Moreover the mountain image is misleading, for by ourselves we cannot reach the God who made us and gain true perspective on all things. God sent down his son, to lead us up to him in heaven. People who quote the mountain image claim to love everybody, but in their own relationships they seldom demonstrate a capacity for enduring love. They are, sadly, lost sheep posing as shepherds. Humanity needs more than great moral teachers. Jesus Christ is the true shepherd, and he will not lead you astray.