

Not Secularism (Part One)

“The world and its desires pass away”

Reflection 8 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

As we move further into our series, “New World in the Morning,” our title is “Not Secularism,” implying that the great spiritual turning point the church is now facing doesn’t have a whole lot to do with secularism. It’s a title though that requires some explanation. In fact, possibly it’s not a very good title at all! Because it is true that much of what the church is up against in our time and the pattern of declining church attendance in our time is a result of secularism.

Certainly many people today are completely secularized. Some are hostile to religion. Some have been deeply wounded by their experience of religion when they were young. Some had church-going, Sunday-School-teaching parents, often the fathers, given at home to fits of rage, to emotional and physical abuse, and sometimes tragically even to sexual abuse. For them, churches mean only deep and unresolved pain.

Some others are secular fundamentalists; they are as dogmatic, as arrogant, and as black-and-white in their thinking as religious fundamentalists. Often when I hear secular and religious fundamentalists going after one another, I find them far more like one another than I am like either one of them.

Many others, however, don’t attend church because the teachings of the church just don’t make sense to them. It’s not that they don’t care about being good or kind. It’s not that they don’t believe in God; most of them do believe in God. Many of them seek compassion, decency, common sense and inclusiveness but they have not found these things in the churches, mosques and synagogues of their experience. They still believe in God but they struggle to find God in organized religion.

But it’s also true that it’s been this way for a long time. As we’ve already seen in this series, way back in the eighteenth century, Western culture turned against the historic church. Thinkers like Voltaire and Hume and Diderot and others held the eighteenth-century church up to the light of history and reason and Scripture, up to the light of the teachings of Jesus, and found it badly wanting. They reflected back on a hundred years of religious warfare all across Europe that had left millions of people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries dead. They were tired of the senseless arguments. They were tired of the proof-texting, of the way churchmen would manipulate three or four passages to support their viewpoint and forget a hundred that destroyed it. They were tired of preachers who presented God as so wrathful and judgmental that God was nothing more than a capricious demon who exercises power tyrannically, arbitrarily and irrationally. Not in ways that anyone could really trust. They noted – they did not miss – that the Christian religion of their day differed greatly from the religion which Jesus practiced, that in fact it was the opposite of the religion of Jesus. And so in the eighteenth century much of Western society, many of the most thoughtful people, collectively decided that they could no longer take their primary truths from Christianity. They could no longer safely do this. They could not trust peace and prosperity to the historic church. The historic church was primarily responsible for undermining peace and prosperity.

And so the West turned secular. And in some ways even the people that make up church today are becoming more and more secular. There are on weekends so many places to go, so many things to do, so many good times to be had, that are not church. So I am reminded of a great text in 1 John – 1 John 2:15-17. John writes this late in his life. A lot of things are on his mind and heart. There are some people teaching some wrong and very confusing things about Jesus. And John addresses this. But in the end he returns again and again to the core message, the truth he learned from Jesus the night before his crucifixion, the night unforgettably stamped on his consciousness (John 13:34-35), the truth that we really must love one another. And John says this over and over (1 John 2:7-11; 3:11-20; 4:7-21).

But in the middle of all this he remembers something else, now in 1 John 2:15-17, and he writes:

“Do not love the world or anything in the world.
 If anyone loves the world,
 the love of the Father is not in him.
 For everything in the world
 – the cravings of sinful man,
 the lust of his eyes
 and the boasting of what he has and does –
 comes not from the Father
 but from the world.
 The world and its desires pass away,
 but the man who does the will of God
 lives forever.”

So do not love the world or anything in the world. Now he does not mean the world as such, the world as God’s creation. This Jesus loved; not even Solomon in all his glory was arrayed, he said, like one of the lilies of the field. What he is talking about is the world apart from God, human society as it is organized on wrong principles – on unrestrained craving, lust and boasting, the world which forsakes the God who created it. What he is warning against is life committed to secular pleasure, dominated by the senses, in pursuit of luxury, lustful, driven by cravings, lax in morality, self-centered, thinking that joy is to be found primarily in what money can buy, doing everything for show, life and conversation spent attempting to impress everyone else. And John is saying that a life in which God is not the reference point, a life in which God is not the ground beneath our feet, has no future.

All such things pass away. Things come together and fall apart. They come together again and fall apart again. They are always coming together and falling apart. So secularism, this perspective of reality apart from God, is always a dead end. It’s the emperor who has no clothes. It’s the future that is no future. So secularism is very much an issue in our time and in our lives. And yet maybe it is not the issue we think is.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week.