

Not Secularism (Part Two)

“The world and its desires pass away”

Reflection 9 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

Secularism, however, may not be the issue we think it is. It may have less to do with the current decline in church attendance than we suppose. After all it’s been with us several hundred years. Diana Butler Bass in her book *Christianity after Religion*, trying to make sense of why more and more of the generations now coming along are turning away from religion as they have experienced it, claims that the once commanding secularization theory has in academic circles largely fallen on hard times. She notes that even now only 1.6 percent of Americans claim to be atheist, and that a Pew poll in 2008 found that “net” belief in God is still 92 percent of the population which is historically in line with belief levels in previous generations.

But she also observes that more and more twentysomethings see God differently, less as an often angry Father and more often as a force field, an energy field, a Spirit, the Holy Spirit. But the big change is this: that 20somethings are not more secular in their thinking; they’re more sacredly diverse. They have grown up amidst unprecedented religious diversity. I, for instance, knew one Jewish family before well, before I moved to Stamford and ended up living near the synagogue Agudath Shalom where Jewish folk lived all around us. But kids today go to school from kindergarten on with Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and many others. So their beliefs about God, doctrine and sacred texts are open to influence from all sorts of faith traditions. As a result, they no longer think in simplistic, either-or terms. They think more flexibly in ways that allow for multiple interpretations and multiple perspectives. They are open to considering possibilities that may at first make others uncomfortable. But all in all, they are learning to think in ways that more true to the way life really is. And it is this rather than secularism that is really different in our time – this willingness to hear and learn from people who are “not like us.”

Over the years, with regard to the faith of others, particularly the major world faiths, in my own readings and study and in my work in interfaith circles, I have learned many things. I have learned that no single religion has all the wisdom helpful to humanity; that ultimately truth is always more than anyone’s concept of it; and that all people from the East and the West, and from the North and the South, are made “in the image of God,” and, consequently, all world faiths contain substantial wisdom. I have learned that all the major world religions, to one degree or another, encourage (or that at least wise voices within those religions encourage) a concept of a loving and merciful God, notions of life beyond death, a sense of the sacred, the importance of rites of passage, the gift of personal rebirth (in some sense) and the need to overcome self-centeredness. They encourage stopping and looking and seeing things as they are, conquering our cravings and attachments, the necessity of spiritual community and spiritual friendship, the practices of compassion and generosity, the value of simplicity – living simply so that others might simply live, and notions of grace and forgiveness. And with a little thought, all of us know these things.

So now wherever and in whomever I see love and goodness, truth and beauty, I sense the presence of God. And I celebrate it, and I am happy. Here’s what I believe is going on. In the words of Paul in Colossians 1:17, “In [Christ] all things hold together.” All things, or in the words of Ephesians 1:10, “all things in heaven and on earth.” So this is what we who gather in

our church family have found. Christ is the story we find ourselves in. In our brightest days and darkest nights, it was always Christ. When we never guessed it, when we least expected it, when we thought our lives were about something else, it was still Christ. The story is always Christ. But could his story have room for all the other stories of the world? The stories of Moses, and Mohammed, and Buddha, the Vedas and the Mahabharata and Ramayana, the genius of that great spiritual classic, the Tao Te Ching, and the timeless wisdom of Native American spirituality? Instead of dismissing and ridiculing all the other stories, perhaps we could respect them and as we have time listen to them, and see that just maybe they all somehow point to same one story. The star has always shone in the east.

So more and more people are finding that the story we find ourselves in is large enough for all the other stories of the world. They are finding that it might be very good for Christians to deeply respect the Qur'an so that one day Muslims will deeply respect the ways of Jesus. And they are finding that it might be good to realize that there are spiritual people everywhere who aspire: to a sense of the sacred; to overcoming self-centeredness and cravings; to seeing things as they are; to mindfulness and meditative practice; to letting go of unthinking judgments – those likes and dislikes – that distort our ability to see connections clearly; to letting go and approaching life with trust and gratitude and compassion; to a generosity that is all-embracing and leaves no one behind; to personal rebirth, to being reborn, to experiencing forgiveness and discovering within themselves the Spirit of God.

Now what I want us to see and fully understand is that it is in Christ when he is really understood, when he owns us and we no longer claim to own him, that all things hold together. Churches that focus on themselves, on their own power structures, on their own self-preservation, on their own “perfect” doctrine and practice, will not hold together. Nations that rely on force of arms, on the power of their economy, on their patriotic mythology, on the cult of national superiority, will not hold together. Lives focused on career, on lands and real estate, on lifestyle and education and entertainment, will not hold together. The world and its desires pass away

But in Christ all things in all their colorful diversity really do hold together. I think of Cecile Diamond who for many years was our church family's Jewish grandmother. She took being Jewish seriously. She took being Christian seriously. Why not? The apostle Paul did. Cecile ignored the centuries of animosity and asked, “Why not both?” She didn't make a big deal about it. She just didn't let prejudice and tradition and the way things are always done and the way people always think keep her from seeing the bigger picture. And so she led many of us to see the beauty of Judaism and its glorious Passover Seder.

We are called always to go back to Christ, to his spirit (which the church gets right sometimes and, oh, so wrong, others), to the way he treated people, all people, people in all their colorful diversity, the way he understood and cared about them all, to the love he feels for you, the way he understands you, the way he seeks only to inspire and raise you up, how he wants you to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is his love, how he wants to liberate you and release you into abundant joy, how he wraps you up in a love that never, never lets you go. We are called to trust that whatever else might happen, though many things come together and then fall apart, though the world and its desires pass away – that in God all things hold together, and all is

well, and all shall be well. And where we stand today, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, is on the edge of a great global spiritual awakening.

– Dale Pauls