

CHAPTER THREE

DEFINING THE SECULAR

From *Present Truth in the Real World* (1993)

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How Secular People Think

What does it mean to be a secular person? How do secular people think? At this stage it will be necessary to use a few big words because they express in an accurate, scientific way the sort of understanding shared by the professionals who have studied how secular people relate to life and its basic issues. It can be difficult to find simple words that accurately express serious concepts. The following basic outline was first presented by theologian Langdon Gilkey in his book *Naming the Whirlwind*, and was later popularized by Tony Campolo in the book *A Reasonable Faith*.

The first word that describes how secular people think is "contingency". The word "contingency" describes the belief that everything in this world happens by cause and effect within the historical cycle. In other words, nothing that happens in this life needs to be explained in terms of supernatural intervention. Everything that happens to a person is the result of some other event within history and experience. For example, if I am a bitter person, it is because of the way my parents raised me. If I am rich it is because my parents are rich or because I worked hard. Nothing is to be ascribed to divine intervention. And everything we do causes other things to happen without any supernatural input. Another term for this way of thinking would be "naturalism."

Although we would be slow to admit it, many Adventists function on a daily basis as though God did not make a significant difference in their lives. We may say otherwise theologically, but in practice most decisions are made more on scientific basis than on what we perceive Scripture to be saying. The extent of our modern dependence on scientific method can be seen when we realize that Luther wrote a tract condemning Copernicus' radical view that the sun is the center of the solar system, rather than the earth. He felt that the new astronomy was out of harmony with Scripture. Yet in spite of our respect for Luther I know

of no Adventist who would argue as Luther did. Science has clearly opened our eyes to reality in ways Luther did not expect. But the blessings of science have their dark side for faith. When a person's view of truth is in practice limited to the reality of the five senses, God is crowded out of that person's existence.

In practical terms, then, secular people live out their lives within the boundaries of reality as their five senses experience it. But in such a limited reality there is no inherent purpose or meaning in life. If God is not available to direct them people must take charge of their own lives. The second major aspect of secular thinking, therefore, is called autonomy. Autonomy is based on the Greek words for "law unto oneself." Autonomous people no longer sense any need for God's direction. They retain for themselves all the rights and privileges in decision-making that they once assigned to God. Meaning does not come down from heaven, neither do the answers to my questions or the solutions to my problems. It is up to me to decide what meaning my life is going to have.

A person may decide, for example, that meaning ultimately resides in how I am remembered after I am gone. This explains some of the interest in the environment these days. If by my action, the world is a better place for my children and my grandchildren, than

my life has not been lived in vain. (I am certainly not opposed to environmentalism, but you can promote ecology for secular as well as Christian reasons.) Others may reason that if they found the right kind of job, or married the right kind of person, or raised beautiful and well-behaved children, their lives would be filled with meaning. Still others seek meaning in art, music, travel, or literature. In the grand experience of great art or musical composition they feel transported into a higher plane of existence.

By contrast lives that are centered on drugs, crime, or the selfish pursuit of personal pleasure at the expense of other people, are considered to be meaningless, wasted lives. According to this philosophy, I must decide what meaning my life will have. The typical secular person also does not look to God or anyone else to determine his or her destiny. Thus secular people are forced to become autonomous, a law unto themselves.

Very closely related to autonomy is the concept of relativity, our third basic concept. If there is no supernatural, and if human beings basically decide their own destiny, then meaning, values, and truth depend on the situation. What is right for one person might be wrong for the next person. Morality is a social contract--whatever the group can agree on becomes the basis for judging all behavior within the group. Homosexuality could be wrong

for one generation, yet acceptable for the next. Sex between consenting adults is fine as long as no one is overly shackled by guilt as a result of some quaint notion of morality. In this way of thinking, society creates morals, principles, and "truth" on the basis of social and economic needs. If something is useful or enough people practice it, it can be allowed or even encouraged. On the other hand, relativity denies that there are objective morals and principles that should control the development of society. There are no absolutes. All values are relative and any moral system is viable only for the group that creates it. Rather than speaking about "truth" or right and wrong, secular people like to talk about whatever is "right for you."

The power that the principle of relativity has over people's minds is illustrated by the decreasing significance of lifestyle standards among Adventists today. Church standards were based on the concept that there is a God who is actively involved in everyday life and who has the right to tell us what to do in even the most personal and intimate areas of our lives. But once a person begins to question, even unconsciously, God's active involvement in human affairs, many personal standards lose their primary reason for existence.

The fourth and final principle is called temporality. Temporality expresses the concept that this life is all that there is. To the secular person, belief in the afterlife is an attractive concept, but is only wishful thinking, conjured up by those who cannot face the fears and anxieties related to death and dying. It would be nice to be able to genuinely believe in life after death, but the secular person mourns the lack of any solid scientific evidence for it. Since this life is all that such a person can be sure of, it is advisable in this life to "get all the gusto you can." This concept is strikingly expressed in a recent athletic shoe commercial on television, "Life is short, play hard."

Temporality means that we arrive on this earth, we live for a short time, then we pass on. There is no lasting significance to anything that we do, there are no rewards or punishments after the close of earthly consciousness. If temporality is valid, then ultimately whatever a person chooses to do is all right as long as he or she doesn't seem to hurt anyone.

This is not an isolated way of thinking. I remember speaking to an Adventist pastor who said, "You know, you wonder sometimes if everything is really going to end up the way we say it is. I sure hope so. But ultimately, the only part of ourselves that we can be sure will still be left behind after we're gone is our children." I don't think this pastor was a perverse

man, shamelessly living off the godly expectations of others. He was simply being honest at that moment about some of the doubts and fears that assail us all at one time or another. But such questions illustrate the extent to which the secular mindset affects even those whose lifework is dedicated to the advancement of the biblical approach to life.

While these are the four basic presuppositions by which secular people face the issues of life, the average person on the street rarely thinks about these things, and certainly doesn't use these terms to describe them, any more than you do. These principles of thinking have been handed down to our generation as an unconscious legacy which affects the way we face life in America as we approach the 21st century. A secular person is certainly not an atheist, someone who has consciously rejected religion in the ultimate sense. The secular person may believe in God, yet is not continually conscious of God's involvement in the practical matters of everyday life. Ninety-four percent (94%) of Americans may believe in God but 70% don't go to church. In Australia, where 85% of the people say they believe in God--96% don't go to church! The secular person is not an atheist, he or she is simply someone for whom religion has become irrelevant at the practical level of everyday experience.

I should probably avoid leaving the impression that all secular people think exactly alike. As will become obvious in Part Three, secular people are as diverse as snowflakes even though there are some common patterns in the way they think. That diversity, of course, is the inevitable consequence of autonomy and relativity. If each person strives for meaning and determines values for themselves, there will be great diversity of belief and lifestyle among secular people.

What Kind of People Become Secular?

What type of person is more likely to become secular? What type is more likely to maintain faith? What characteristics place one under the umbrella of secular influence? All other things being equal, men are more likely to be secular than women. Observe the typical SDA church located away from one of our institutions. Among the adults such a church will often consist of two-thirds to three-quarters women. I can think of churches of as many as a hundred members that include only one or two fully committed men. The rest were there because of their families or for some other social reason. Recent research by the Office of Human Relations discovered that women make up more than 75% of the entire membership

of some conferences. Now I am certainly thankful for every woman who has responded to the call of God. But somehow in the way we approach people, men are generally being turned off. Targeting males may need to become a conscious priority. Without seeking to neglect the spiritual needs of women in my congregation, I have sought to make reaching men a priority throughout my ministry. As a result the majority of my baptisms have been men, and usually young men. But at times it required breaking the ministerial mold.

Perhaps a brief example will help. I tried to visit an elderly shut-in member of one of my churches every couple of months even though she lived with her son fifty miles away. The son had resisted all attempts at his soul for thirty years, and was threatening to sue the conference over their handling of his mother's trust account. I was unable to make a dent in his anti-Adventist shell. One day on a sudden impression I asked if he liked football. He did. I mentioned that I didn't have a TV and would he enjoy it if I came some Sunday afternoon and combined a visit to his mother with a football game? He seemed hardly able to contain his enthusiasm.

When the day came he had ordered snacks, non-alcoholic drinks, and set up a special chair for "his pastor." We enjoyed the game, then I visited his mother and went home, not

realizing what had happened in his mind that day. On my next visit, he asked if I could spend a little time with him after I had visited his mother downstairs. When I came up, he broke down in tears, sharing his fears for the future, and especially his fear of where he would end up in the afterlife. Somehow the man who had driven fifty miles to watch a football game with him could now be trusted with his true feelings. I have rarely felt so honored as I did that day. I wonder how many men I have turned off because I was too busy to share in their "trivial" pursuits.

All other things being equal, young people are more likely to be secular than elderly people. Again one can verify this proposition by a look at the typical Adventist church outside our educational institutions. All other things being equal, people who live in cities are more likely to be secular than those who live in rural areas. Well-educated people are more likely to be secular than the poorly educated.

The rich are far more likely to be secular than the poor. This is partly true, at least, because the rich are in a position to take care of their own needs to a large degree and may not feel a need for God. But wealth also provides access to options and opportunities, such as travel, that expose one to a variety of secular influences.

People who travel a lot--who speak in Australia one week, California the next, and teach in Michigan the rest of the time--are more likely to be secular than those who spend a lifetime in a single locality. Why is this the case? Because travel, much like education, brings you into contact with a wide variety of people and a wide variety of ideas. To use a simple illustration, in Europe they have latches instead of doorknobs. The reaction of many first-time American visitors to latches is, "Boy, these people are stupid, don't they know how to make a doorknob?" Then after a while you discover that latches are very useful. If your arms are filled with packages, you can open the door with your elbow. Try doing that with a doorknob! After a while you are no longer so sure that the American way of opening doors is all that great anymore. This is an everyday illustration of how it becomes increasingly difficult to hold strong convictions in the face of a wide variety of claims to truth.

For similar reasons, people who are constantly in the public eye are far more likely to be secular than are people who live secluded lives. Hermits do not get exposed to many different ideas! We will notice that one of the best ways to maintain faith in a secular world is to schedule periods of "derived seclusion," otherwise known as devotional time, where the

spiritual batteries can get recharged for the battle of life. Public people need this even more than most.

People who work in factories, by the same token, are more likely to be secular than people who work in agriculture. On the other hand, people who work in information industries--bankers, computer programmers, teachers, etc. are far more likely to be secular than someone who works in manufacturing. Unless drastic measures are taken to prevent it, a mobile, public person who works in an information industry is marked for secularization.

Note the following table which summarizes the above discussion:

FIGURE ONE

Secular		Religious
male		female
young		old
urban		rural
well-educated		poorly educated
rich		poor
mobile		stationary
public		secluded
industrial		agricultural
information		manufacturing

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Most people, obviously, do not fit one side or the other of this profile exactly. There are many godly pastors on the secular side of the profile. On the other hand, many secular people fit the more religious side of the profile to a large degree. The purpose of these comparisons is to identify the kinds of people who are more exposed to secular influences than most. As we become more aware of how secular thinking impacts on our lives as Christians, we are better able to deal with the challenges of secularization in a constructive way.