

CHAPTER FOUR

BECOMING SECULAR

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

By Jon Paulien

How Society Secularizes People

Why is it that males tend to be more secular than females? Why is it urban people tend to be more secular than rural people? Why is it that public people tend to be more secular than people who live secluded lives? It is because people on the left side of the last chapter's profile are more exposed to the forces that secularize people than are those on the right side, all other things being equal. What influences in society cause people to become

increasingly secular? Three predominant influences can be identified. These are scientific reason, pluralism, and privatization.

First, and perhaps foremost, is scientific reason. In the world we live in today most people make decisions and solve problems on the basis of what we would call science and scientific method. You observe a situation. You gather information about it. You talk to other people who have experience in similar situations. You may formulate an explanation for what you see and try to experiment with some possible solutions to the problem you face. In the end you put all the information together and you make a decision. Whether you knew it or not, the process that you went through in making that decision is known as scientific method. The scientific way of reasoning affects everything we do and everything we believe.

This is not the way people solved problems in biblical times. When Daniel and his three friends faced an information deficit, their first thought was prayer, not research. Instead of getting the "think tank" together, and interviewing other wise men to see what kind of information might help them satisfy the king, they went immediately to their knees.

Now this is not to put down the tremendous benefits that have come to us as a result of a scientific approach to problems. The problem is, however, that science cannot deal with

the supernatural, it can only operate within the realm of what can be observed with our natural senses. It, therefore, has a natural bias toward explaining what happens in life as though God either didn't exist, or is uninvolved in the natural processes of life on earth. Since science has rightly demonstrated that many phenomena once assumed to be the action of God can be explained in natural terms, the increasing credibility of science in the world has led to a corresponding lessening in the credibility of religion.

Let me illustrate with an analogy drawn from small-town America in the 19th-century Midwest. In such an Anglo-German setting one would expect a Lutheran church on one side of the town square and a Methodist church on the other. Let us imagine the people in town were feuding over which church more accurately reflected the will of God. One night lightning strikes the Methodist church and burns it to the ground. What is everybody in town thinking the next day? "Looks like God put His word in and settled the matter, didn't He?" It was natural at that time to explain everything that happened on the basis of God's direct intervention. What, however, would happen to the faith of those people when they discover that a little piece of metal placed on top of that Methodist church would have deflected the wrath of God and prevented the church from burning down? Because science

often "works" when faith seems to have failed, it makes faith explanations less convincing than they used to be. What was once ascribed to God can now be explained in terms of natural cause and effect, "contingency." As God is more and more removed from everyday life, people sense the absence of God and increasingly live as though He did not matter.

The main difference between religion and science is the difference between truth and reality. Being raised in a scientific world, secular people see no difference between the two. Truth and reality are the same thing. What do we mean by reality? Reality is what the five senses can perceive: what you can see, what you can hear, what you can taste, smell, and touch. That is reality. But Christians believe that truth is bigger than reality. We believe that beyond what you can see, and hear, and touch, and smell, and taste, there are other realities that transcend the five senses. Although we all make use of science every day, there is a fundamental clash between the scientific world view and the Christian one. When a cosmonaut circles the earth and says, "I didn't see God or angels up there," he is denying truth on the basis of perceived reality.

The more that people rely on science in their daily lives, (and I mean science in the broadest sense--not just the physical sciences, but also the psychological and social sciences),

the more difficult it is to maintain a truth that transcends. So scientific reason leads to a lessening of faith in society as a whole. This is not to suggest that Christians need to go back to a pre-scientific world, such is neither possible nor practical. But we need to recognize the powerful impact on faith that scientific reason has had and continues to have in the Western world and increasingly throughout the entire world.

A second major secularizing influence is called pluralism. Pluralism means that there are many different religious persuasions in society, none of them dominant. In nineteenth-century America it was much easier to develop and maintain faith than it is today. Nineteenth-century America was a lot like campmeeting--when you come out of your cabin on campmeeting weekend, you experience the invigoration of a unified belief environment. Everyone around you basically believes the same things. When you meet someone on the road you say "Happy Sabbath" and the other person replies, "Praise the Lord, it's a beautiful day isn't it? Beautiful Sabbath." What happens at that moment? Another human being has affirmed your faith and your faith becomes stronger as a result. That is why retreats have become so popular today. When we are with people that believe as we do it supports and encourages our faith.

Contrast the campmeeting experience with what happens to faith out in the secular world. The first twelve people you meet may represent thirteen different religions. Or non-religions. If you were to say, "Happy Sabbath" they might reply, "Huh? What's a Sabbath?" Such constant interaction with conflicting ideas has an erosive effect on faith.

The concept of pluralism explains why higher education is often destructive of faith, it exposes you to a wide variety of options to explain most things in life. The positive side of education is that it broadens your horizons and makes you better able to reach different classes of people. The pastor who has been to the seminary is able to effectively reach a greater variety of people both inside and outside the church than one who hasn't, all other things being equal. But the down-side of education is that being constantly bombarded with different ideas will inevitably weaken faith unless drastic measures are instituted to maintain it. Education is not evil in itself, but it is certainly a two-edged sword. A pastor friend located near a great secular university told me that unless he gets into the dorms and contacts Adventist students within the first three weeks after they arrive, he can usually do little for them after that. In a mere three weeks they have been overwhelmed with a universe of ideas

they had never before been exposed to. In three weeks their faith has already crumbled and gone.

Pluralism means that there is little or no social support for your faith in society as a whole. This lack of support produces religious uncertainty. The more ideas you are exposed to the more difficult it is to be certain that your favorite idea is the right one. This explains why certain classes of people tend to be more secular than others. Public people are constantly being exposed to other people and their ideas. Mobile people are constantly running into new ways of thinking and of doing things. Urban people are constantly rubbing shoulders with all kinds of ideas and expressions. Young people, of course, are more open to new ideas than are the elderly. The more that our life experiences expose us to various ideas, the more difficult it is to maintain faith.

It may be that the main function of Christian radio and television is not evangelism, but providing spiritual reinforcement for people who otherwise live in a secular environment. There is certainly little evidence that most secular people listen to Christian radio or watch Christian television. But in a pluralistic age, Christian media can provide the "campmeeting"

atmosphere for people who are already religious. People may watch and listen to reinforce their views rather than to learn new ones.

The third major influence that produces secularization is called privatization. Privatization means that it is increasingly considered inappropriate to discuss religion in public. Religion is confined more and more to people's private lives and experiences. A familiar saying comes to mind here, "There are two things you don't discuss in public, religion and politics." Religion only makes the news when it has become a matter of secular interest: a pastor slept with the wrong person, or stole something out of the offering plate. But religion as such is considered a private matter.

I'll never forget the NBA championship series of a few years ago. The Philadelphia 76ers won the series and the television media rushed to interview their star player, Julius Erving, better known as "Dr. J." As he was still dripping sweat from the game, they asked him, live on national television, "What is the source of your personal strength? What kind of support system enables you to not only be a great athlete, but a gentleman who cares so much about other people?" Without hesitation he responded, "There are two things, first of all is my family. I give great credit to the role my wife has played in my life. But even more important,

I have given my life to Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. He is the center of my life and deserves the credit for every good thing I have done both on and off the court."

He went on for some time on this theme to the obvious discomfort of the interviewer. The network could do nothing about it! It was live television and editing was impossible. At that moment Dr. J had transgressed the unwritten norms of secular society. He seized his only chance to reach the millions who thought of him as a hero and role-model and offer the message that life is not in basketball, but in Jesus Christ. But what he did was socially unacceptable in secular society. You don't talk about religion in public. And I have not seen a live interview of Julius Erving on television since!

The church no longer dominates society. It is not a major player in the public sphere. Politics, education, and economics serve secular goals rather than religious ones. And this privatization, this moving faith into the closet, is a factor that makes faith seem increasingly irrelevant to everyday life.

We live, therefore, in an age of "secular drift." No one plans to become secular, it usually happens gradually in one's experience. Scientific reason, pluralism, and privatization quietly take their toll. People continue to "believe" in some sense, but without strong

convictions and without a spiritual outlet in some organized group experience such as a local church.

As a result of these trends, the structures of society provide less and less support for a religious interpretation of life. Religious convictions become unstable and relative, seeming to be merely matters of preference.

One response to secularization (which destroys the relevance of the past and hope for the future) is escape into the present. An "eat, drink, and be merry" lifestyle of sports and entertainment become a religion of the self which takes the place of church in a person's life.

Another response to secularization is escape into a group that protects itself by separation from the world. Such groups run the gamut from fairly orthodox Christian "self-supporting" groups to dangerous cults that turn normal people into social and religious zombies. Whatever the type, the community becomes a refuge of peace in a messed-up age.

The most typical response to secular drift is to plunge into the world as it is. If this world is all there is, its tasks and problems are sufficient to absorb all one's attention. Prayer and worship seem like escapes which waste time that could be put to good use transforming society. Knowledge is obtained by reason and research, rather than revelation. Secular people

seek to create their own values, sets their own goals, and look to God for neither support nor judgment.

Secularization in itself is a fairly neutral thing. On the positive side, by fostering education, science, and toleration, secularization has bettered the lives of many, including Christians. In discrediting superstition, it has made it more difficult for people to hide from their true needs by means of religious systems that deny reality.

But on the negative side, secularization destroys faith in a number of ways. It makes truth seem relative or irrelevant. It crowds out the spiritual aspects of life in the struggle for secular goals. Furthermore, since secularization has removed the church from the center of life in most places, the church often fails to get the attention of the very secular people who are actively seeking spiritual solutions to life's problems.

Is there any way to avoid the forces of secularization without falling into the trap of denying or escaping reality? In a media-saturated age it is extremely difficult. Although secularism is not a denomination, the most persuasive evangelist that ever lived is preaching a secular message. And secular evangelistic meetings have been held in nearly every Seventh-day Adventist home. I am talking about the visual medium of television.

TV is the most powerful agent of secularization. Through the television scientific reasoning, pluralism, and the privatization of religion bombard homes everywhere. Adventists used to teach that it is necessary to move out into the country to get away from the evil influences of society. So I moved out of New York City into a little town of 300 people, seven miles from the next town. But every morning I watched about 20 kids vandalize my yard while waiting for the school bus. Bring a television into a country setting and the kids grow up with all the latest ideas, fashions, drugs, and violence. Country living is not what it used to be because of the media and related influences. Television has become the "wild card" that can bypass aspects of the secular-influence profile charted above. Television can provide, in one's own living room, the mobility, the urban environment, and the powerful exposure to ideas that used to be available only to those on the left side of the profile.

Many people are concerned about the sex and violence on television. And these are valid concerns. But there is plenty of sex and violence in the Bible as well. I translated 2 Samuel 7-21 from Hebrew once. It was mind-boggling. David's court was saturated with political intrigue, sexual antics, murder, and rape. But there is a major difference between the Bible and TV. The sex and the violence in the Bible illustrate the consequences of

opposing God or living contrary to His laws. The real problem with television is that it glorifies life apart from God. When was the last time anybody prayed and got an answer on prime-time television? When did anyone pay tithe to acknowledge God's ownership of their lives? When was witnessing portrayed as a positive and valuable part of a person's life? The major shaper of philosophy in our world today is a little box in people's homes. But it does not portray life as Christians experience life.

The big problem with television is that it saturates our minds with images of lives in which God does not play a part. Problems are not solved by prayer and the study of the Scriptures but by human ingenuity, skill, and luck. I remember turning on the TV in a motel once and seeing a program called "MacGyver." The unarmed hero is being chased through the back country of Montana by eight Arab terrorists armed to the teeth with machine guns, armored vehicles, and rockets. If I were in his shoes I would pray earnestly, and so would most people, church or not! That is the one thing MacGyver doesn't need to do, because he has ingenuity, skill, and some luck on his side. With botanical insight he creates explosive and poisonous weapons out of plants and wipes out the whole bunch without sustaining so much as a scratch! Now this may all be innocent fun in a way, but a

steady diet of such material sends a subliminal message that a relationship with God is not relevant to life and its problems.

I am not suggesting that all Adventists must remove the television set from their homes. We have not as a church taken such a stand. Neither am I suggesting that there is some great Hollywood conspiracy to pervert our morals. Television simply portrays normal life as its secular creators perceive normal life. But every Christian needs to be aware that whatever gets your attention gets YOU. If you spend more time with the television set than you do in worship and Bible study, you are in great danger of drifting into secular ways of living and thinking. Especially if your profile indicates that you are vulnerable to secularization, you need to ask yourself what kind of impact your entertainment style is having on your faith.

How Adventists Become Secular

Before we begin to talk about solutions to the problem of secularization, it may be helpful to look specifically at the process by which an Adventist can become secular. As with gaining weight and growing up secularization does not normally happen overnight, it is

usually a lengthy process. Adventists rarely just get up one day and walk out of the church. Most Adventists DRIFT out of the church gradually over a period of time. They may continue to believe the basic teachings of the church, but progressively become less and less involved in religious matters on a day-to-day basis. For convenience we will call the process by which an Adventist moves from deep commitment to secular detachment secular drift.

The first step in the process of secular drift occurs in the private prayer life. In its very secrecy, private prayer is the ultimate personal barometer of spiritual commitment. Prayer is the first thing to go, and even pastors are not immune to secular drift. To be candid, I have had pastor's wives tell me, "My husband hasn't prayed in twenty years except in public." While such cases may be extreme, few Adventists do not admit to at least some struggles in this area. Don't think that an uphill battle for a meaningful devotional life is unique to you. It is a consequence of being Adventist in a secular world. The most immediate impact of secularization is felt in the prayer life. How many of us can say that in our private lives, when no one else is looking, we walk as closely with God as our public profession might indicate?

The next area affected is usually the study life, although for some, especially pastors, Bible study can continue for a long time in the absence of prayer. But while Bible study may

continue in such cases, it tends to have less and less personal significance. It is simply something one does as a ritual or because it is part of a job description. Meaningful personal study and prayer can become absent from a person's life for years and yet no one else knows, except maybe a spouse. The pastor may well be the last one to know that an elder's personal walk with God is a thing of the past.

The third step in secular drift occurs when personal standards of behavior begin to erode. This step may be the first that anyone but your spouse will notice. It is virtually impossible to detect that someone else is struggling in the inward spiritual life unless God chooses to reveal it to you. Although He has occasionally done that for me, it is not His normal procedure. Spiritual distress sends up its first public signal when personal standards begin to slip. I realize that standards are a big issue right now in the church and I do not wish to address the issue of which standards are appropriately enforced in a local church and which are not. But as a pastor I have discovered that when a person has believed for a long time that a particular action is wrong, and suddenly acts in a contrary manner, it tends to be a red flag that screams out, "I'm in spiritual trouble."

Let me use a controversial issue among us just to make a point. Although the Seventh-day Adventist Church does not enforce any standard against the wearing of wedding rings, many Adventists sincerely believe that a wedding ring is not in harmony with God's will for them personally. I have learned from experience that when a person has believed for years that they should not wear a wedding ring and one Sabbath shows up with one, it is often an indication that the individual is in serious spiritual difficulty. This does not suggest that the wearing of a wedding ring is inherently related to spiritual difficulty. The point I am seeking to make is that whenever there is a significant change in personal standards it can flag the presence of secular drift. Other early warning signs of secularization can include such areas as the way one relates to the tithe, social drinking, and choices in entertainment.

The fourth step tends to be slippage in church attendance. You wake up one Sabbath and say, "Oh, it's such a beautiful day, let's go to the mountains." Now you may on occasion have a very good reason to skip church. But as part of the process of secular drift, slippage in church attendance becomes a very public indication that the earlier steps in the process have become quite advanced. Slippage in attendance is usually quite gradual. First you miss once a month, then it's twice a month, and then you start coming only every other month

and then finally, it just seems to be more trouble than it is worth. After a while you don't even miss it.

The fifth step in becoming secular is to begin to doubt the Bible itself; to doubt the afterlife, to doubt whether there really is a God. You pick up the Bible and it is as if a voice in your head is saying, "What are you reading this for, it's just ink on a page. This is a book like any other book." That is secularism. That is the result of the natural influence of our society, which leads us away from God and a believing relationship with His Word.

The sixth and final step in the process of secular drift is an increasing distrust of institutions. This includes a lack of loyalty to religious institutions of any kind, for example, the institutions and authority structures of the Seventh-day Adventist church. "No one can tell me what to believe. Nobody can tell me what to do." The most interesting thing about this aspect of secularization is that it is often seen most strongly in groups that are sometimes characterized as "right wing," groups which would be quick to deny that secularism could have any impact on them. In spite of this denial such groups tend to manifest some of the same consequences of secularization as their more "left-wing" counterparts. Either extreme may signal danger, but "right-wing" Christians are usually either less aware of it or less willing to admit it. Since I brought the subject up, I might as well say that I believe every church needs two wings to fly--a left wing and a right wing! The point I am attempting to make is that, in their increasing distrust of Adventist institutions, the so-called right-wing Adventist groups betray that they are far from immune to the influence of secularization.

I'll never forget the pastors' conference where I was speaking on this subject and the President of the conference was sitting to one side of the group. I made the comment, "I'll bet that your President doesn't feel like he gets half the respect from you that he gave to his

conference president when he started out in the ministry." It was as if I had pressed a button: he shot up in the air and said, "You listen to this guy! You listen to this guy! He knows what he's talking about! You wouldn't believe what I have to go through. You wouldn't believe the mail that comes across my desk. Hate! Hate! Hate! And often in four-letter words! And from people who pride themselves in their conservatism." He went on like this for about half an hour.

In my experience, what that president said was true. Some of the most conservative people now tolerate truly bizarre behavior in the name of truth. Satan has subtly spun his web of secularism in both "wings" of the church, hampering our ability to fly together, and largely preventing a positive influence on the world. We are all affected by secularization regardless of our theological preferences. The scary thing is, the less you are aware of secular drift, the more spiritually dangerous it becomes. Disrespect for religious authority, whether one recognizes it or not, is the natural outgrowth of contingency, autonomy, and relativity, the philosophical products of the secularization process.

Now secular drift does not always take place in the exact order described above. In special circumstances the order may be altered or even reversed. For example, if a person is

embittered by some real or perceived action on the part of a church institution, attendance and loyalty may be affected immediately while prayer, study, and standards linger on for a great while, perhaps even a lifetime. On the other hand, a young person newly exposed to a secular university may abandon the entire spiritual life in such a brief time that the very levels of secular drift can hardly be discerned. What I have shared here is the most typical order in which the process occurs, usually over a fairly lengthy period of time.

People often tell me that my description of secularism and secular people sounds a great deal like most Adventists today, not just the so-called "backsliders." I have never intended a deliberate comparison. But the more you become acquainted with Bible-believing Christians of other faiths, the more you suspect that Adventists may be more secularized than the average Christian. If so, secularism has wounded us more than once, it has not only made it more difficult for us to communicate with those who are not Adventists in our communities, it has sapped our own faith as well.

In the previous century Adventists saw themselves as a reform movement within the larger Christian church. Most of the people they worked with did not need an emphasis on Christian spirituality. So their emphasis was on assembling logical and reasonable arguments

that would persuade people intellectually that they needed to pursue their spirituality along different lines than they had previously. In a world full of Christians, this worked out reasonably well for a generation. But by the year 1888 this approach resulted in an entire generation of Adventists who knew the arguments but were losing touch with a personal God. And in spite of the power of the message that was born in Minneapolis in 1888, to this day Adventist distinctives tend to get more emphasis in most circles than does a living relationship with God.

In a secular world an intellectual faith is no longer sufficient to guard against secular drift. Adventists, therefore, are crying out more and more for a living walk with God, for a taste of His presence. A doctrinal construct by itself may not touch the heart. In Part Two I will try to offer some helpful insights in how to activate and personalize our walk with God in a secular world.

We may summarize the first part of the book by noting that the secular worldview has hurt Adventists in at least three distinct ways. First, it has made it more difficult to communicate what we believe to others. It has hurt our evangelistic impact in the world. Second, it has, as we have noticed, been extremely damaging to individual faith. We ourselves

often feel that we are losing our way with God. And third, it has resulted in great frustration to the Adventist organizational structure. Being an administrator in the Adventist church today is, if you'll forgive the expression, a hellish experience. A president dreams of a finished work, but everything attempted only seems to make the situation worse. One's best attempts just aren't good enough anymore. And it is secularization that has clipped the church's wings so that it works against itself.

Part Two moves us now into a discussion of the most vital issue facing us as a church, how to maintain faith in a secular world. You cannot share what you do not have. Part Three goes on to discuss how to share faith in a secular world. Because I am neither gifted nor experienced in administration, I hesitate to say a great deal about the administrative consequences of recent developments. Nevertheless, my study and experimentation has raised ideas that may be helpful to those in administration. A section in the Appendix to this book offers some tentative suggestions on how to more effectively administer the church in a secular world.

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different ideas will inevitably weaken faith unless drastic measures are instituted to maintain it. Education is not evil in itself, but it is certainly a two-edged sword. A pastor friend located near a great secular university told me that unless he gets into the dorms and contacts Adventist students within the first three weeks after they arrive, he can usually do little for them after that. In a mere three weeks they have been overwhelmed with a universe of ideas they had never before been exposed to. In three weeks their faith has already crumbled and gone.

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I'll never forget the NBA championship series of a few years ago. The Philadelphia 76ers won the series and the television media rushed to interview their star player, Julius Erving, better known as "Dr. J." As he was still dripping sweat from the game, they asked him, live

on national television, "What is the source of your personal strength? What kind of support system enables you to not only be a great athlete, but a gentleman who cares so much about other people?" Without hesitation he responded, "There are two things, first of all is my family. I give great credit to the role my wife has played in my life. But even more important, I have given my life to Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. He is the center of my life and deserves the credit for every good thing I have done both on and off the court."

He went on for some time on this theme to the obvious discomfort of the interviewer. The network could do nothing about it! It was live television and editing was impossible. At that moment Dr. J had transgressed the unwritten norms of secular society. He seized his only chance to reach the millions who thought of him as a hero and role-model and offer the message that life is not in basketball, but in Jesus Christ. But what he did was socially unacceptable in secular society. You don't talk about religion in public. And I have not seen a live interview of Julius Erving on television since!

The church no longer dominates society. It is not a major player in the public sphere. Politics, education, and economics serve secular goals rather than religious ones. And this

privatization, this moving faith into the closet, is a factor that makes faith seem increasingly irrelevant to everyday life.

We live, therefore, in an age of "secular drift." No one plans to become secular, it usually happens gradually in one's experience. Scientific reason, pluralism, and privatization quietly take their toll. People continue to "believe" in some sense, but without strong convictions and without a spiritual outlet in some organized group experience such as a local church.

As a result of these trends, the structures of society provide less and less support for a religious interpretation of life. Religious convictions become unstable and relative, seeming to be merely matters of preference.

One response to secularization (which destroys the relevance of the past and hope for the future) is escape into the present. An "eat, drink, and be merry" lifestyle of sports and entertainment become a religion of the self which takes the place of church in a person's life.

Another response to secularization is escape into a group that protects itself by separation from the world. Such groups run the gamut from fairly orthodox Christian "self-

supporting" groups to dangerous cults that turn normal people into social and religious zombies. Whatever the type, the community becomes a refuge of peace in a messed-up age.

The most typical response to secular drift is to plunge into the world as it is. If this world is all there is, its tasks and problems are sufficient to absorb all one's attention. Prayer and worship seem like escapes which waste time that could be put to good use transforming society. Knowledge is obtained by reason and research, rather than revelation. Secular people seek to create their own values, sets their own goals, and look to God for neither support nor judgment.

Secularization in itself is a fairly neutral thing. On the positive side, by fostering education, science, and toleration, secularization has bettered the lives of many, including Christians. In discrediting superstition, it has made it more difficult for people to hide from their true needs by means of religious systems that deny reality.

But on the negative side, secularization destroys faith in a number of ways. It makes truth seem relative or irrelevant. It crowds out the spiritual aspects of life in the struggle for secular goals. Furthermore, since secularization has removed the church from the center of

life in most places, the church often fails to get the attention of the very secular people who are actively seeking spiritual solutions to life's problems.

Is there any way to avoid the forces of secularization without falling into the trap of denying or escaping reality? In a media-saturated age it is extremely difficult. Although secularism is not a denomination, the most persuasive evangelist that ever lived is preaching a secular message. And secular evangelistic meetings have been held in nearly every Seventh-day Adventist home. I am talking about the visual medium of television.

TV is the most powerful agent of secularization. Through the television scientific reasoning, pluralism, and the privatization of religion bombard homes everywhere. Adventists used to teach that it is necessary to move out into the country to get away from the evil influences of society. So I moved out of New York City into a little town of 300 people, seven miles from the next town. But every morning I watched about 20 kids vandalize my yard while waiting for the school bus. Bring a television into a country setting and the kids grow up with all the latest ideas, fashions, drugs, and violence. Country living is not what it used to be because of the media and related influences. Television has become the "wild card" that can bypass aspects of the secular-influence profile charted above. Television

can provide, in one's own living room, the mobility, the urban environment, and the powerful exposure to ideas that used to be available only to those on the left side of the profile.

Many people are concerned about the sex and violence on television. And these are valid concerns. But there is plenty of sex and violence in the Bible as well. I translated 2 Samuel 7-21 from Hebrew once. It was mind-boggling. David's court was saturated with political intrigue, sexual antics, murder, and rape. But there is a major difference between the Bible and TV. The sex and the violence in the Bible illustrate the consequences of opposing God or living contrary to His laws. The real problem with television is that it glorifies life apart from God. When was the last time anybody prayed and got an answer on prime-time television? When did anyone pay tithe to acknowledge God's ownership of their lives? When was witnessing portrayed as a positive and valuable part of a person's life? The major shaper of philosophy in our world today is a little box in people's homes. But it does not portray life as Christians experience life.

The big problem with television is that it saturates our minds with images of lives in which God does not play a part. Problems are not solved by prayer and the study of the Scriptures but by human ingenuity, skill, and luck. I remember turning on the

TV in a motel once and seeing a program called "MacGyver." The unarmed hero is being chased through the back country of Montana by eight Arab terrorists armed to the teeth with machine guns, armored vehicles, and rockets. If I were in his shoes I would pray earnestly, and so would most people, church or not! That is the one thing MacGyver doesn't need to do, because he has ingenuity, skill, and some luck on his side. With botanical insight he creates explosive and poisonous weapons out of plants and wipes out the whole bunch without sustaining so much as a scratch! Now this may all be innocent fun in a way, but a steady diet of such material sends a subliminal message that a relationship with God is not relevant to life and its problems.

I am not suggesting that all Adventists must remove the television set from their homes. We have not as a church taken such a stand. Neither am I suggesting that there is some great Hollywood conspiracy to pervert our morals. Television simply portrays normal life as its secular creators perceive normal life. But every Christian needs to be aware that whatever gets your attention gets YOU. If you spend more time with the television set than you do in worship and Bible study, you are in great danger of drifting into secular ways of living and thinking. Especially if your profile indicates that you are vulnerable to

secularization, you need to ask yourself what kind of impact your entertainment style is having on your faith.

How Adventists Become Secular

Before we begin to talk about solutions to the problem of secularization, it may be helpful to look specifically at the process by which an Adventist can become secular. As with gaining weight and growing up secularization does not normally happen overnight, it is usually a lengthy process. Adventists rarely just get up one day and walk out of the church. Most Adventists DRIFT out of the church gradually over a period of time. They may continue to believe the basic teachings of the church, but progressively become less and less involved in religious matters on a day-to-day basis. For convenience we will call the process by which an Adventist moves from deep commitment to secular detachment secular drift.

The first step in the process of secular drift occurs in the private prayer life. In its very secrecy, private prayer is the ultimate personal barometer of spiritual commitment. Prayer is the first thing to go, and even pastors are not immune to secular drift. To be candid, I have had pastor's wives tell me, "My husband hasn't prayed in twenty years except in public."

While such cases may be extreme, few Adventists do not admit to at least some struggles in this area. Don't think that an uphill battle for a meaningful devotional life is unique to you. It is a consequence of being Adventist in a secular world. The most immediate impact of secularization is felt in the prayer life. How many of us can say that in our private lives, when no one else is looking, we walk as closely with God as our public profession might indicate?

The next area affected is usually the study life, although for some, especially pastors, Bible study can continue for a long time in the absence of prayer. But while Bible study may continue in such cases, it tends to have less and less personal significance. It is simply something one does as a ritual or because it is part of a job description. Meaningful personal study and prayer can become absent from a person's life for years and yet no one else knows, except maybe a spouse. The pastor may well be the last one to know that an elder's personal walk with God is a thing of the past.

The third step in secular drift occurs when personal standards of behavior begin to erode. This step may be the first that anyone but your spouse will notice. It is virtually impossible to detect that someone else is struggling in the inward spiritual life unless God chooses to reveal it to you. Although He has occasionally done that for me, it is not His

normal procedure. Spiritual distress sends up its first public signal when personal standards begin to slip. I realize that standards are a big issue right now in the church and I do not wish to address the issue of which standards are appropriately enforced in a local church and which are not. But as a pastor I have discovered that when a person has believed for a long time that a particular action is wrong, and suddenly acts in a contrary manner, it tends to be a red flag that screams out, "I'm in spiritual trouble."

Let me use a controversial issue among us just to make a point. Although the Seventh-day Adventist Church does not enforce any standard against the wearing of wedding rings, many Adventists sincerely believe that a wedding ring is not in harmony with God's will for them personally. I have learned from experience that when a person has believed for years that they should not wear a wedding ring and one Sabbath shows up with one, it is often an indication that the individual is in serious spiritual difficulty. This does not suggest that the wearing of a wedding ring is inherently related to spiritual difficulty. The point I am seeking to make is that whenever there is a significant change in personal standards it can flag the presence of secular drift. Other early warning signs of secularization can include such areas as the way one relates to the tithe, social drinking, and choices in entertainment.

The fourth step tends to be slippage in church attendance. You wake up one Sabbath and say, "Oh, it's such a beautiful day, let's go to the mountains." Now you may on occasion have a very good reason to skip church. But as part of the process of secular drift, slippage in church attendance becomes a very public indication that the earlier steps in the process have become quite advanced. Slippage in attendance is usually quite gradual. First you miss once a month, then it's twice a month, and then you start coming only every other month and then finally, it just seems to be more trouble than it is worth. After a while you don't even miss it.

The fifth step in becoming secular is to begin to doubt the Bible itself; to doubt the afterlife, to doubt whether there really is a God. You pick up the Bible and it is as if a voice in your head is saying, "What are you reading this for, it's just ink on a page. This is a book like any other book." That is secularism. That is the result of the natural influence of our society, which leads us away from God and a believing relationship with His Word.

The sixth and final step in the process of secular drift is an increasing distrust of institutions. This includes a lack of loyalty to religious institutions of any kind, for example, the institutions and authority structures of the Seventh-day Adventist church. "No one can

tell me what to believe. Nobody can tell me what to do." The most interesting thing about this aspect of secularization is that it is often seen most strongly in groups that are sometimes characterized as "right wing," groups which would be quick to deny that secularism could have any impact on them. In spite of this denial such groups tend to manifest some of the same consequences of secularization as their more "left-wing" counterparts. Either extreme may signal danger, but "right-wing" Christians are usually either less aware of it or less willing to admit it. Since I brought the subject up, I might as well say that I believe every church needs two wings to fly--a left wing and a right wing! The point I am attempting to make is that, in their increasing distrust of Adventist institutions, the so-called right-wing Adventist groups betray that they are far from immune to the influence of secularization.

I'll never forget the pastors' conference where I was speaking on this subject and the President of the conference was sitting to one side of the group. I made the comment, "I'll bet that your President doesn't feel like he gets half the respect from you that he gave to his conference president when he started out in the ministry." It was as if I had pressed a button: he shot up in the air and said, "You listen to this guy! You listen to this guy! He knows what he's talking about! You wouldn't believe what I have to go through. You wouldn't believe

the mail that comes across my desk. Hate! Hate! Hate! And often in four-letter words! And from people who pride themselves in their conservatism." He went on like this for about half an hour.

In my experience, what that president said was true. Some of the most conservative people now tolerate truly bizarre behavior in the name of truth. Satan has subtly spun his web of secularism in both "wings" of the church, hampering our ability to fly together, and largely preventing a positive influence on the world. We are all affected by secularization regardless of our theological preferences. The scary thing is, the less you are aware of secular drift, the more spiritually dangerous it becomes. Disrespect for religious authority, whether one recognizes it or not, is the natural outgrowth of contingency, autonomy, and relativity, the philosophical products of the secularization process.

Now secular drift does not always take place in the exact order described above. In special circumstances the order may be altered or even reversed. For example, if a person is embittered by some real or perceived action on the part of a church institution, attendance and loyalty may be affected immediately while prayer, study, and standards linger on for a great while, perhaps even a lifetime. On the other hand, a young person newly exposed to a

secular university may abandon the entire spiritual life in such a brief time that the very levels of secular drift can hardly be discerned. What I have shared here is the most typical order in which the process occurs, usually over a fairly lengthy period of time.

People often tell me that my description of secularism and secular people sounds a great deal like most Adventists today, not just the so-called "backsliders." I have never intended a deliberate comparison. But the more you become acquainted with Bible-believing Christians of other faiths, the more you suspect that Adventists may be more secularized than the average Christian. If so, secularism has wounded us more than once, it has not only made it more difficult for us to communicate with those who are not Adventists in our communities, it has sapped our own faith as well.

In the previous century Adventists saw themselves as a reform movement within the larger Christian church. Most of the people they worked with did not need an emphasis on Christian spirituality. So their emphasis was on assembling logical and reasonable arguments that would persuade people intellectually that they needed to pursue their spirituality along different lines than they had previously. In a world full of Christians, this worked out reasonably well for a generation. But by the year 1888 this approach resulted in an entire

generation of Adventists who knew the arguments but were losing touch with a personal God. And in spite of the power of the message that was born in Minneapolis in 1888, to this day Adventist distinctives tend to get more emphasis in most circles than does a living relationship with God.

In a secular world an intellectual faith is no longer sufficient to guard against secular drift. Adventists, therefore, are crying out more and more for a living walk with God, for a taste of His presence. A doctrinal construct by itself may not touch the heart. In Part Two I will try to offer some helpful insights in how to activate and personalize our walk with God in a secular world.

We may summarize the first part of the book by noting that the secular worldview has hurt Adventists in at least three distinct ways. First, it has made it more difficult to communicate what we believe to others. It has hurt our evangelistic impact in the world. Second, it has, as we have noticed, been extremely damaging to individual faith. We ourselves often feel that we are losing our way with God. And third, it has resulted in great frustration to the Adventist organizational structure. Being an administrator in the Adventist church today is, if you'll forgive the expression, a hellish experience. A president dreams of a finished

work, but everything attempted only seems to make the situation worse. One's best attempts just aren't good enough anymore. And it is secularization that has clipped the church's wings so that it works against itself.

Part Two moves us now into a discussion of the most vital issue facing us as a church, how to maintain faith in a secular world. You cannot share what you do not have. Part Three goes on to discuss how to share faith in a secular world. Because I am neither gifted nor experienced in administration, I hesitate to say a great deal about the administrative consequences of recent developments. Nevertheless, my study and experimentation has raised ideas that may be helpful to those in administration. A section in the Appendix to this book offers some tentative suggestions on how to more effectively administer the church in a secular world.