



Secularism vs Biblical Secularity

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Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology

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Abstract:

This book of essays and discussion explores the idea that the “blame” for secularism resides at least in part in our failure to live biblical secularity. How does secularism differ radically from Biblical secularity? The role of “unbridled consumption” was questioned as a contributing factor to the growth of secularism. These proceedings can be summarized by St. Paul’s statement to the Corinthians: “We all have knowledge; yes, that is so, but knowledge gives self-importance; it is love that makes the building grow.”

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Foreword:

But God raised him high
and gave him the name
above all other names
so that all beings
in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld,
should bend the knee at the name of Jesus
and that every tongue should acclaim
Jesus Christ as Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

That, essentially, is the theme of this volume. In one way or another, the conversation always came back to the idea that the “blame” for secularism resides at least in part in our failure to live biblical secularity.

In deference to, or maybe in honor of, the physicians among us, we talked about diagnosis and prognosis. What is secularism? What, indeed, is secularity? How sick are we? How did we get this way? What has been the progress of our “disease”? What can we do about it? What should we do about it? Where is the disease most acute in our society? In ourselves? These are the basic questions we wrestled with over the weekend. In the end

we did not develop any “how to” answers. We did learn from each other and, hopefully, encouraged each other to face these issues and help our own particular communities and constituencies grapple with them.

Dr. Christopher Kaiser prepared a splendid paper on many aspects of the growth of secularism in the West over the last millennium or so. From his presentation it is clear that secularism as we know it is the culmination of much time and many forces. It did not spring full blown from the head of Zeus, nor can it all be blamed on our failure to be “secular” in the terms of biblical mandates.

Dr. Richard Blackwell showed that the tensions between faith and science did not all arise from conflicts of ideas and methods of approach. There is clearly a volitional aspect in every dealing between faith and science. Much, or at least a significant part, of what conflict there is occurs because of a “clash of wills.” Dr. Mandeville, in a quite different way, led us in much the same direction in considering the arts. And, although there was no cooperation in the writings of the essays, Father Akers clearly delineated this clash in his approach to politics.

Finally, both Dr. Pellegrino and Mr. Ball showed the results of the clash of faith and secularism in medicine and law, respectively. Mr. Ball’s essay and Dr. Pellegrino’s interventions leave no doubt that we are facing a severe crisis in our academic, social and political lives not to mention our religious lives.

There was the inevitable academic disagreement about the nature and extent of secularism, discussion about the difference between secularization (process) and secularism (final state). One of the disappointments of the meeting, at least to the editors, was a lack of greater deliberation on the nature of biblical secularity and its demands on Christian living. A more in-depth consideration of secularity will have to wait for some future meeting. The Board and Staff assure you that this meeting will take place “in due time.”

Many salient remarks were made during the discussion, each demanding further thought and living. It is a commonplace that Jesus Christ is Creator, Redeemer and Lord of history. It is a commonplace of thought. Is it a commonplace of our living in our local community, university, laboratory, hospital, law office or wherever we are? There were several rather pessimistic reports on the growth of secularism in colleges and universities. It is fully worth noting that this pessimism is most pronounced among those teaching in or associated with church-related schools. On the contrary, those connected with secular and state schools were more optimistic, noting that there is a feeling of “something missing” in the secular world, something to be sought.

Though pessimism manifested itself, it was not a “pessimism of despair”; rather, it seemed to be a “pessimism of hope,” if that is not a contradiction. It was more than a nostalgic look back at the way things used to be. It was more a determination to look soberly at the state of our institutions, assess the problems and do what we can to change them.

Dr. Roselyn Schmitt made an intervention at the very end of the meeting in which she noted that “unbridled consumption” was part of our secularism. Unfortunately, it was too late to pursue this topic. Consumption is indeed part of the problem; whether it is a cause or an effect or some of both is difficult to decide. Nonetheless, it is a theme worth pursuing in our private and in our public lives. It is certainly something that a Christian should always have in mind.

One point, made over and over again in many different contexts, during the weekend was that secularism is a problem for the whole Christian people. It is not an apostolate or ministry of the clergy so much as it is the task of the laity. It was noted several times that we, as participators in the life of Christ in baptism, need no one’s permission to carry out our obligation to preach the Word. We are the “preachers” of the Word far more in how we live than in what we say. Someone observed during the meeting that what we do is far louder than what we say. In the olden days we used to call it good example. Whatever we want to call it now, people are more interested in what we do than in what we say, in how we love more than in what we think. Christianity’s proof is more in living than in thinking or speaking.

Perhaps, the meeting can be summarized by St. Paul's statement to the Corinthians:

. . . We all have knowledge; yes, that is so, but knowledge gives self-importance it is love that makes the building grow.

In Christ, we are that love, God's gift in history to his creation.

We want to thank both Mr. Ball and Dr. Pellegrino for their contributions to this workshop. Unfortunately, Mr. Ball's court schedule prevented him from attending. We are grateful for his time and effort in providing us with an essay on secularism in law. Dr. Pellegrino, on the other hand, was able to attend the meeting, but his schedule prevented him from preparing a paper for the workshop. We are indebted to him for his interventions.

We wish to thank the other essayists Dr. Kaiser, Dr. Blackwell, Dr. Mandeville and Father Akers and Dr. Childs for their pre-papers, which were essential to the development of the weekend's agenda. We thank them for their papers and their interventions into the discussion. We would also thank Fr. Donald Keefe and Judge Niemira for their willingness literally, on the spur of the moment to develop some aspects of Mr. Ball's paper.

Finally, we thank the participants for their thoughtful attendance, their patience and their wisdom. Although we have not attempted a summary or synthesis of their contributions this will, we hope, come later it is clear that they have contributed a great deal of their knowledge and concern to our growth into the Lord Jesus.

Finally, gratitude is due to Sr. Marianne Postiglione, RSM and Sr. Rose Marie Pryzbylowicz, OSF for all their work to ensure the smooth running of the meeting. ITEST would be very hard-pressed to find better support and greater energy in arranging for such weekends.

Our gratitude goes out to all of the above and to you, the readers of this volume. We hope it helps "the building grow."

Robert Brungs, SJ
Director: ITEST
August, 1994



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