

Life in a Secular Culture – Christian Worldview Living in a Secular World

Rick Wade looks at the similarities and the differences between the views offered by our secular culture and a Christian, biblical worldview. Understanding the significant differences will help us choose to think biblically about situations we face in our secular society.

We get our cues about how to live from the society in which we live. Maybe I should say the societies in which we live since, in this day and age, we can find ourselves moving back and forth between very different worlds. Christians belong to the mini-societies of our churches which might extend beyond the walls of our church to define our friendships, our social lives. We also live and work and play in a secular society which is sending us messages constantly about how to live, how to talk, what to wear; in short, what is important in life.

Secular means that which is defined apart from anything religious. Peter Berger, a sociologist, put it this way: By secularization we mean the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols... It affects the totality of cultural life and of ideation. In other words, secularism works its fingers into all of life, including the ideas we hold. Secularization also refers the consciousness of individuals who decreasingly view the world with a religious perspective. So the influence of religion declines in society and in us individually as we think about life with lessor with no reference to God. [{1}](#)

Without God shaping its vision, what does our society teach us about how to think and act? Think about it. How are we shaped

by the culture in which we live? Just identifying a few things can be a start to combating the corrosive effects of secularism in our lives.

Here are a few things that come to mind.

My society tells me that *my* experience and *my* opinion are all-important (and it thinks of opinion as a purely subjective thing). No one else has the right to set the rules for me. And, if there's a God (and most Americans believe there is), He (or She or It) pretty much leaves us to make our own choices. So I am supposed to refer first to my own tastes and desires when making choices. And that's what really happens when I'm not thinking about it. Vocation, where I live, what music I listen to, what church I attend—it's all up to me. Yes, I know that there are a number of legitimate reasons we make choices that are different from those others make. The point is, should our individual tastes and desires be our primary criteria?

I noted that my society tells me my own experience and opinion is all-important. It's interesting, though, that it wants to decide what choices I can have! We'll see that in some of the next examples.

My society tells me how to dress. We're told that we should express ourselves, our own individuality, in how we dress. The result? People wearing spandex or spandex-tight clothes who have no business doing so; young men wearing their pants down around their thighs; young women showing us all the contours of their bodies. And we're supposed to be expressing ourselves? Looks like a whole lot of conformity to me. Even worse, while we're told to express ourselves, clothes designers and stores are the ones who decide what our choices are. I hear this most often from young women. Their choice in clothing is either sexy or dressing like mom.

My society tells me that I *deserve* good things, so I spend

money on things I might not even *want*, much less really *deserve*. Gratitude for what we have isn't high on the list of virtues these days. Gimme more . . . because I *deserve* it (and I'll go into debt to get it)!

My society teaches me what is funny. The greatest influences on my sense of humor were Bill Cosby and Robin Williams. Who else remembers Cosby talking about smearing Jell-O on the floor of his house to protect him from the monster, or about having his tonsils removed? And when *Mork and Mindy* was all the rage in the 70s, I'd gather with my friends each week to get another dose of Williams's crazy performances.

Now understand that I'm not saying it's necessarily wrong to model our humor on others, even on people who aren't Christians. But what is the character of our humor today? The humor I see routinely on TV and movies is sarcastic put-downs. That's become so much the norm that if anyone objects to it, they're made fun of for being so touchy!

My society also tells me my religion isn't all that important. It has its place, of course, but that place shouldn't be public, at least not until there's some horrible disaster and prayer becomes acceptable. So religion is to stay out of politics and social issues, but is permitted in tragedies such as the recent mine disaster in Utah. To *whom* we pray is irrelevant, of course. You have your God and I have mine.

One place where I see the insignificance of religion in our cultural attitude is on web sites that ask for information about me including my vocation. Religion isn't typically an option (and I'm being generous in saying typically; I can't remember *any* giving me that option). My only choice is Other. The result is that in public I tend to fall into line and keep my religious convictions out of the conversation. Even in our *private* lives religion should mind its manners. One shouldn't be fanatical, you know.

Unfortunately, polls indicate that Christian beliefs are apparently insignificant to *Christians* as well with respect to how they live. The polls I read indicate that people claiming to be born-again don't live any differently than their non-Christian neighbors. We've let the segmenters win. Keep your religion in your church, we're told, and we do just that.

My society tells me that economics is all-important. I wonder if there's anyone else out there who wishes that in a State of the Union address a president would say something like, Our economy is strong, but morally we're in rough shape. I'm not going to hold my breath waiting for that! It's the economy, stupid, was a phrase heard often in Bill Clinton's campaign against President Bush in 92. Well, the economy is important, of course. But is it the *most* important thing in individual and social life? Is the U.S. doing just fine as long as the economy is strong?

My society tells us we're free to do what we want in our sexual relationships, that we aren't to be instructed by archaic religious notions. But then, of course, we're told what is expected by society. We've been taught well that a kiss is followed immediately by a romp in the bed. How many times have you seen on TV or in the movies where a man and woman fall into that first embrace and *don't* immediately fall onto the couch or bed or floor? I think of the scene in the movie *While You Were Sleeping* where a woman is astonished to hear that a man and woman have decided to wait till marriage to have sex. Yes, we're free to do whatever we please (the church has nothing to say about such things—that is, as long as what we please doesn't include abstaining and we don't champion monogamy as loudly as homosexuals champion their, um, lifestyle.

My society tells me what constitutes success. Although you can often see stories through the media about the great things average people do, you also are kept up-to-date on the life and times of Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan, and soccer star

David Beckman. In minute detail. Day after day. Do I really *care* about the latest entry in Rosie O'Donnell's blog? No disrespect intended, but I'm not sure why Ms. O'Donnell's opinions and comings and goings are important enough to make the headlines. Success is doing one's best to accomplish the tasks God has given or those clearly in keeping with the commands and wisdom of God.

My society tells me that objections to crudeness are puritanical; that manners are relics of a by-gone era (since life is all about *me*, while manners are about *others*).

It tells women that the notion of being under a man's headship or devoting herself to her children above her own interests is a throw-back to oppressive days.

It tells parents that they need to let their children determine their own values.

I could go on and on. My point in all this isn't mainly to bemoan the state of our society, but to consider how our secular society tells *us* how to live, and how much of its instruction we swallow and follow without even realizing it. We are definitely going to be shaped by our society, but that shaping shouldn't be mindless.

A few decades ago Christian writers made much of the idea that there shouldn't be a division between the sacred and the secular, that all of life should be infused with the sacred. Our society works against that. And quite frankly, I think the message has been lost to a significant extent in the church. We like our things, so without even thinking about it, we conform our notions of the sacred to the secular. We make Christianity relevant by adjusting it to our circumstances and desires.

Rather than seeing the secular world, the world we can see and touch, through a sacred lens, we're more apt to look at the sacred through a secular lens. May God help us to see all of

life—including our clothes, our humor, our entertainment, our vocation, our relationships, and all the rest—through the eyes of God, as belonging to Him, and give us the resolve to bring them under His lordship.

Note

1. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969), 107-108.

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Life on Another Planet-Just Around the Corner?

In late April [2007], a group of European scientists made an announcement that created quite a stir in the mainstream media. For the first time, a planet which could potentially support life has been discovered outside of our solar system. One newspaper headline read “Scientists find potentially habitable planet—Discovery a big step in search for life in universe”[\[1\]](#). Such an announcement raises important questions:

Is this newly discovered planet really a likely host for life?

Does this discovery imply that the earth is not unique in its ability to support complex life as promoted by most proponents of Intelligent Design?

If this planet does (or did) host life, would that detract from or support our belief in a transcendent creator?

By considering these questions, we realize that this discovery

provides more support for the theory of Intelligent Design than for Darwinism.

A Potentially Habitable Planet?

This planet orbits the red dwarf star, Gliese 581 and has been designated as 581 c. It cannot be seen from earth. It was detected by examining the effect its gravity had on the light emanating from its star. Based on that data, these scientists projected that this planet may have temperatures between 32 and 104 degrees. With this temperature range and at 1.5 to 2 times the diameter of earth, it might be able to hold liquid water. In addition, its red dwarf star appears to be quite old and stable, suggesting that its planets may have been around for billions of years. Thus, some of the characteristics necessary for a naturalistic explanation of life may be associated with this planet.

However, a habitable planet requires much more than “just add water”^{2} plus time. Further analysis of Gliese 581 c indicates that it probably has many characteristics unfavorable to life. Examples include:

It does not rotate around its axis, meaning one side is always in the sun while the other side remains in constant darkness. Some scientists are now suggesting that its surface temperatures will be much hotter than the original estimates.

Since it orbits a red star with lower levels of electromagnetic radiation than our sun, this greatly limits the effectiveness of photosynthetic reactions.

Uniqueness of Earth

On the [Reasons To Believe](#) Web site^{3}, astrophysicist Hugh Ross has posted several articles identifying characteristics of our galaxy and earth that are necessary for life. In one paper^{4}, he estimates the probability of the universe having

a planet like earth exhibiting all 322 characteristics identified as critical for life. A high level analysis of the list in his paper indicates that Gliese 581 c may satisfy 112 of these characteristics (primarily because it exists in the same universe and galaxy as earth). Gliese 581 c is the first out of 220 planets identified outside our solar system that exists in the habitable temperature zone.[{5}](#) That leaves at least 210 questions unanswered such as:

Does it have a large enough moon to create tidal patterns?

Does it have just the right size, protecting planets to reduce the number of asteroid hits?

Does it have the right thickness of crust?

Does it have the right atmosphere?

Does it have the right mixture of minerals?

Using the probability estimates for each remaining characteristic, a conservative estimate for the probability that this planet could support life is 1 in 10^{199} (1 with 199 zeros after it). Please remember that this extremely low probability (essentially zero) is simply to have a planet that is habitable. It does not include the similarly minuscule probability of even the simplest life forms arising from inorganic matter. As renowned astrophysicist Stephen Hawking stated, "I expect there will be planets like Earth, but whether they have life is another question. We haven't been visited by little green men yet."[{6}](#) Since we can be virtually certain that this planet does not support any life, we may not want to spend the effort to travel to it—especially, when with current technology, it would take over 400,000 years to reach this planet.

Life on another planet—What would it mean?

Would finding life on another planet be a victory for Darwinism and proponents of naturalistic evolution as the sole force behind life as we know it? Quite the contrary! Given the extremely small probability of finding another habitable planet in our universe, multiplied by the equally small probability of life generating spontaneously on a habitable planet, finding life on another planet would have to be considered a miracle.

In other words, finding even the simplest life forms on another planet would greatly increase the scientific evidence for intelligent design. Only a transcendent intelligent designer would be able to overcome those long odds to create life in multiple places in the universe. The theological implications of such a discovery would depend upon the nature of the life forms and will be left for future ponderings.

Bottom Line

The discovery of Gliese 581 c is an interesting event in astronomy which, if anything, further supports our view that the earth is very likely unique in its ability to support complex life. If life is ever discovered on another planet, it will further strengthen the position of intelligent design as the best theory to explain the evidence.

Notes

1. *Dallas Morning News*, April 24, 2007.
2. Jay Richards, Acton Institute, formerly with The Discovery Institute, the institutional home of the Intelligent Design movement.
3. www.reasons.org

4. Hugh Ross, "Probability for Life on Earth, 2004 April Update", Reasons to Believe, 2004.

5. It is interesting to note that Ross's paper allocated a probability of 1 in 1,000 to that same factor, which is the same order of magnitude as 1 out of 220. So if we used 1 out of 220 instead, the calculated probability would be less than 1 in 10¹⁹⁸.

6. *Dallas Morning News*, April 24, 2007.

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Your Money, Your Life or Your Wine

Could offering a cup of human kindness save your life sometime? It helped protect guests from a menacing gunman at a recent Washington, DC, dinner gathering.

Comedian Jack Benny had a famous skit in which an armed robber pointed a gun at Benny, whose comedy often poked fun at his own miserly show business persona. In the routine, Benny told the robber to put the gun down. The robber persisted. "Your money or your life!" demanded the crook, irritated by the delay. "I'm thinking it over," deadpanned Benny.[{1}](#)

Quick thinking helped save the DC dinner guests.

Give me your money!

The Washington Post reports[{2}](#) that some friends had enjoyed steak and shrimp at a DC home and were sitting on the back patio sipping wine around midnight. A hooded gunman slipped in

through an open gate and held a pistol to a fourteen-year-old girl's head. "Give me your money, or I'll start shooting," demanded the intruder.

The guests—including the girl's parents—froze. Then one adult—Cristina "Cha Cha" Rowan—had an idea.

"We were just finishing dinner," Rowan said to the uninvited guest. "Why don't you have a glass of wine with us?"

The robber sipped their French wine and said, "Damn, that's good wine."

Michael Rabdau, the girl's father, offered the man the glass. Rowan offered the bottle. The man—with hood down, by this point—sipped more wine and sampled some Camembert cheese. Then he stowed the gun in his pocket and admitted, "I think I may have come to the wrong house. I'm sorry. Can I get a hug?"

Rowan hugged the man. Then Rabdau, his wife and the other two guests each hugged him. The man asked for a group hug; the five adults complied. He left with the wine glass. There were no injuries, no theft. The stunned guests entered the house and stared at each other silently. Police came. Investigators discovered the empty and unbroken wine glass on the ground in a nearby alley.

"I was definitely expecting there would be some kind of casualty," Rabdau recalled, according to the *Post*. "He was very aggressive at first; then it turned into a love fest. I don't know what it was."

"There was this degree of disbelief and terror at the same time," Rabdau observed. "Then it miraculously just changed. His whole emotional tone turned—like, we're one big happy family now. I thought: Was it the wine? Was it the cheese?" The entire encounter lasted about ten minutes. DC police chalked it up as strange but true.

Gentle Answers

An old Jewish proverb says, “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” {3} I suspect her friends are extremely grateful that Cha Cha Rowan had the presence of mind to offer a gentle reply to the intruder’s demands.

Sometimes the psychological approach can deter disaster. Kindness and hospitality often can defuse tension and help open hearts and minds. Was the robber lonely? Feeling sad or rejected? Weary of his lifestyle? Hungry for acceptance and friendship? Rowan and her friends struck an emotional chord that resonated, apparently deeply.

Brute force and overwhelming arguments are common cultural responses to danger or opposition and, of course, theyre sometimes necessary. Most of us are glad Hitler was defeated and that legislators outlawed slavery. But could gentle answers improve any disputes—or families, marriages, workplaces, political relationships—that you’ve seen?

Notes

1. George Grow, “Funnyman Jack Benny Won Hearts Mainly by Making Fun of Himself,” Voice of America News, 21 May 2005; at www.voanews.com/specialenglish/archive/2005-05/2005-05-21-voa1.cfm (accessed July 19, 2007).
2. Allison Klein, A Gate-Crasher’s Change of Heart, Washington Post, July 13, 2007; B01; at <http://tinyurl.com/2q9mjc> (accessed July 17, 2007).
3. Proverbs 15:1 NIV.

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