

# Secularization and the Church in Europe

*Christian beliefs and church attendance are playing a much smaller role in Europeans' lives in general than in the past. Rick Wade gives a snapshot of the place and nature of Christianity in Europe.*

At the end of a talk about the state of the evangelical mind in America, the subject turned to Europe, and a man said with great confidence, "The churches in Europe are all empty!" I've heard that said before. It makes for a good missions sermon; however, it doesn't quite do justice to the situation. Not *all* the churches in Europe are empty! The situation isn't like in Dallas, Texas, where churches dot the landscape, but there are thriving churches across the continent.



That said, however, there is more than just a grain of truth in the claim. Church attendance in Europe *is* down. Traditional Christian beliefs *are* less widely held.

It's important to know what the situation is in Europe for a few reasons.

First, we have a tendency to write Europe off in a way we don't other parts of the world. The church is struggling there, but it isn't a lost cause by any means! Maybe we can even *learn* from the thinking and life's experience of believers across the Atlantic.

Second, learning about the church around the world is good because it broadens our understanding of the interaction of Christianity and society. This should be of interest to us here in America.

Let's look at a few numbers in the area of church attendance.

To provide a contrast with the situation today, the best estimate for church attendance in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century was between forty and sixty percent of the adult population.[{1}](#) By contrast, in 2007, ten percent attended church at least weekly. About a quarter of those (about two million people) self-identify as evangelicals.[{2}](#) Although there has been large growth in so-called “new churches,” that growth hasn’t offset the loss across other denominations, especially the Church of England.

What about some other countries? In 2004, Gallup reported that “weekly attendance at religious services is below 10% in France and Germany, while in Belgium, the Netherlands, [and] Luxembourg . . . between 10% and 15% of citizens are regular churchgoers. . . . Only in Roman Catholic Ireland do a majority of residents (54%) still go to church weekly.”[{3}](#)

As we’ll see later, reduced numbers in church doesn’t mean all religious belief—even Christian—is lost.

## **The Golden Age of Faith**

There is a story of the prominence and demise of religion in Europe that has become standard fare for understanding the history of Christianity in the modern world. The story goes that Europe was once a Christian civilization; that everyone was a Christian, and that the state churches ensured that society as a whole was Christian. This was the so-called “golden age of faith.” With the shift in thinking in the Enlightenment which put man at the center of knowledge, and which saw the rise of science, it became clear to some that religion was really just a form of superstition that gave pre-modern people an explanation of the world in which they lived and gave them hope.[{4}](#)

This story has come under a lot of fire in recent decades.[{5}](#) Although the churches had political and social power, there

was no uniform religious belief across Europe. In fact, it's been shown that there was a significant amount of paganism and folk magic mixed in with Christian beliefs.[{6}](#) Many priests had the barest notions of Christian theology; a lot of them couldn't even read.[{7}](#) Sociologist Philip Gorski says that it's more accurate to call it an Age of Magic or an Age of Ritual than an Age of Belief.[{8}](#)

On the other side of this debate are scholars such as Steve Bruce who say that, no matter the content or nature of religious belief in the Middle Ages, people were still *religious* even if not uniformly *Christian*; they believed in the supernatural and their religious beliefs colored their entire lives. "The English peasants may have often disappointed the guardians of Christian orthodoxy," Bruce writes, "but they were indubitably religious."[{9}](#)

So what changed? Was there a loss of Christianity or a loss of religion in general, or just some kind of shift? Historian Timothy Larson believes that what has been lost is Christendom.[{10}](#) The term *Christendom* is typically used to refer to the West when it was dominated by Christianity. The change wasn't really from religion to irreligion but from the dominance of Christianity to its demise as a dominant force.

Religion has come back with significant force in recent decades even in such deeply secular countries as France, primarily because of the influx of Muslims.[{11}](#) Although the state Christian churches are faltering, some founded by immigrants are doing well, such as those founded by Afro-Caribbean immigrants in England. It seems that critics sounded the death knell on religion too soon.

## European Distinctives

Although Christian belief is on the demise in general in Europe, the institutional church—the state church

specifically—still has a valuable place in society.

In Europe's past, the church was a major part of people's lives. Everyone was baptized, married, and buried in the church. That tradition is still such a part of the social psyche that people fully expect that the church will be there for them even if they don't attend. Sociologist Grace Davie describes the church in this respect as a *public utility*. "A public utility," she writes, "is available to the population as a whole at the point of need and is funded through the tax system."[\[12\]](#) Fewer people are being married in churches now, and far fewer are being baptized. However, there's still a sense of need for the church at the time of death along with the expectation that it will be there for them.

Another term that characterizes religion in Europe is *vicarious religion*. Vicarious religion is "religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who . . . understand [and] approve of what the minority is doing." Church leaders are expected to believe certain things, perform religious rituals, and embody a high moral code. "English bishops," Davie writes, "are rebuked . . . if they doubt in public; it is, after all, their 'job' to believe." She reports an incident where a bishop was thought to have spoken derogatorily about the resurrection of Jesus. He was "widely pilloried" for that, she writes. Soon after his consecration as bishop, his church was struck by lightning. That was seen by some as a rebuke by God![\[13\]](#)

Another indicator of the importance of the church in European life is the fact that, in some countries, people still pay church tax, even countries that are very secular. Germany is one example. People can opt out, but a surprisingly high number don't, including some who are not religiously affiliated. Reasons include the possibility of needing the church sometime later in life, having a place to provide moral guidance for children, and the church's role in positively influencing the moral fabric of society in general.[\[14\]](#)

## From Doctrine to Spirituality

I described above two concepts that characterize religious life in parts of Europe: *public utility* and *vicarious religion*. There's a third phrase sociologists use which points to the shift in emphasis from what one gets through the institutional church to personal spiritual experience. The phrase is "believing without belonging."

Sociologist Peter Berger believes that, as America is less religious than it seems, Europe is less secular than it seems. "A lot goes on under the radar," he writes.[\[15\]](#)

A phrase often heard *there* is heard more and more frequently in the States: "I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual." This could mean the person is into New Age thinking, or is interested in more conventional religion but doesn't feel at home in a church or in organized religion, or just prefers to choose what to believe him- or herself. A term some use to characterize this way of thinking is "patchwork religion."

One frequently finds a greater acceptance of religion in Europe when religion in *general* is the subject and not particular, creedal religions. Davie notes that "[generally speaking] if you ask European populations . . . do you believe in God, and you're not terribly specific about the God in question, you'll get about 70 percent saying yes, depending where you are. If you say, do you believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God, you'll get a much lower number. In other words, if you turn your question into a creedal statement, the percentages go down." A "cerebral" kind of belief doesn't hold much appeal to the young. The essence of religious experience isn't so much what you learn as it is simply taking part. "It's the fact that you're lifted out of yourself that counts."[\[16\]](#)

The loss of authority in the state church hasn't resulted in the triumph of secular rationalism among young people, which

is rather surprising. They experiment with religious beliefs. "The rise occurred right across Europe," Davie notes, "but is most marked in those parts of Europe where the institutional churches are at their weakest." This isn't seen, however, "where the church is still strong and seen as a disciplinary force and is therefore rejected by young people."[\[17\]](#)

## Some Closing Thoughts

Allow me to make some observations about the subject of secularization and the church in Europe.

Here are a few things to keep in mind as we face a Western culture that is increasingly hostile to the Gospel. First, we routinely hear the charge from people that religious people are living in the past, that they need to catch up to modern times. Such people simply assume as obviously true the long-held theory that secularization necessarily follows from modernization. This theory is sharply disputed today. Europe's history isn't the history of the rest of the world. Modernization appears in different forms around the world, including some that have room for religious belief and practice. America is a prime example. It isn't the backward exception to the rule, as haughty critics would have us believe. Some say it's *Europe* that is the exception with its strong secularity.[\[18\]](#) In fact, I think a case can be made that the modern propensity to separate our spiritual side from our material one is artificial; it violates our nature. But that's a subject for another time. What we can be sure of is that the condescending attitude of people who want Christians to catch up to modern times is without basis. There is no necessary connection between modernity and secularity.[\[19\]](#)

A second thing to keep in mind is that the church doesn't require a Christian society around it in order to grow. Christianity didn't have its beginnings in a Christian society, but it grew nonetheless. The wide-spread social

acceptance of Christian beliefs and morality is not the power of God unto salvation. It is the word of the cross.

Third, religion per se will not disappear because we are made in God's image and He has put eternity in our hearts (Eccl. 3:11). Christianity in particular will not die either, for the One who rose from the dead said even the gates of hell won't prevail against it (a much more serious adversary than the new atheists!).

What should we do? The same things Christians have always been called to do: continue in sound, biblical teaching, and learn and practice consistent Christian living. It is the way we live that, for many people, makes our beliefs plausible in the first place. And proclaim the gospel. Despite any constraints society may put on us, the Word of God is not bound.

## Notes

1. Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 63-64.
2. Tearfund, "Churchgoing in the UK," available on the Web at [www.tearfund.org/webdocs/Website/News/Final%20churchgoing%20report.pdf](http://www.tearfund.org/webdocs/Website/News/Final%20churchgoing%20report.pdf).
3. Robert Manchin, "Religion in Europe: Trust Not Filling the Pews," Sept. 21, 2004, [www.gallup.com/poll/13117/religion-europe-trust-filling-pews.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/13117/religion-europe-trust-filling-pews.aspx).
4. Kevin M. Schulz, "Secularization: A Bibliographic Essay," *The Hedgehog Review*, vol. 8, nos.1-2 (Spring/Summer 2006), 171. Online at [www.virginia.edu/iasc/HHR\\_Archives/AfterSecularization/8.12RBibliography.pdf](http://www.virginia.edu/iasc/HHR_Archives/AfterSecularization/8.12RBibliography.pdf).
5. Sociologist Rodney Stark is one of the most prominent doubters of secularization theory. See his "Secularization, R.I.P. – rest in peace," *Sociology of Religion*, Fall, 1999, available online at [findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0S0R/is\\_3\\_60/ai\\_57533381/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0S0R/is_3_60/ai_57533381/).



6. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, England: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), 41; quoted in Philip S. Gorski, "Historicizing the Secularization Debate: Church, State, and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, ca. 1300 to 1700," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (Feb. 2000), 144.
7. Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P."
8. Gorski, "Historicizing the Secularization Debate": 146.
9. Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 47.
10. Timothy Larsen, "Dechristendomization As an Alternative to Secularization: Theology, History, and Sociology in Conversation," *Pro Ecclesia*, Vol. XV, No. 3.
11. See Jean-Paul Willaime, "The Cultural Turn in the Sociology of Religion in France," *Sociology of Religion* 65, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 373-389.
12. Grace Davie, "Is Europe an Exceptional Case?" *The Hedgehog Review* 8, nos.1-2 (Spring/Summer 2006): 27. Online at [www.virginia.edu/iasc/HHR\\_Archives/AfterSecularization/8.12DDavie.pdf](http://www.virginia.edu/iasc/HHR_Archives/AfterSecularization/8.12DDavie.pdf).
13. Grace Davie, "Is Europe an Exceptional Case?": 24-26.
14. See Peter Berger, Grace Davie, and Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations* (Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 15.
15. Charles T. Mathewes, "An Interview with Peter Berger," *The Hedgehog Review*, vol. 8, nos.1-2 (Spring/Summer 2006):155. Online at [www.virginia.edu/iasc/HHR\\_Archives/AfterSecularization/8.12PBerger.pdf](http://www.virginia.edu/iasc/HHR_Archives/AfterSecularization/8.12PBerger.pdf)
16. "Believing Without Belonging: Just How Secular Is Europe?" A discussion with Grace Davie at the Pew Forum's biannual Faith Angle Conference on religion, politics and public life, December 2005. [pewforum.org/events/?EventID=97](http://pewforum.org/events/?EventID=97).
17. Ibid.
18. Berger, Davie, and Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe?*.
19. Sociologist Christian Smith edited a volume titled *The*



*Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life* (UC Press, 2003) in which the case was argued that secularization became so powerful here because of a concerted effort by people who wanted it, not because of some natural, teleological progression.

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# Restoring the Sacred

## The Loss of the Sacred

There are several ways to define modernism. One way is this: modernism was an attempt to remove the sacred from society and to replace it with a mechanistic naturalism. Everything was to be understood and explained in scientific terms.

The late philosopher of religion Mircea Eliade wrote this:

The completely profane world, the wholly desacralized cosmos [that is, the cosmos with the sacred removed] is a recent discovery in the history of the human spirit . . . desacralization pervades the entire experience of the nonreligious man of modern societies.[\[1\]](#)

*Profane*, here, is another word for *secular*. It is contrasted with *sacred*. My *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *sacred* as “connected with God or a god or dedicated to a religious purpose and so deserving veneration.” It is closely related to *sanctified* which means “holy” which means “dedicated or consecrated to God.”[\[2\]](#)

Ours is obviously a secular society. Everything open for

public discussion is to be explained with no reference to the sacred; there is no acknowledged connection to God. It seems the only time the sacred makes it into the news is when there is a tragedy and reporters talk about people praying, or when a famous religious person, such as the Pope, dies.

Once upon a time in the West, our society operated as though God mattered. Now, such views are considered quaint relics of the past which shouldn't be allowed to invade the public square. The late Christopher Reeve in a speech about stem cell research at Yale University said that "our government should not be influenced by any religion when matters of public policy are being debated."[\[3\]](#) Religion is to be a private affair only.

The late theologian and missionary Lesslie Newbigin, after spending four decades in India, said this about the West:

The sharp line which modern Western culture has drawn between religious affairs and secular affairs is itself one of the most significant peculiarities of our culture, and would be incomprehensible to the vast majority of people.[\[4\]](#)

Why should this matter to us? Among other reasons is the simple unfairness in a democracy of "religious people" not being able to bring *their* worldviews into public debates while the nonreligious can. I can think of two explanations for this idea. First, it's thought that religion necessarily creates unreasonable *bias* whereas irreligion doesn't. Religious belief removes our ability to be objective, it is thought. People who think this way need to catch up with current philosophy! There are no value-free facts, and no perspectives that do not begin with unprovable assumptions.[\[5\]](#)

Second, it's thought that religious biases are likely to be *destructive* because of their "intolerant" character. This is a popular mantra today; it is trotted out with all the authority of unassailable fact. Didn't the events of 9/11 prove it?

Responding to the observation that people see those horrible events as illustrating what religious monotheism causes, writer Os Guinness noted that “In the last century, more people were killed by secularist intellectuals, in the name of secularist ideologies, than in all the religious persecutions and repressions in Western history combined.”[\[6\]](#) If the twentieth century is a good witness, there is greater danger from secular powers than from religious ones.

Beyond that, though, is a problem Christians have individually and corporately. When so much of our time is spent in a realm in which our Christian beliefs aren’t welcomed, we begin to forget their importance for all of life. So we start thinking from a secular perspective. In addition, we even find it easier to let our Christian beliefs be shaped by non-Christian thinking.

In her latest book, *Total Truth*,[\[7\]](#) Nancy Pearcey has reminded us of the importance of destroying the divide between the sacred and the secular in our thinking. But it can’t stop with our thinking; the sacred needs to be an integral part of our lives. As part of that process it would be good to be reminded of just what we mean by the sacred.

## Sacredness

As noted earlier, *sacred* means to be dedicated or devoted to God. It involves a separation of purpose: something is separated from the use of the world for the use of God.

The idea of sacredness is reflected in a number of ways in the various religions of the world. There are holy books and places and festivals. The sacred is reflected in religious architecture. Islamic mosques, for example, are designed to point people to Allah. Muslim writer Hwaan Irfan speaks of “sacred geometry [which] is the science of creating a space, writing or other artwork, which reminds one of the greatness

of Allah.”{8} In the past, Christianity too, of course, was conscious of the sacred in its architecture. Medieval era churches were built for the purpose of “signifying the sacred,” of reflecting something about God. The furnishings of churches were designed to aid in this focus.

## Old Testament

What does the Bible tell us about sacredness or holiness?{9} In the Old Testament it refers primarily to God. “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts” Isaiah said (6:3). In Old Testament times, God showed Himself to be set apart from His created order through such events as Moses being told to remove his shoes before the burning bush because he was standing on holy ground (Ex. 3:5). Later, at Sinai, God called Moses up onto a mountain to teach him His laws, far away from the people signifying His separateness from a fallen world (Ex. 19). His separation from unclean things was reflected also through His laws (e.g., Lev. 11:43, 44). Anyone who would approach God, who would “ascend His holy hill,” according to the Psalmist, must have “clean hands and a pure heart” (24:4).

The word *holy* was applied to other things that were separated by God, such as the nation of Israel (Ex. 19:6; Lev. 20:26), the Sabbath (Ex. 16:23), the tabernacle with both the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place (Ex. 26:33), and the various feasts and special observations, such as the Day of Atonement (Ex. 30:10). This even extended to objects used for worship. For example, there was special incense that was too holy to be used by people for themselves (Ex. 30:37). In the Old Testament, then, we find God using things and events to teach His people about His holy nature.

## New Testament

What do we find in the New Testament? Again, the primary reference is to God. All three members of the Trinity are said to be holy. Peter repeated God’s admonition recorded in Lev. 11:44—“Be holy because I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16). He called

Jesus “the Holy One of God” (Jn. 6:69). And, of course, the Spirit is called the Holy Spirit (e.g., Lk. 2:26).

Whereas in the Old Testament, God’s separateness from creation and the unclean was the emphasis, in the New Testament the moral dimension comes to the fore (although the moral wasn’t absent from the Old Testament). In the Old Testament the concern is more with external matters; in the New Testament the focus is on the internal. The writer of Hebrews says we were “made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (10:10). This doesn’t mean we’ve fully “arrived” in our personal sanctification. Paul says we’re to “purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (2 Cor. 7:1). The shift in emphasis between Testaments doesn’t indicate a change in the meaning of holiness or its importance. For example, God’s people are called saints—holy ones or sanctified ones—in both Testaments (e.g., Ps. 34:9; Acts 9:13). However, in the Old Testament times, God used external matters, which could be seen, to teach about the inward change He desired.

Does this mean that we no longer think about events and physical things as holy as in the Old Testament? Certainly not in the same way Old Testament saints did. We no longer have the Temple and the sacrificial system and the Aaronic priesthood. All things are God’s, and all things are to be offered up to Him with a pure heart. There should be no sacred/secular split in the sense that some things are under God’s jurisdiction and some aren’t. However, we might find that, just like the Israelites, certain items or observances might help in directing us to God or reminding us of His character.

## **Secularism—The Loss of the Sacred**

Contrasted with *sacred* is the idea of *secular*. The root of the

word "secular" is interesting. It comes from a Latin word that means "time." James Hitchcock says "to call someone secular means that he is completely time-bound, totally a child of his age, a creature of history, with no vision of eternity. Unable to see anything in the perspective of eternity, he cannot believe that God exists or acts in human affairs."[\[10\]](#) A secular society, then, is one which is tied to time, to the temporal, with no reference to the eternal, to God.

We shouldn't think that there was no distinction between the sacred and the secular in the West until modern times. In the Medieval era, there was secular music and poetry. However, there was an increasing turn to the secular following the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century. By the eighteenth century writers such as Voltaire were openly espousing secularism. If religion was the cause of such terrible things as the wars of the sixteenth century, it should be removed from the public square.

Over time, secularism gradually encroached on almost all areas of human life. In the university in the nineteenth century, a movement began to remove religion from its central place in education and segregate it to its own department. In the workplace, *efficiency* became a watchword; because religion could disrupt the workplace, it was to be left at home. By the twentieth century buildings and art and law and . . . well, you name it; all areas of human life were now to be thought of in secular terms and developed according to the methods of science. Life would be much improved, it was thought, if we were freed from the narrowness of religion to make of ourselves what we would. Humanism was the fundamental worldview, and secular humanism at that. The name given to this era was "modernism."

What has this gotten us as a society? We're free to construct our reality any way we wish now that God is supposedly dead. But what have we done with our freedom? Henry Grunwald, former ambassador to Austria and editor-in-chief of Time, Inc. said

this:

Secular humanism . . . stubbornly insisted that morality need not be based on the supernatural. But it gradually became clear that ethics without the sanction of some higher authority simply were not compelling. The ultimate irony, or perhaps tragedy, is that secularism has not led to humanism. We have gradually dissolved—deconstructed—the human being into a bundle of reflexes, impulses, neuroses, nerve endings. The great religious heresy used to be making man the measure of all things; but we have come close to making man the measure of nothing.[\[11\]](#)

## **What the Loss of the Sacred Means for Us**

### **Life in a secular world**

What does it mean to live in a secular society? How does it color our Christian experience? How does it affect the way we make decisions? The way we spend our money and time? The way we relate to people?

In 1998, Craig Gay published a book titled *The Way of the Modern World: Or, Why It's Tempting to Live As if God Doesn't Exist*.[\[12\]](#) In the introduction, he addresses the question why there needs to be another book on modernism. He gives a couple of reasons. First, he says, is the possibility of unfruitfulness. He points to the Parable of the Sower in Matthew as a biblical example. Could any ineffectiveness on our part or the part of our churches be traced back to accommodation to the secular mind? Could our many church programs and strategies be found wanting because we are using modern methods which run counter to the ways of God? Our private lives have become divided: Monday through Friday are for money-making endeavors; Saturday is for working around the house or going to the lake; Sunday is for religion. We live bifurcated lives.



Second is “the threat of apostasy and spiritual death.” Think of the proverbial frog in the pot of water slowly coming to a boil, and then think about how easy it is to adopt the notion that “you only go around once” and the modernistic solution of getting all the “toys” we can *while* we can . . . and gradually not only *look* like the world but become card-carrying members of it.

## **The sacred brought down to the secular**

The late Francis Schaeffer taught many of us the meaning and significance of “secular humanism,” and, as a result of such teaching, evangelicals have taken on the project of integrating the sacred and the secular in more and more areas of their lives. Much of this has been good. Determining to let one’s Christian beliefs inform all aspects of life is hard in itself; in a secular culture that doesn’t care for such things, it’s a major challenge. As noted earlier, it is an uphill battle living as a Christian in our secular society, so one should be cautious about criticizing the sincere efforts of fellow believers.

In my opinion, however, some or many of us have unconsciously pulled a “switcheroo.” In our efforts to tear down the divide between sacred and secular, we have been guilty to a significant extent of bringing the sacred down to the secular rather than lifting all of life up to the secular, as it were. We live so much of our lives in the “lower story” as Nancy Pearcey calls it (following Schaeffer) that we have simply baptized as Christian attitudes and ways of life that are questionable. We’ve secularized the sacred rather than vice versa.

Ask yourself this: Besides things internal to you—attitudes, beliefs, etc.—what externals in your life clearly reflect the divine? How does the sacred color your life? What habits of life, objects or tools, what signifiers of the sacred, are part of your life?

# Restoring the Sacred, *Not* the Sacred-Secular Split

In so far as this describes us, we need to make the conscious decision to bring about change. The first order of business is to re-acknowledge the sacredness of God. Then we must recognize that we are sanctified, set apart. We are to be drawn up to God, and one significant area in which this should be seen is in worship. Think of worship as the sanctified being drawn up to the Sanctifier. In another place I wrote this:

*The object of one's worship reflects back on the worshipper. Those who worship things lower than themselves end up demeaning themselves, being brought down to the level of their object of worship. But those who worship things higher are drawn up to reflect their object of worship. To worship God is to be drawn up to our full height, so to speak. We are ennobled by worshipping the most noble One.*[{13}](#)

Two thoughts to add which might seem contradictory at first. In response to the secularization of our society, it is our responsibility to bring God back into all the affairs of our lives, even the mundane. In our *private* lives that will be easier to do than in our *public* lives simply because we don't set all the rules for the latter. For example, a person working for a financial institution probably won't be able to insist that the boss leads the office in prayer before work each morning. However, there *are* ways we can bring a Christian view of the world and godly morality into the workplace. We want God to be over the full sweep of our lives such that we don't have a brick wall dividing our lives in two.

Along with that, however, we might find it helpful to bring into our lives some kinds of signifiers of the sacred, some kinds of objects or places or routines or *something* that will provide reminders to us that the world we see isn't all there

is. Christians have used symbols for ages to remind them of the “otherness” of God. Art has made a big comeback in recent decades as a means of portraying truths about God and a Christian view of life and the world. Such things aren’t prescribed in Scripture. What *is* prescribed, of course, is the rejection of idolatry. Therefore, anything we use as an aid must remain just that—an aid, not the object of our faith.

Thomas Molnar argues that a strong Christian belief in the supernatural needs worship symbols such as prayer, ritual, a sense of the sacred community, sincere piety, and the *élan* (enthusiastic energy) of the clergy.”[\[14\]](#) He believes that the only way the church can remain strong in a pagan environment is to “remain unquestionably loyal” to both the intellectual component—doctrine—and the sacred component which employs symbolic forms.[\[15\]](#) The intellectual component gives us an understanding of our faith and our world. By being renewed, it enables us to “test and approve what God’s will is” (Rom. 12:2). The symbolic component can help us focus on and learn about God. Things like visual aids, postures, particular times set aside for a focus on God, along with Bible reading and prayer, can be very beneficial, as long as they don’t lead to idolatry or a diminished or altered view of God.

We don’t have the law with all its stipulations about the Temple and its furnishings, sacrifices, and special feasts. In my opinion, however, to simply set all such things aside *because* they aren’t required by law is short-sighted. Human nature hasn’t changed; if sacred signifiers were helpful to the Israelites, maybe they would be to us, too.

To give people a list of things to do that goes beyond clear scriptural exhortation to such practices as prayer, learning God’s Word, gathering together as a body, and participating in the sacraments or ordinances would be to overstep our boundaries. The most I can do, then, is ask you think about it. Consider how you can restore a clear sense of the sacred in your life. Not just any sacredness *per se*, of course, but a

sense of the presence of the One who is truly sacred and of the significance of the sacred for how you live.

## Notes

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2. *The Pop-up New Oxford Dictionary of English*, Selectsoft Publishing, 1992.
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# Modern Myths

## Myths and Modern Myths

Have you ever heard someone describe the Bible as *myth*? All

those supernatural occurrences couldn't possibly have taken place, it is said. It's a good story, intended to help people lead a good life and perhaps get closer to God (if there is one), but not to be taken literally.

What is a *myth*? A myth is a story that serves to provide meaning and structure for life. It *might* have some history behind it, but that isn't important. It is the ideas that count. Myths are intended to translate the supposed abstract realities of the world in concrete, story form.

Myths were important to the ancient Greeks for defining who they were and what the world was like. In modern times, however, we try to de-emphasize the significance of myths for a culture; we equate *myth* with *fiction*, and fiction isn't to be taken seriously.

In his book, *6 Modern Myths About Christianity and Western Civilization*,[\[1\]](#) Philip Sampson debunks the notion that we've given up myths, even in the arena of science! According to Sampson there are a number of myths that have become significant for our culture even though they are false—or at least misleading—with respect to the facts. In this book, Sampson gives the true stories behind some of the myths our culture holds as true, such as the idea that Galileo's fight with the church provides a good example of the supposed warfare between science and religion.

Myths such as these serve to perpetuate certain notions their promoters want us to believe. They can develop over time with no conscious aim, or they can be knowingly advanced for the good of a certain cause. So, as with the Galileo story, if one wishes to advance the notion that there is a tension between Christianity and science, with science being clearly in the right, one might employ a story which pits the knowledgeable, good scientist just out to present facts against the hierarchy of a church which seeks to keep people in darkness so as to advance its own cause.

In ancient Greece, myths weren't told as though they were historically true. In our society, however, facts are important, so myths are told as if they are scientifically or historically accurate. Thus, with the Galileo story, there is enough history to seem to give it a factual basis—although significant facts are left out!

In this article we will look at three of these modern myths: Galileo and the church, the purported oppression of people by missionaries, and the witch trials of the 16th and 17th centuries.

## Galileo and the Church

One myth that is deeply ingrained in our culture is that of the supposed “warfare between science and religion.” Science deals with fact; religion deals with nice stories, at best. Whenever there is a conflict, obviously science wins the day. This myth goes deeper than just who has the best interpretation of the data. It's as if there is, *of necessity*, a conflict between the two, and religion has to be shown to be inferior to science.

One story that seems to serve this myth especially well is the story of Galileo. You've probably heard about Galileo's celebrated battle with the church over his views on the nature of the universe. As the story is typically told, Copernicus discovered that the earth revolves around the sun. Galileo, who agreed that the earth was not the center of the universe after all, then developed his work. Supposedly the church wanted to keep man at the center of God's creation and thus as the supreme part of the created order. To move earth out of the center was to somehow lower man. Thus, the church persecuted Galileo and eventually silenced him, showing its raw power over society.

George Bernard Shaw said, “Galileo was a martyr, and his persecutors incorrigible ignoramuses.”[\[2\]](#) Says writer Patrick



Moore, "The Roman Catholic Church attacked Galileo because the [heliocentric] theory was not reconcilable with certain passages of the Bible. As a consequence, poor Galileo spent most of his life in open conflict with the Church."[{3}](#) However, reason ultimately prevailed and science won the day over religious obscurantism.

The problem with this story is that it ranges from the true to the distorted to the blatantly untrue! Galileo's primary trouble was with *secular scientists*, not with the church. It was when he began reinterpreting Scripture to promote his cause and publicly ridiculed the pope that he got into big trouble.

"The Galileo story was developed by French Enlightenment thinkers as part of their anticlerical program," says Philip Sampson, "but by the late nineteenth century it had created a language of warfare between science and religion." Science became the fount of reasoned knowledge, and religion was "reduced to ignorance and dogma."[{4}](#) To accomplish this, however, history had to be distorted.

Let's see what really happened with Galileo. It needs to be noted up front that in Galileo's day the theories of scientists were not thought to give an actual account of the way the heavens worked; they simply provided models for ordering the data. They "were regarded as the play things of virtuosi," as George Sim Johnston put it.[{5}](#) "To the Greek and medieval mind, science was a kind of formalism, a means of coordinating data, which had no bearing on the ultimate reality of things."[{6}](#)

The fact is that the church didn't *care* all that much about what Copernicus and Galileo thought about the order of the universe, scientifically speaking. Copernicus' book on the subject circulated for seventy years without any trouble at all. It was the *scientists* of the day who opposed the theory, because it went against the received wisdom of Aristotle.

Copernicus believed that his theory actually described the universe the way it was, and this was unacceptable to the academics. When Galileo published his ideas, it was the ridicule of fellow astronomers that he feared, not the church.

According to Aristotle, the earth was at the center of the universe, and all the rest of the universe was situated in concentric spheres around it. From the moon out, all was thought to be perfect and unchanging. The earth, however, was obviously changing and thus imperfect. All matter in the universe was thought to fall downward toward the center of the earth. The earth is therefore like the trash bin of the universe; it was no compliment to man to emphasize his place on earth. In other words, to be at the center of the universe was *not* a good thing!

To now say that the earth was out with other planets where things had to be perfect was to seriously undercut Aristotle's ideas. So when Galileo published his notions it was the ridicule of fellow astronomers that he feared, not the church.

It's true that Galileo got into hot water with the church, but it was *not* because his theory moved man physically from the center of the universe; that was a *good* thing, given Aristotle's views. Man was already considered small in the universe. Most people already believed that the earth was created for God, not for man. "The doctrine that the earth exists for man's use," says Philip Sampson, "derives from Greek philosophy, not the Bible."[\[7\]](#) Thus, the Copernican theory "ennobled" the status of the earth by making it a planet. So the church in general didn't see the heliocentric theory as a demotion.

The fact is that Galileo was on good terms with the church for a long time, even while advancing his theory. He made sure that the idea he was attacking of the incorruptibility of the universe with its perfect heavens and imperfect earth was an Aristotelian belief and not a doctrine of the church.

“Indeed,” says Sampson, “the church largely accepted his conclusions, although the die-hard Aristotelians in the universities did not. . . . Far from being constantly harried by obscurantist priests, he was feted by cardinals, received by Pope Paul V and befriended by the future Pope Urban VIII.”[\[8\]](#) As historian George Santillana wrote in 1958, “It has been known for a long time that a major part of the church intellectuals were on the side of Galileo, while the clearest opposition to him came from secular circles.”[\[9\]](#) He wasn’t afraid of the church; he feared the ridicule of his fellow scientists!

What *did* get Galileo in trouble with the church were two things. First, because the church had historically followed Aristotle (as did secularists) in interpreting scientific data, it wanted hard evidence to support Galileo’s views, which he did not have. For Galileo to insist that his theory was true to the way things really were was to step outside proper scientific boundaries. He simply didn’t have enough hard data to make such a claim. The problem, then, wasn’t between religion and science, but between methods of interpreting the data. But this, in itself, wasn’t enough to bring the church down on him.

The bigger problem was Galileo’s manner of promoting his beliefs. To do so, he reinterpreted Scripture in contradiction to traditional understandings, which ran counter to the dictates of the Council of Trent. Perhaps even worse was his mockery of the pope. His treatise, *Dialogue Concerning the Chief World Systems*, took the form of a debate. The character that took Aristotle’s view against the heliocentric theory was called Simplicio. His “role in the dialogue is to be a kind of Aunt Sally to be knocked down by Galileo. . . .Galileo puts into Simplicio’s mouth a favorite argument used by his friend Pope Urban VIII and then mocks it. In other words, he concluded his treatise by effectively calling the very pope who had befriended him a simpleton for not agreeing with

Galileo. This was not a wise move,” says Sampson, “and the rest is history.”[\[10\]](#) In fact, Galileo himself believed that the major cause of his trouble was the charge that he had made fun of the pope, *not* that he thought the earth moved.

So the condemnation of Galileo did *not* result from some basic conflict between science and religion. It “was the result of the complex interplay of untoward political circumstances, political ambitions, and wounded prides.”[\[11\]](#) However, the myth continues to bolster the status of secular, naturalistic thought by making religion look bad.

So is there warfare between science and religion? Hardly. This is really warfare between worldviews.

## **The Missionaries**

A favorite charge against Christians for many years is the belief that missionaries effectively destroyed other cultures: running roughshod over the natives’ beliefs and culture. Like the myth of the warfare between science and religion, the myth of the oppressive missionary provides a vehicle for exalting secularism while denigrating Christianity. According to this myth, the Christian missionary arrogantly strips natives of their own culture and forces western Christian culture on them, even to the point of oppression and exploitation.

Secular literature often leaves one with an impression of missionaries as stern, joyless oppressors who took advantage of innocent natives in order to advance their own ends. They forced their art and music on other cultures, made the people learn the missionaries’ language, and manipulated them to wear western clothing. “Missionaries are accused of exploiting natives for commercial gain,” says Sampson, “colluding with expansionist colonialism and even committing ‘ethnocide.’ They are implicated in the theft of land, the forced removal of children from their parents, the destruction of habitats, torture, murder, the decline of whole populations into

destitution, alcoholism, and prostitution. Even when they provide disaster relief, they are guilty of 'buying' converts." {12} There are no "half tones," says Sampson. Missionaries "impose rigid, joyless, and patriarchal rules" on natives who are "portrayed as residents in an idyllic land, the victims of the full might of Western oppression incarnate in the person of 'the missionary.'" {13}

One of the problems in this assessment is the ready identification of missionary activity with that of western colonialism and trade. While missionaries often *did* import their culture along with the Gospel, they were not, for the most part, interested in taking over other peoples. Colonialists, however, were. It was "the Enlightenment visions of 'civilization' and 'progress' that inspired colonial activity from the eighteenth century and rejected faith in God for faith in reason." Colonialists had no qualms about attempting to "civilize" the "barbarians" and "savages." *Civilized* was a term which "had 'behind it the general spirit of the Enlightenment with its emphasis on secular and progressive human self-development.'" Traders, also, were guilty of exploiting other peoples for their own profit. Consider the power of commercial enterprises such as the search for gold by the conquistadors and the activity of such organizations as the British South Africa Company that brought exploitation. {14}

What this reveals is the role of *modernism* in the oppression and exploitation of native peoples. Romanticism established the image of the "noble savage," the pure, pristine individual who, living close to nature, had not been corrupted by the influences of civilization. The fact is that some native peoples were given to human sacrifice and cannibalism, among other vices. However, the myth of the noble savage took root in western thinking. Then Darwin taught that there were weaker races that were doomed to extinction by the unstoppable forces of evolutionary change (new ideas about eugenics grew out of

this thinking). These two images—the noble savage and the weaker race—combined to paint a picture of vulnerable nobility. According to the myth, Christian missionaries were guilty of taking advantage of this vulnerability to advance their own causes. The reality was that it was often *colonialists* who exploited these people, and salved their consciences by picturing the people as doomed to extinction anyway.

By contrast, what one finds in the literature about missionary activities includes occasions where they stood against the colonial and trading powers. The Dominican bishop Bartolomé opposed slavery in the sixteenth century. John Philip of the London Missionary Society supported native rights in South Africa in the early nineteenth century. Lancelot Threlkeld demanded “equal protection under the law for the Awabakal people of Australia.”[\[15\]](#) John Eliot stood up for the Indians in Massachusetts’ courts against unjust settler claims. Even one critic of missionary activity conceded that evangelical missions in Latin America “tended to treat native people with more respect than did national governments and fellow citizens.”[\[16\]](#) Missionaries taught people to read their own languages, good hygiene to indigenous groups, farming skills, and even brought medical help. In some regards, the missionaries *did* try to change other cultures, and sometimes illegitimately. But sometimes that isn’t wrong; there should be no apologies for trying to stop such practices as human sacrifice and cannibalism. Compare the efforts of contemporary secularists to end female genital mutilation practiced by some African tribes.

Scholars have known for many years that the identification of missions with oppression is unfair, yet the myth continues to be told. It simply isn’t true that missionaries were responsible for the destruction of native cultures. But the myth persists, for “it provides the modern mind with an alibi for its own complicity in oppression.”[\[17\]](#)

# The Witch Trials

Some critics like to portray the Christian Church as the great persecutor of the weak and helpless. A popular vehicle for this myth is the story of the witch trials in Europe and America in the 16th and 17th centuries. Philip Sampson says that this story “relates that many millions of women throughout Europe, mainly the elderly, poor and isolated, were tortured by the church into confessing nonexistent crimes before being burnt to death.”[\[18\]](#) The story of the witch trials provides a handy illustration for the myth that the church actively persecutes those who aren't in agreement. “The history of Christianity is the history of persecution,” said one writer,[\[19\]](#) and this is seen in no bolder outline than in the story of the witch-hunts. Furthermore, this story provides a good example of the supposed women-hating attitude of the church since the vast majority of witches tried were women.

There is no denying that Christians were involved in the trial and execution of witches. But to paint this issue as simply a matter of the powerful church against the weakest members of society is to distort what really happened.

Before considering a couple of facts about the trials, the bias of the critics who write about them should be noted. For most, there simply is no such thing as a supernatural witch, meaning one who can actually draw on satanic power to manipulate nature. If this is true, it *must* be the case that there is some natural explanation for the strange behavior of those charged with witchcraft, and the church was completely unjustified in prosecuting them. But this is a naturalistic bias; it ignores the fact that “most people of the world throughout most of its history have taken supernatural witchcraft to be real.”[\[20\]](#) Modern writers like to think that it was the dawning of the Age of Reason that brought about the end of the witch trials, but today this is seen as mere



hubris, "the prejudice of 'indignant rationalists' [who were] more concerned to castigate the witch-baiters for their credulity and cruelty than to understand what the phenomenon was all about."[{21}](#) It was the centralization of legal power that brought the trials to an end, not a matter of "Enlightenment overcoming superstition."[{22}](#)

This leads us to ask who and why these charges of witchcraft were brought in the first place. What we find is that this "was not principally a church matter, nor was the Inquisition the prime mover in the prosecution of witches," as is often thought. It was ordinary lay people who typically brought charges of witchcraft, and mostly women at that![{23}](#) The primary reasons were not bizarre supernatural behavior or heretical beliefs, but the tensions brought about by a loss of crops or the failure of bread to rise. "People commonly appealed to magic and witchcraft to explain tragedies and misfortunes, or more generally to gain power over neighbors."[{24}](#) Even kings and queens saw witchcraft as a very real threat to their thrones and well-being. The Inquisition actually supplied a tempering influence. Historian Hugh Trevor-Roper said, "In general, the established church was opposed to the persecution" of witches.[{25}](#) Likewise, the Protestant churches were not the real aggressors in the witch trials. John Calvin believed that witchcraft was a delusion, the cure for which was the Gospel, not execution.[{26}](#)

Estimates of executions in the millions are grossly exaggerated. Recent studies estimate about 150,300 per year, making a total of between 40,000 and 100,000 who were executed over a period of 300 years. While "this is an appalling enough catalog of human suffering," as Sampson says,[{27}](#) it pales in comparison to the slaughter of innocent people in the 20th century, resulting from the excesses of modernistic thinking. "Genocide is an invention of the modern world," says one writer.[{28}](#) Compare the numbers slaughtered under Nazism or Stalinism to that of the witch trials. If the witch trials

demonstrate the danger of religion to society, the slaughters under Hitler and Stalin demonstrate the much greater danger of irreligion.

Modern writers like to think that it was the dawning of the Age of Reason that brought about the end of the witch trials, but today this is seen as mere hubris. It was the centralization of legal power that brought the trials to an end, not a matter of "Enlightenment overcoming superstition."[\[29\]](#)

## Conclusion

From the days of the early church we have been called upon to defend not only our beliefs but also the *activities* of individual Christians and the church as a whole. In his book, *6 Modern Myths About Christianity and Western Civilization*, Philip Sampson has given us a tool to better enable us to do that today. I encourage you to read it.

## Notes

1. Philip J. Sampson, *6 Modern Myths About Christianity and Western Civilization* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001).
2. George Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1946), 17, quoted in Sampson, 28.
3. Patrick Moore, *A Beginner's Guide to Astronomy* (London: PRC Publishing, 1997), 12, quoted in Sampson, 28.
4. Sampson, 45.
5. George Sim Johnston, "The Galileo Affair," downloaded from <http://www.catholic.net/rcc/Periodicals/Issues/GalileoAffair.html> May 7, 2001.
6. Ibid.

7. Sampson, 34.
8. Sampson, 36-37.
9. George de Santillana, *The Crime of Galileo* (London: Heinemann, 1958), xii, quoted in Sampson, 37.
10. Sampson, 38.
11. William R. Shea, "Galileo and the Church" in *God and Nature*, ed. David C. Lindberg and Ronald Numbers (Berkley: University of California Press, 1986), 312, quoted in Sampson, 39.
12. Sampson, 93.
13. Sampson, 94.
14. Sampson, 94.
15. Sampson, 97-98.
16. D. Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1990), 12, quoted in Sampson, 98.
17. Sampson, 99.
18. Sampson, 130.
19. Laurie, Cabot, *Power of the Witch* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1992), 62, quoted in Sampson, 130.
20. Sampson, 133.
21. Sampson, 144.
22. Sampson, 133.
23. Sampson, 134-135.
24. Sampson, 134.

25. Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1969), 37, quoted in Sampson, 139.

26. Sampson, 141.

27. Sampson 137.

28. Trevor-Roper, 22, quoted in Sampson, 137.

29. Sampson, 133.

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## Christianity and Culture

At the close of the twentieth century American evangelicals find themselves in a diverse, pluralistic culture. Many ideas vie for attention and allegiance. These ideas, philosophies, or world views are the products of philosophical and cultural changes. Such changes have come to define our culture. For example, pluralism can mean that all world views are correct and that it is intolerable to state otherwise; secularism reigns; absolutes have ceased to exist; facts can only be stated in the realm of science, not religion; evangelical Christianity has become nothing more than a troublesome oddity amidst diversity. It is clear, therefore, that western culture is suffering; it is ill. Lesslie Newbigin, a scholar and former missionary to India, has emphasized this by asking a provocative question: "Can the West be converted?"(1)

Such a question leads us to another: How is a Christian supposed to respond to such conditions? Or, how should we deal with the culture that surrounds us?

Since the term *culture* is central in this discussion, it deserves particular attention and definition. Even though the concept behind the word is ancient, and it is used frequently in many different contexts, its actual meaning is elusive and often confusing. *Culture* does not refer to a particular level of life. This level, sometimes referred to as “high culture,” is certainly an integral part of the definition, but it is not the central focus. For example, “the arts” are frequently identified with culture in the minds of many. More often than not there is a qualitative difference between what is a part of “high culture” and other segments of culture, but these distinctions are not our concern at this time.

T. S. Eliot has written that culture “may . . . be described simply as that which makes life worth living.”(2) Emil Brunner, a theologian, has stated “that culture is materialisation of meaning.”(3) Donald Bloesch, another theologian, says that culture “is the task appointed to humans to realize their destiny in the world in service to the glory of God.”(4) An anthropologist, E. Adamson Hoebel, believes that culture “is the integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the result of biological inheritance.”(5) All of these definitions can be combined to include the world views, actions, and products of a given community of people.

Christians are to observe and analyze culture and make decisions regarding our proper actions and reactions within it. A struggle is in progress and the stakes are high. Harry Blamires writes: “No thoughtful Christian can contemplate and analyze the tensions all about us in both public and private life without sensing the eternal momentousness of the current struggle for the human mind between Christian teaching and materialistic secularism.”(6)

Believers are called to join the struggle. But in order to struggle meaningfully and with some hope of influencing our culture, we must be informed and thoughtful Christians. There

is no room for sloth or apathy. Rev. 3:15-16 states, "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I spit you out of My mouth."

God forbid that these words of condemnation should apply to us.

## **Transforming Culture**

Church history demonstrates that one of the constant struggles of Christianity, both individually and corporately, is with culture. Where should we stand? Inside the culture? Outside? Ignore it? Isolate ourselves from it? Should we try to transform it?

The theologian Richard Niebuhr provided a classic study concerning these questions in his book *Christ and Culture*. Even though his theology is not always evangelical, his paradigm is helpful. It includes five views.

First, he describes the "Christ Against Culture" view, which encourages opposition, total separation, and hostility toward culture. Tertullian, Tolstoy, Menno Simons, and, in our day, Jacques Ellul are exponents of this position.

Second, the "Christ of Culture" perspective is exactly the opposite of "Christ Against Culture" because it attempts to bring culture and Christianity together, regardless of their differences. Liberation, process, and feminist theologies are current examples.

Third, the "Christ Above Culture" position attempts "to correlate the fundamental questions of the culture with the answer of Christian revelation."<sup>(7)</sup> Thomas Aquinas is the most prominent teacher of this view.

Fourth, "Christ and Culture in Paradox" describes the "dualists" who stress that the Christian belongs "to two

realms (the spiritual and temporal) and must live in the tension of fulfilling responsibilities to both.”(8) Luther adopted this view.

Fifth, “Christ the Transformer of Culture” includes the “conversionists” who attempt “to convert the values and goals of secular culture into the service of the kingdom of God.”(9) Augustine, Calvin, John Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards are the chief proponents of this last view.

With the understanding that we are utilizing a tool and not a perfected system, I believe that the “Christ the Transformer of Culture” view aligns most closely with Scripture. We are to be actively involved in the transformation of culture without giving that culture undue prominence. As the social critic Herbert Schlossberg says, “The ‘salt’ of people changed by the gospel must change the world.”(10) Admittedly, such a perspective calls for an alertness and sensitivity to subtle dangers. But the effort is needed to follow the biblical pattern.

If we are to be transformers, we must also be “discerners,” a very important word for contemporary Christians. We are to apply “the faculty of discerning; discrimination; acuteness of judgment and understanding.”(11) Matthew 16:3 includes a penetrating question from Jesus to the Pharisees and Sadducees who were testing Him by asking for a sign from heaven: “Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot *discern* the signs of the times?” It is obvious that Jesus was disheartened by their lack of discernment. If they were alert, they could see that the Lord was demonstrating and would demonstrate (in v. 4 He refers to impending resurrection) His claims. Jesus’ question is still relevant. We too must be alert and able to discern our times.

In order to transform the culture, we must continually recognize what is in need of transformation and what is not. This is a difficult assignment. We cannot afford to approach



the responsibility without the guidance of God's Spirit, Word, wisdom, and power. As the theologian John Baille has said, "In proportion as a society relaxes its hold upon the eternal, it ensures the corruption of the temporal." (12) May we live in our temporal setting with a firm grasp of God's eternal claims while we transform the culture he has entrusted to us!

## **Stewardship and Creativity**

An important aspect of our discussion of Christians and culture is centered in the early passages of the Bible.

The first two chapters of Genesis provide a foundation for God's view of culture and man's responsibility in it. These chapters contain what is generally called the "cultural mandate," God's instructions concerning the care of His creation. Included in this are the concepts of "stewardship" and "creativity."

The mandate of stewardship is specifically found within 1:27-28 and 2:15, even though these two chapters as a whole also demonstrate it. Verse 28 of chapter 1 reads, "And God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

This verse contains the word *subdue*, an expression that is helpful in determining the mandate of stewardship. First, it should be observed that man is created "in the image of God." Volumes have been written about the meaning of this phrase. Obviously, it is a very positive statement. If man is created in God's image, that image must contain God's benevolent goodness, and not maliciousness. Second, it is obvious that God's created order includes industriousness, work—a striving on the part of man. Thus we are to exercise our minds and bodies in service to God by "subduing," observing, touching, and molding the "stuff" of creation. We are to form a culture.

Tragically, because of sin, man abused his stewardship. We are now in a struggle that was not originally intended. But the redeemed person, the person in Christ, is refashioned. He can now approach culture with a clearer understanding of God's mandate. He can now begin again to exercise proper stewardship.

The mandate concerning creativity is broadly implied within the first two chapters of Genesis. It is not an emphatic pronouncement, as is the mandate concerning stewardship. In reality, the term is a misnomer, for we cannot *create* anything. We can only redesign, rearrange, or refashion what God has created. But in this discussion we will continue to use the word with this understanding in mind.

A return to the opening chapter of Genesis leads us to an intriguing question. Of what does the "image of God" consist? It is interesting to note, as did the British writer Dorothy Sayers, that if one stops with the first chapter and asks that question, the apparent answer is that God is creator.(13) Thus, some element of that creativity is instilled in man. God created the cosmos. He declared that what He had done was "very good." He then put man within creation. Man responded creatively. He was able to see things with aesthetic judgment (2:9). His cultivation of the garden involved creativity, not monotonous servitude (2:15). He creatively assigned names to the animals (2:19-20). And he was able to respond with poetic expression upon seeing Eve, his help-mate (2:23). Kenneth Myers writes: "Man was fit for the cultural mandate. As the bearer of his Creator-God's image, he could not be satisfied apart from cultural activity. Here is the origin of human culture in untainted glory and possibility. It is no wonder that those who see God's redemption as a transformation of human culture speak of it in terms of re-creation."(14)

As we seek to transform culture we must understand this mandate and apply it.

# Pluralism

*Pluralism* and *secularism* are two prominent words that describe contemporary American culture. The Christian must live within a culture that emphasizes these terms. What do they mean and how do we respond? We will look at pluralism first.

The first sentence of professor Allan Bloom's provocative and controversial book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, reads: "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative." (15)

This statement is indicative of Bloom's concern for the fact that many college students do not believe in absolutes, but the concern goes beyond students to the broader population. *Relativism, openness, syncretism, and tolerance* are some of the more descriptive words for the ways people are increasingly thinking in contemporary culture. These words are part of what I mean by *pluralism*. Many ideas are proclaimed, as has always been the case, but the type of pluralism to which I refer asserts that all these ideas are of equal value, and that it is intolerant to think otherwise. Absurdity is the result. This is especially apparent in the realm of religious thought.

In order for evangelicals to be transformers of culture they must understand that their beliefs will be viewed by a significant portion of the culture as intolerant, antiquated, uncompassionate, and destructive of the status quo. As a result, they will often be persecuted through ridicule, prejudice, social ostracism, academic intolerance, media bias, or a number of other attitudes. Just as with Bloom's statement, the evangelical's emphasis on absolutes is enough to draw a negative response. For example, Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6). Such an exclusive, absolute claim does not fit current pluralism. Therefore, the

pluralist would contend that Jesus must have meant something other than what is implied in such an egocentric statement.

It is unfortunate that Christians often have been absorbed by pluralism. As Harry Blamires puts it, "We have stopped thinking christianly outside the scope of personal morals and personal spirituality." (16) We hold our beliefs privately, which is perfectly legitimate within pluralism. But we have not been the transformers we are to be. We have supported pluralism, because it tolerates a form of Christianity that doesn't make demands on the culture or call it into question.

Christianity is not just personal opinion; it is objective truth. This must be asserted, regardless of the responses to the contrary, in order to transform culture. Christians must affirm this. We must enter our culture boldly with the understanding that what we believe and practice privately is also applicable to all of public life. Lesslie Newbigin writes: "We come here to what is perhaps the most distinctive and crucial feature of the modern worldview, namely the division of human affairs into two realms— the private and the public, a private realm of values where pluralism reigns and a public world of what our culture calls 'facts.'" (17)

We must be cautious of incorrect distinctions between the public and private. We must also influence culture with the "facts" of Christianity. This is our responsibility.

## **Secularism**

Secularism permeates virtually every facet of life and thought. What does it mean? We need to understand that the word *secular* is not the same as *secularism*. All of us, whether Christian or non-Christian, live, work, and play within the secular sphere. There is no threat here for the evangelical. As Blamires says, "Engaging in secular activities . . . does not make anyone a 'secularist', an exponent or adherent of 'secularism'." (18) Secularism as a philosophy, a world view,

is a different matter. Blamires continues: "While 'secular' is a purely neutral term, 'secularism' represents a view of life which challenges Christianity head on, for it excludes all considerations drawn from a belief in God or in a future state." (19)

Secularism elevates things that are not to be elevated to such a high status, such as the autonomy of man. Donald Bloesch states that "a culture closed to the transcendent will find the locus of the sacred in its own creations." (20) This should be a sobering thought for the evangelical.

We must understand that secularism is influential and can be found throughout the culture. In addition, we must realize that the secularist's belief in independence makes Christianity appear useless and the Christian seem woefully ignorant. As far as the secularist is concerned, Christianity is no longer vital. As Emil Brunner says, "The roots of culture that lie in the transcendent sphere are cut off; culture and civilisation must have their law and meaning in themselves." (21) As liberating as this may sound to a secularist, it stimulates grave concern in the mind of an alert evangelical whose view of culture is founded upon God's precepts. There is a clear dividing line.

How is this reflected in our culture? Wolfhart Pannenberg presents what he believes are three aspects of the long-term effects of secularism. "First of these is the loss of legitimation in the institutional ordering of society." (22) That is, without a belief in the divine origin of the world there is no foundation for order. Political rule becomes "merely the exercising of power, and citizens would then inevitably feel that they were delivered over to the whim of those who had power." (23)

"The collapse of the universal validity of traditional morality and consciousness of law is the second aspect of the long-term effects of secularization." (24) Much of this can be

attributed to the influence of Immanuel Kant, the eighteenth-century German philosopher, who taught that moral norms were binding even without religion.(25)

Third, "the individual in his or her struggle towards orientation and identity is hardest hit by the loss of a meaningful focus of commitment." (26) This leads to a sense of "homelessness and alienation" and "neurotic deviations." The loss of the "sacred and ultimate" has left its mark. As Pannenberg writes: "The increasingly evident long-term effects of the loss of a meaningful focus of commitment have led to a state of fragile equilibrium in the system of secular society." (27)

Since evangelicals are a part of that society, we should realize this "fragile equilibrium" is not just a problem reserved for the unbelieving secularist; it is also our problem.

Whether the challenge is secularism, pluralism, or a myriad of other issues, the Christian is called to practice discernment while actively transforming culture.

#### Notes

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3. Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization* (London: Nisbet, 1948), 62.
4. Donald G. Bloesch, *Freedom for Obedience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 54.
5. E. Adamson Hoebel, *Anthropology: The Study of Man*, 3d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 5.
6. Harry Blamires, *Recovering the Christian Mind* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988), 10.
7. Bloesch, *Freedom*, 227.
8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.
10. Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 324.
11. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. "discernment."
12. John Baille, *What is Christian Civilization?* (London: Oxford, 1945), 59.
13. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1941), 22.
14. Kenneth A. Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1989), 38.
15. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 25.
16. Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant, 1963), 37-38.
17. Newbigin, "West," 359.
18. Blamires, *Christian Mind*, 58.
19. Ibid.
20. Bloesch, *Freedom*, 228.
21. Brunner, *Christianity*, 2.
22. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Christianity in a Secularized World* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 33.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 35.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 37.
27. Ibid., 38.