

**The Faithful and Secularism, Part One**  
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Secularism refers to a purely earthly way of thinking, that is, a philosophy of life based only on the givens of earthly existence. In Arabic, according to *Al-Munjid* dictionary, a *dawqhrī* is an atheist who says that the world has existed from eternity and will remain forever, having no Creator. In this sense, the word is similar to the word “world” as it appears in the Gospel of John. The Christian is in this world, but he is not of it. In other words, he lives in the world, but he draws his way of life from the Gospel, not from the world.

In its contemporary practical sense, secularism means managing the affairs of life by human ability alone, without God. Man alone becomes the reference point, starting point, and source of the secular world. This concept began to grow stronger and to prevail, becoming a philosophy and policy adopted by people, societies, and states, roughly three hundred years ago. And the more technological abilities have developed, granting man the power to overcome the difficulties of life, and means to confront and eliminate them, the more the secular manner of life has become established and deeply rooted in human consciousness.

The danger of secularism does not lie only in the fact that it replaces God with man as the reference point of humanity. Its danger also allows one to deny God’s action in the world not only theoretically but practically. Secularism turns God into something into nothing more than an image, a form, or a theoretical belief. It may preserve religious practice, but it empties that practice of its essence and replaces it with something purely worldly. It separates life from faith and confines the life of faith to a few religious practices. Thus, the secular man does not live according to the demands of his faith so much as he lives according to the demands of secular culture.

According to secularism, the affairs of life are handled in a worldly manner, while the affairs of God are handled in the temple on Sunday. That behavior becomes separated from faith, as do morals, values, and ways of living. Man becomes confined to the earthly dimension of his life, and he turns the spiritual

dimension into a kind of perfume that gives him the feeling that his conscience has been satisfied, while preventing him from examining himself in the light of the Gospel and, consequently, from demanding of himself more than what he already is.

There is nothing sacred in secularism. Man no longer lives in the anticipation and realization of eternity—or, more precisely, in the experience of it, even as a murmur, here and now. His earthly life is no longer an imitation of the things above and an embodiment of the things to come. Rather, the present world charts the path, direction, and aim of life. Indeed, quite the opposite happens: earthly life itself becomes the goal and the end, and all available possibilities, including religious and spiritual ones, are placed at its service. The happiness of earthly life becomes the framework within which this philosophy imprisons man, neglecting his non-material dimensions.

Secularism is a completely materialistic way of life. It is another face of Marxist materialism. It forms man within a world whose material demands never end, drawing for him a consumer society that makes him constantly pant as he chases his worldly affairs that have no end. Marxism openly opposes religion, while secularism outwardly accepts it, but at the same time absorbs it and strips it of its essence.

I remember the son of an American priest, of Middle Eastern origin, who wrote in his memoirs, with astonishment, after spending three months with me learning Arabic: “God is present in people’s daily life here in the East! They bring Him into every matter of their lives, and they do not restrict Him to Sunday only!”

Secularism, which dominates man in general, has created a schism between faith and life. It is not always easy for the believer to distinguish between what befits him as a believer and what does not. This confusion has entered deeply into human consciousness, and human communities have absorbed it to different degrees, according to each community and the extent of secularism’s influence within its society.

The more technological progress develops, the more man's ability to control his reality increases. Consequently, he comes to depend on his own energy and capabilities, replacing God with them.

Here are a few simple examples:

- Man used to turn to God, asking for healing from any pain or bodily illness, no matter how simple. Our ancestors were accustomed to calling the priest to pray over their sick and anoint them with holy oil. The sacrament of Holy Unction was a lived sacrament. Today, however, the believer turns immediately to the appropriate medicine, and few even make the sign of the Cross, asking God's blessing before taking the medicine. Prayer, meanwhile, has become the last refuge, when hope in medicine has come to an end.
- A quick survey of how weddings are conducted, both inside and outside the Church, shows the liturgical sacrament has become folklore! The reverent prayer of the Crowning has become a party! Attention is focused on everything except preparation to receive the blessing of God. This raises crucial questions: How many people practice the sacrament of repentance and confession before their marriage? What percentage approach the sacrament of the Eucharist before the celebration of their Crowning?
- How do the bride and groom today, while immersed in preparations for their wedding celebration, distinguish between what befits them as Christians and what does not? And if they do distinguish this, how can they face the influence of parents and friends? Do they have the ability to go against the customs that accompany the wedding celebration? What are the essential traditions that cannot be dispensed with, and what are the external formalities that can be abandoned? How do they understand the sacrament of marriage and, consequently, the Christian understanding of marriage?
- Has not entering the church for the celebration of the Crowning become, for many, completely empty of spiritual awareness? Does it not seem, in

their consciousness, that they are participating in a sacred and reverent prayer, even though its rites are exceedingly beautiful? Do not the shameful clothes with which some enter the church point to a real divorce between real Christianity and their own form of Christianity? Does this behavior not indicate the domination of the worldly festive spirit over the sanctifying spirit?

- The secular spirit turns everything sacred into folklore or into a religious color that, in its outward form, contradicts the essence of the reality itself. We organize a church charity event during a fast, and we invite people to a luxurious fasting dinner! Does not the word “luxurious,” that is, extravagant, contradict the very essence of fasting? And the agape meals, which are authentic in our tradition and which fundamentally express the familial sense of the faithful in the Church, become banquets in which only the well-to-do can participate.
- The secular spirit presents death as the natural end of life, and so reconciles man with it. It gives great importance to funeral rituals. In some countries, they cover the face of the deceased in makeup so that he may appear beautiful in his sleep and so that his appearance may not disturb others. Christianity, however, confronts death and exposes it as the final enemy of life, and transforms it into a passage toward fullness in the true life, as Father Alexander Schmemmann says in his book “For the Life of the World.”

This spirit of secularism has entered into the heart of the Church. This is no surprise, for the people of the Church, whether pastors or flocks, are children of this age. If the influence of this age upon them is stronger than the influence of the Gospel, they will behave secularly, even in the Church, perhaps unknowingly in many cases.

(To be continued)