

WHAT DOES 'SECULAR' MEAN? Or, WHY RELIGION WON'T GO AWAY?

A Sermon Delivered for First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist
The Third in a Series on "The Signs of the Times"

Sunday, November 25, 2007

The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister

Resp. Reading 647

An Ancient Verity

W. Waldemar Argow

Ancient as the home is the temple; ancient as workbench is the altar.

Ancient as the sword is the sacrificial fire;

ancient as the solder is the priest.

Older than written language is spoken prayer;

older than painting is the thought of a nameless one.

Religion is the first and last— the universal language of the human heart.

Differing words describe the outward appearance of things;

diverse symbols represent that which stands beyond and within.

Yet every person's hunger is the same,

and heart communicates with heart.

Ever the vision leads on with many gods or with one,

with a holy land washed by ocean waters, or a holy land within the heart.

In temperament we differ, yet we are dedicated to one august destiny;

creeds divide us, but we share a human quest.

Because we are human, we shall ever build our altars;

because each has a holy yearning, we offer everywhere our prayers and anthems.

For an eternal verity abides beneath diversities;

we are children of one great love, united in our one eternal family.

Hymn 312

Here on the Paths of Every Day

Edwin Markham

Here on the paths of every day—here on the common human way—
Is all the stuff the gods would take to build a heaven, to mold and make
New Edens. Ours the task sublime to build eternity in time.

We need no other stones to build the temple of the unfulfilled—
No other ivory for the doors—no other marble for the floors—
no other cedar for the beam and dome of our immortal dream.

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I like that hymn. In focusing on this world, not some other, it reminds me of what Thoreau supposedly said when asked, as he lay dying, if he was prepared for the world to come: "One world at a time. One world at a time."

That's the original meaning of the word "secular." It comes from a Latin term for an age, a finite period of time; as opposed to eternity—although the latter in medieval prayers was often alluded to with the phrase, *secula seculorum*, literally, "ages of ages," but more often translated, "world without end." Amen!

Secular priests were ordinary village priests, as opposed to members of "religious" orders. And gradually the term has come to mean virtually the opposite of religious. As in the assertion: "The lighting of the Blue Tree on the Town Common on Saturday afternoon was purely a secular event." Or, "Thanksgiving is now an inclusive secular holiday, although with clear religious origins." But as those uses suggest, it also implies a historical process of distancing from particular religious influence. And this, like the term "religious" itself these days, can have either a positive or a problematic connotation, depending on content/context.

Some weeks ago, preaching at Dedham about the growth of Unitarian Universalism, I used a reading, the burden of which was that in the future, more and more people are going to be coming to UU congregations not fleeing from the Methodists but from the shopping mall; not from orthodoxy but from secularity. Some of you reacted strongly. "What's wrong with secular?" you asked. And you have a point. But so did my reading.

It's now more than 40 years since my teacher and friend, Harvard professor Harvey Cox, wrote his first bestseller, *The Secular City*. But many of us still tease him that ever since, in ten more books, he's been saying why the world isn't *just* becoming secular after all.

And this has been a great disappointment to some. Just as in Communist theory the State was supposed to “wither away,” and didn’t, so for some people science and reason were expected to supplant all forms of religion. But religion has proved to be rather persistent, for good or for ill. And sometimes, surely, it *is* for the latter. One way of understanding the rise of so-called “fundamentalism”—which is really often a form of religious tribalism—is to see traditional communities defensively rejecting the influence of globalization and “secular” culture.

In a huge new book called *A Secular Age*—one of those books you really don’t want to read yourselves, friends; the ponderous kind you pay your minister to read *for* you!—philosopher Charles Taylor shows that much of what we take for granted in the West in the form of secular tolerance and pluralism actually can be traced back to a religious process—one that aimed at everyone, not just monks and priests, leading a thoroughly religious life, first in movements like the Franciscans, then in the Protestant Reformation. The latter eventually led to a form of Christian civil war in Europe: the Wars of Religion. So perhaps we shouldn’t be so surprised today at Muslim Sunni and Shi’ite rivalries. Some we call extremists really don’t differ much from our own forebears in the radical wing of the Reformation. Maybe only now is Islam going through a Reformation, leading to a form of faith more compatible with Enlightenment values. *Insh’allah!* God willing!

So it’s simplistic to think of secularization as just a matter of God or religion going away. It’s also about the *how* of respectful religious pluralism arising. I’m reminded of the first Thanksgiving that we lived in Dallas. My wife Gwen was then an ordained deacon in the Episcopal Church. She’d found a parish that would employ her part-time, just Sundays. That weekend an older member of the parish, trying to get acquainted, asked her what had brought her to Dallas, “My husband is the new Senior Minister at First Unitarian,” replied Gwen. “I see,” said the woman. “And are you working at all during the week?” “As a matter of fact,” said Gwen, “I work for Rabbi Bemporad at Temple Emmanuel.” “Oh!” said the woman, “You don’t play favorites, do you?” Impartiality, that’s secular!

But some folk, like Christopher Hitchens, want a form of secularity that is anti-religious. His book, *God is Not Great: How Religion Spoils Everything*, seems to me adolescent compared to Taylor's analysis of what is both gained and lost in achieving a secular age. The gains are real. Our Pilgrim and Puritan ancestors, for example, saw bad weather, and epidemics, as signs of God's displeasure. Now it's only fundamentalists who try to read "signs of the times" like 9/11, or hurricanes, in such a way, and look like fools doing so. Today we should be quite grateful that we now see the natural world within what Taylor calls "an immanent framework"—which includes our own impact on the global climate. And that the vast majority of us do this whether we acknowledge the possibility of a more transcendent dimension to creation, and to our lives, or not.

Moreover, our ancestors, until just a few hundred years ago, saw the world as sacred and enchanted. Today we pay the ecological price of seeing it only as analyzable and useful. On the other hand, where once spiritual realities, including demons, were "out there," and could get *into* human affairs in the form of possession, witchcraft, or chosen-ness, our modern sensibilities say that all spiritual realities are just ideas and relationships, in here, in the mind. We've developed what Taylor calls a kind of "buffered self." Perhaps best represented by the contemporary phrase, "I'm not going to let it get to me." But there's another hidden cost: sometimes it does. And maybe other times it should. Taylor writes:

"What we do always has a point; we undertake various projects, and in-between we keep going the routines which sustain our lives. Through all of this, something may be growing: a life of love; children who are becoming adults and then leaving to live their own lives; we may be getting better at some valuable and useful activity. But we can also be struck by a question of what this all adds up to; what is the meaning of it all?"

Such a question, even if we seek to hold it at bay, has a way of a breaking in, because "it arises out of a sense that there are goals which could engage us more fully and deeply than our ordinary ends ... that somewhere there is a fullness or a richness that transcends the ordinary." This transcendence need not be vertical; it can also be horizontal—calling us into, say, a wider form of service, or of imaginative compassion for our fellow beings.

But the idea that we can long ignore dimensions of Reality that transcend our control routine, or analysis, may be as big a delusion as any ever found in traditional religion.

A relationship turns out not to be what it seemed. A job that gave meaning suddenly ends. You realize that you've been buffering your self's relationship to Reality with alcohol, or illness. That you feel separated from people. Even from your own innermost feelings. From your "soul." Or you realize, as A. Powell Davies put it, that "life is just a chance to grow a soul." You think that you've left "religion" behind. But you're aware that there is still a spiritual dimension, concerned with meaning and value, to your one, mortal life.

What we offer in this parish in response is not a simple, singular path for you to walk, but rather a safe, respectful, pluralistic community in which to discover and follow your own. Sixty years ago in America, only 5% of all people active in religious communities belonged to one different from the "brand" that they were raised in. Today almost 60% of Americans say that they are on a spiritual path different from that of their upbringing. Why? Because of a greater diversity of human encounter; thanks to our secular age.

Recently I read a great sermon by Wellesley Rabbi Ronald Weiss in which he admitted that the most influential book in his life was in fact about Jesus. Called *The New Man*, and written by a psychoanalyst, it was an interpretation of parables and miracles stories in the gospels. It made him new, he said, because it taught him that all faith traditions and their scriptures need to be interpreted on more than one level: a common or literal level, which is where most hearers hear them, and then at a deeper, spiritual level, addressed to a hidden place within us that deeply needs to be aimed beyond us.

Most often we are concerned about the facts and the data that our five senses can deliver within the immanent framework of ordinary, secular living. But to the extent we never or rarely go beyond this level, we can be said to be almost sleep-walking through this life. All of us, for example, hope that we can make a difference in our world while we're here: in the lives of children, friends, community. And, in my theology, as in that of the rabbi, God wants us to do this well: to develop all of the inner potential for good that we have.

Yet we all know from our experience that most of us are less good than we'd like to be. And why is that? Why isn't simple, secular moral teaching enough?—the good that our parents taught us?

Perhaps because each of us has both an outer, social part that aims to accomplish what our society hopes of us, but also has an inner dimension that yearns for something deeper, something that transcends the mere expectations of the social world around us. And this part of us needs to be touched and nourished and challenged as well, if we're truly to grow, from the inside out, and not simply from the outside in.

Now like most liberal clergy, I'm not so much interested in getting people into heaven as I'm interested, as our hymn implied, in getting as much of heaven as possible into people—and even into this all-too-troubled world that we share. I think of the young of today—Lucy, whom we dedicated this morning, and my new granddaughter, Isabel. The world they'll inherit from us will not soon or easily be just a secular world. That seems certain. Given the rapid pace at which the world is shrinking, and the growing interpenetration of cultures, with all the possibility for misunderstanding, intolerance, and outright conflict, no child can wisely be raised to be just anti-religious lest she become religious illiterate, which won't help. Instead, our children must be prepared for a life-long process of religious learning and openness to spiritual and intellectual transformation in dialogue—often with people quite different from themselves. Only that way can they both make a positive difference in the world and truly become their deepest and best selves.

As the rabbi says he learned from reading the stories about Jesus through the lens of the psychoanalyst's book, *The New Man*, each of us is capable of being transformed—of being “born again,” to use traditional Christian language, and again, and again, and again. It's not about accepting Jesus or some guru as “lord and savior.” It's about inner change. And it's not about focusing on what is called “the life eternal,” at least not at the expense of living more fully in the here-and-now. Certainly Jesus didn't seem to want people to wait for the next life to begin fully living, and helping others to live more fully!

You may recall that he himself had particular trouble with those of his time and people who thought of themselves as the “religious” people. What he told them often was that outward conformity, or merely being pious, is not only not the point, but often a barrier. Being thought of by others to be upright, moral, or “good” is never the real point either. Rather the challenge is constantly one of self-transcendence, choosing life so that we ourselves might more fully live, and living so that others also may have the opportunity to unfold the potential God has placed in them, so that they too might have life, and have it more abundantly. *This* is to be authentically religious, or in today’s terms, “spiritual.” This is to lead a secular life that is still relational—open to the Other, to the Transcendent, to the challenge and hope of coming generations.

So let us, and our children, live: here at the intersection of the secular and transcendent—more fully, more openly, more creatively, all our mortal lives. Amen, and amen.

*Hymn 148

Let Freedom Span Both East and West

Jacob Trapp

Let freedom span both east and west, and love both south and north,
In universal fellowship throughout the whole wide earth.

In beauty, wonder, everywhere, let us communion find;
Compassion be the golden cord close-binding humankind.

Beyond all barriers of race, of color, caste, or creed,
Let us make friendship, human worth, our common faith and deed.

Then east and west will meet and share, and south shall build with north,
One human commonwealth of good throughout the whole wide earth.

Benediction

(as adapted at First Parish in Concord, MA)

from I Thess. 5

Go out into the world in peace.
Have courage.
Hold on to what is good.
Return to no person evil for evil
Strengthen the faint-hearted.
Support the weak.
Help the suffering.
Honor all beings. Amen.