

Opening Connection to God in a Secular Culture

Brad Bailey – Sunday, June 3, 2018

The Secularization of Culture

- Secularization is a shift in _____...more not facts
- Secularization closes one off from what lies outside themselves... and with it...the ability to find themselves in relationship to a larger source of identity and meaning.
- Secularization is not the _____ of anything

Opening up space

1. Enjoy the natural connection of _____

“Whatever a person is like, I try to find common ground with him so that he will let me tell him about Christ and let Christ save him.”

-1 Cor. 9:22 (LB)

2. _____ the experiences and thoughts of another that have shaped their current posture.

3. Welcome _____ as part of the opportunity to open up space.

There are challenges to affirm.... presumptions to question...and reasons to believe. If we welcome engaging objections it can open up the space that has been closed down.

4. _____ their story to the Ultimate Story: the story of what it means to be “lost”... as described by Jesus (i.e. the story carried in Genesis, The Parable of the Prodigal Son)

The larger story of our lives which Jesus describes...

- *We were created to be at home with the Source of all life.*
- *We chose to take the goods of life and declare ourselves autonomous.*
- *The reality is that we were given such freedom...but will find we are never “at home”... never valued for who we are.*
- *God is our original source... our ultimate Father... who longs for us to come home to life with Him.*
- *He is the one who can bestow on us the dignity that He created us to have.*
- *As much as we try to name ourselves... or “create a name” for ourselves... only He who created the human soul with sacred dignity...can name us.*
- *He has made a way of grace to come home... by bearing the consequences of our separation.*

5. _____

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Intro

We have spent the past 8 weeks **engaging the questions** of what is involved with belief and engaging some of the questions that must be considered in believing in Christ.

Today, I want to consider **how we talk** about such belief.

How can we open connection to God in a secular culture?

How can those who believe have positive conversations with those who don't yet believe... especially with the more secular perspective of our current culture?

I think **most people feel it's more challenging today to talk about spiritual beliefs** than in the past.

Most people feel there is such a minefield ...often a minefield of misconceptions...that many **just want to withdraw** from sharing about one's beliefs...or perhaps withdraw from belief in itself...just avoid the sense of conflict or rejection.

This tension may reflect that our culture is more cynical about everything...and social media is less personal and therefore **more disrespectful... more intimidating. But perhaps even more at the core ...is an internal shift... people are generally more secular.**

The Secularization of Culture

The word "secular" is often used to simply mean the opposite of that which is deemed "sacred." As "sacred" refers to that which is set apart to God... "secular" can refer to what is not set apart to God. [1]

It's common to assume that our culture is simply shifting away from believing or at least honoring God... based on some form of more progressive or modern understanding of the world. But our cultural shift towards becoming more secular is not that simple or rational.

Philosopher Charles Taylor wrote published a defining work, "The Secular Age,"... just a few years ago. This massive study provides a deeper grasp of the change that has taken place over the last 500 years. What he captures is how **the shift** is actually **not so rooted** in changes regarding **belief in God** as much as changes regarding **belief in self.** [2]

He traces the **slower process** by which a change in how **western lives began to see themselves** as **guarded from the larger world.**

Whereas western civilization had become that which discovered that Christianity always provided for ordinary human flourishing...but under divine grace...slowly this grace became

eclipsed, for **people endowed with reason and benevolence need only these faculties to carry out God's plan.** This eventually leads to what is called an "**exclusive humanism.**"

The shift to "law-governed structure" ...and a social order that can be organized by rational codes, and human relationships which matter are prescribed in the codes. The new way of trying to perceive life... is that we "acquire knowledge by exploring impersonal orders with the aid of disengaged reason" (p. 294) and form "societies under the normative provisions of the **Modern Moral Order.**"

The ultimate order is now deemed to be the human freedom of **finding one's own way.**

Taylor describes this as a shift from which the vulnerable "porous self" became the "buffered self"... disengaged from the transcendent larger questions and forces... no longer in need of relationship with God.

But Taylor captures that there are **cross pressures.** There is a feeling of malaise, of something lost. **Heroism is lost** in the leveling down of aspiration; **utilitarianism is thought too flat and shallow.**

The *cross pressure* describes the individualistic mood of people who feel caught between a closed world without God and a haunting of the transcendent.

So what is helpful to understand about the secular nature of our current culture?

- **Secularization is a shift in beliefs...more than facts**

As Keller notes, we are the first culture that doesn't believe that it is a culture...it just believes it is a universal way that all smart people see things. Our culture is filled with beliefs...but doesn't believe that their way of life is a set of beliefs. The belief that there is no larger reality that I am connected to ... that serves human flourishing beyond myself...is a belief...not a fact.

- **Secularization closes one off from what lies outside themselves...** and with it...the ability to find themselves in relationship to a larger source of identity and meaning.

Yesterday...getting my haircut...and the young adult woman discovered I was a pastor... and that moment didn't lead to an awkward silence... or "how nice" comment. She stopped... and engaged intently...expressing something to the effect... of expressing she has no clear faith...and feels lost. She explained how her grandmother was the source of a real center...but she dies when she was 12...and her parents divorces 2 months later...and her mother stopped paying for her each night...and her father became more atheistic. And now she feel her life is missing something. She shared how she has experiences of a transcendent presence...and ask if I thought that was weird.

Not only was a significant moment...but also a great expression of many whose secular view of reality... has left them closed from the larger reality that they long for.

- **Secularization is not the end of anything**

Secularization is not entirely new. It is the same end to which the pagan world was known to conclude: **“Eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.”** [3]

In many regards this old philosophy of life... arose in 300BC ...and is simply recycling. There is nothing more...so enjoy a life of pleasure without meaning.

The point is: it's not new...and it's not the end to anything.

What the secularization does mean...is that the space of natural engagement is less normal or wide.

There is **an old play on words**...using the spacing of letters that I find reflects the fact that it is **always a matter of a space that changes everything.**

One may live with a mind that perceives...

“God is nowhere.”

Something happens that opens up that closed world...and it leads to discovering...

“God is now here.”

When that one space opens up...it changes everything.

How that space opens is different for everyone. For some... it was created by family and friends they grew up with

But for many ... there initial world was given no space for God.

It may have begun to open by something they read... or heard... or a slow loss of satisfaction in shallow pleasures of life...or a crisis in which the larger questions of meaning arose... or the illusion of control was lost.

There is no formula for the nuances of individuals...and their relationship to one another...and to God...**but there are some principles** that will generally serve in allowing positive conversations.

Opening up space

1. Enjoy the natural connection of common experience.

I think **we often feel the pressure to try to be different**...but we need to think about **how we are different.**

Those who don't know Christ... will often perceive those Christians as so different that they naturally assume they could never be one.

Tim Keller describes the need to be very clear that we **occupy the same world...** and can **care about the same things.**

Remember you still live in the same world.

Ex - Neighborhood holiday parties

The Apostle Paul famously explained in the Scriptures...

"Whatever a person is like, I try to find common ground with him so that he will let me tell him about Christ and let Christ save him." -1 Cor. 9:22 (LB)

We need to enjoy sharing common ground.

Now I certainly would affirm that Christ has brought more change to my reality and life than I can describe. **But life in this world** can still bring the challenges of work... loneliness... conflict... raising children... fear... discouragement... as well as excitement... inspiration... moments of appreciating beauty... We occupy the same world.

2. Explore the experiences and thoughts of another that have shaped their current posture.

My sense is that...

One of the primary difficulties with sharing our experience of Christ with others...is that as soon as someone realizes that someone else is identified as a "Christian"...the expectation is that the nature of relationship is really just a context for a one sided presentation.

I am guilty of just that. I am also well aware that it **usually becomes the beginning of the end.**

So I know that at some point my relationship with Christ will emerge. When it does... I try to stop the space from closing down...but exploring what lies in them.

The other day... neighbor... "I'm Jewish... agnostic." It was his way of presenting that we probably have a closed reality.

3. Welcome objections as part of the opportunity to open up space.

We tend to think of people's objections only as something negative. We think that if someone begins to tell us why they don't believe in God... or why they don't have a negative view of Christians or the church...that it's only going to raise a wall and close down the conversation.

But the truth is that **these objections** have **already been a wall**... a wall that is **often unspoken** and **unengaged**.

What if we welcome the willingness to share them. Most people use objections to close down the space for God. And there is a vulnerability in voicing them.

Over the past 8 weeks we have engaged these difficult areas. In every case I hope we have seen that

There are challenges to affirm.... presumptions to question...and reasons to believe. If we welcome engaging objections it can open up the space that has been closed down.

4. Connect their story to the Ultimate Story: the story of what it means to be “lost”... as described by Jesus (i.e. the story carried in Genesis, The Parable of the Prodigal Son)

I think what many hear is too small a version of what God has revealed. I think they hear that Christians simply believe that they are sinners who need and can be forgiven for their sins. The problem is that few people really have their consciences struck by the conviction that they are a sinner. I think most people hear that the Christian just has their own ideas about a sinner...which they use to judge others...and that the one being judged doesn't accept it...so at best they don't care.

But the forgiveness of sins...is not a comparison of standards...but rather part of a larger story.

Consider with me what Jesus describes as our story... in what is often referred to as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. (Shared a paraphrase.)....

The larger story of our lives which Jesus describes...

- *We were created to be at home with the Source of all life.*
- *We chose to take the goods of life and declare ourselves autonomous.*
- *The reality is that we were given such freedom...but will find we are never “at home”... never valued for who we are.*
- *God is our original source... our ultimate Father... who longs for us to come home to life with Him.*
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This is the larger story that can open up a larger space that one can find themselves in.

Finally... it is vital to understand that this is **far from merely some rational debate...or a clash of worldviews.**

There is a spiritual dimension. So the last point is simple...we need to...

5. Pray

Jesus understood that the very freedom to claim our own sovereignty... that we now experience as part of this world... began in the spiritual realm.

Jesus said this is a **spiritual war** over **what rules the mind of men...**and ultimately **the soul of men.**

So when we join in such a war... it is vital that we **do not think** it is **about us vs. others...** but God confronting all that defies Him.

If we join at all... **we join prayerfully.**

When we **realize that God is actively involved...** we realize that **we can help connect** by praying for people...but more dynamically... the opportunity to **open space right in the moment.**

“Can I pray for you... right now?”

Whenever Jesus encountered a need... we don't hear him say... **“I'll be praying for you.”** Rather he prayed right there.

Sometimes, saying **“I'll pray for you”** is just the Christian equivalent of ending a date by saying **“I'll give you a call.”** It means we're not sure what to say so we say the polite thing despite any real intent.

In being those who bless others... there may be no more powerful seven words than these:

Can I pray for you right now?

Those seven words capture and communicate more than nearly any other seven words we could offer to another person. Those simple words bring to bear so much of what we value and desire to communicate. [4]

Closing: I want to close with perhaps the most important shift we can make. Stop think about telling other about God out of some sense of mere obligation... as if you are fulfilling a job description. Rather... embrace the identity that you are one who has their own story about what it means to become lost...and what coming home to God has involved. Each of us can be those who help open up space to know God.

Closing Prayer:

Who is in your life... lets join in an opportunity to pray.

Notes:

1. Some articles about what secularization is in history and definition

Secular, Secularism, Secularization - International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (2008 Thomson Gale) - <https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/applied-and-social-sciences-magazines/secular-secularism-secularization>

The term secular arises from the history of Christianity and describes that which is not sacred or not of the church. The term secularization thus refers to the process by which human activity and knowledge progressively come under the control of scientific rather than religious understanding. Max Weber (1864–1920) termed this rationalization and intellectualization characteristic of modern times, “the disenchantment of the world” ([1918] 1946, p. 155).

This differentiating of the sacred from the secular is associated with Europe in the seventeenth century. Prior to this time in Europe, and in non-Western cultures generally, the sacred and the secular were not necessarily separate spheres in the context of political rule. Secularism is thus associated with modernity and in the twentieth century has come to refer to two interrelated practices: (1) a mode of political organization in which the state is neutral with reference to all established religions; and (2) later in the century, a political practice of the state that protects the rights of minorities in a multicultural society.

3 Definitions of “Secular” and Why They Matter for Our Mission - OCTOBER 21, 2014 | Trevin Wax

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/3-definitions-of-secular-and-why-they-matter-for-our-mission/>

This is a GREAT summation and application of Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*. It clarifies the need to shift from the paradigm of viewing secular as anti-religious...and this becoming antagonistic...to that of seeing that secular is now defining a lack of any sense of certainty of belief...and therefore is an era where both believer and unbeliever will doubt... and have more space to question.

“...the better way forward is to recognize that we are all secular in the third sense. We inhabit a secular world in which even the most committed rationalists may confess a longing for transcendence, a sense of loss, even though it is difficult to articulate. Meanwhile, the most committed believers are aware that being “of no faith” is a legitimate option in society and, as a result, they may wrestle with doubts their forefathers would have never entertained.

In a secular age, we are all more likely to doubt our beliefs; the faithful will question truths once taken for granted, and the faithless may doubt their doubts because of a sense that something of

significance is beyond us and beyond our definitions of human flourishing, to break in and give us meaning.

According to the second definition, the “faith option” is less and less available to us because of science’s triumph. If we go after this view of secularism with guns blazing, we put people in the situation where they feel they must choose *either* science *or* faith, and such a false dichotomy flattens both science and faith, ignoring the faith-based assumptions at the root of all scientific inquiry and ignoring the objective, historical elements at the heart of some faiths (particularly, Christianity).

Taylor’s third definition better explains a world that is as religiously fervent as ever, yet within a different frame – one in which we often *expect* people to choose not to believe, or confess they find believing to be difficult. Arguing against “secularity” would be like medieval people arguing against the medieval age.”

We are all secular in Taylor’s third sense; the question is, what does mission look like in the age in which we find ourselves?

2. A Secular Age by Charles Taylor (October 20, 2007) - This Canadian philosopher develops a massive work to explain the rise of secularization for the past 500 years...and the decline of religion. This work has become defining for many...who then have written works drawing upon it. One many deem most helpful is: How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor by James K. A. Smith (May 1, 2014). Some of this section is adapted from summary-assessments made in article...primarily found at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org>

Some great thought available online connected to this topic and work includes:

- How to Preach to the Secular Age by John Starke (APRIL 19, 2018) |
- Ministering to Millennials in a Secular Age by Derek Rishmawy (JANUARY 23, 2018)
- How Sharing the Gospel in Our Secular Age Is Different – an exchange with Tim Keller • Russell Moore • Collin Hansen (SEPTEMBER 19, 2017) - |

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-sharing-the-gospel-in-our-secular-age-is-different/>

3. The phrase “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die”... has an older philosophical origin.

EPICURUS (Circa 300 BC) was a Greek philosopher who deemed that if there were gods...they had nothing that intersected the lives of men. He emphasized that since we do not know why we were born, for what purpose and know nothing about what would happen to us after we die, we should enjoy life as best as we can. Epicureanism was later summed up as a motto: eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die. It is also known as hedonism, the philosophy of good living.

Biblical references to that or similar perspective can be found in Ecclesiastes 11:9; Isaiah 22:13; Proverbs 23:35; Luke 12:19; 1 Corinthians 15:32;

4. Dianne Leman (Co-Senior Pastor of Vineyard of Champaign-Urbana, Illinois) caught how these seven words—seven simply supernatural words— “Can I pray for you right now?” ... capture the essence of the five core values of the Vineyard movement:

- The Theology and Practice of the Kingdom of God
- Experiencing God
- Reconciling Community
- Compassionate Ministry
- Culturally Relevant Mission

Resources: The following were not generally used in this message...but are good resources for exploring the nature of secularization and sharing spiritual influence.

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https://www.amazon.com/dp/0674026764?tag=amz-mkt-chr-us-20&ascsubtag=1ba00-01000-org00-win10-other-nomod-us000-pcomp-feature-scomp-wm-5&ref=aa_scomp

Tim Keller - Making Sense of God: Finding God in the Modern World. (2016, Penguin Publishing Group)

The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures by Jayson George Timē Press (October 23, 2014)

To Light a Fire on the Earth: Proclaiming the Gospel in a Secular Age by Robert Barron (Author), John L. Allen Jr. (Author) (2017) - <https://www.amazon.com/Light-Fire-Earth-Proclaiming-Secular/dp/1524759503>; The Bishop of LA Diocese is leading a call and commission to restore Catholic evangelism.