

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Challenges to the Gospel in the 21st Century: The challenge of militant secularism

“All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.” This well known quote from George Orwell’s famous book *‘Animal Farm’*, has been on the radio several times recently as the anniversary of his death has been commemorated. It comes to my mind as I consider the attitude of some militant secularists today. But before I launch into my topic, I think a few definitions will help us understand what I have in mind.

Secular: The dictionary gives many definitions but I am using it in the fairly simple sense of not concerned with, or related to, religion.

Secular State: By this, I mean the concept of a country that is officially neutral in religious matters, neither supporting any religion or non-religion.

Secularism: I use this to describe the view that religion and religious considerations should be ignored or excluded from social and political matters.

Militant Secularism: I use this phrase to mean an aggressive form of secularism that seeks to systematically exclude all expression and discussion of religion from the public realm. In the UK, the National Secular Society and the British Humanist Association are probably the best known advocates of this position. Recent examples of militant secularism are:

- A campaign to change the Scouts and Guides promises to exclude any reference to God
- A campaign to end state subsidy of religious schools
- A campaign to remove the tax exemptions for churches
- Attempts to have atheists on Radio 4’s *‘Thought for the day’* programme, or to discontinue the programme
- A successful campaign to repeal UK blasphemy law.

That some issues and activities are fundamentally secular, rather than religious or spiritual is not really disputed. Most Christians make some distinction between their secular occupation and activities and their spiritual activities - although I will have more to say about the dangers of a strong separation a little later. Few Christians would want to live in a Muslim state, under sharia law. Nor should we want to try and enforce Christianity by legislation and allow a state approved church to control legislation.

Secularism, however, moves on a step further and claims that no religion should have any part in social or political affairs, and more militant expressions of this position have been increasing in recent times. It is claimed that the intention is simply to ensure a ‘level playing field’, where no religious group has any advantage, and this has a superficial appearance of fairness. But, when we examine it a little more carefully, we find that the approach to equality is similar to that of the pigs in *Animal Farm*, and that some are considered more equal than others! The fundamental, logical flaw is the underlying assumption that secularism, or non-religion, is a completely neutral position, while religious views are inherently biased. If you apply that logic, then it is possible to argue that excluding religion from public life removes bias. But if you regard secularism, or non-religion, as one competing view along with the other, religious views, then it is immediately obvious that adopting an absolute secularism is simply granting a huge advantage to the secularists! If this is allowed, then the only view ever heard in the social and political arenas will be that of secularism.

Militant secularists will usually argue that they are not seeking to silence religion. They claim to defend the rights of individuals to have religious beliefs, but insist that those beliefs cannot be expressed in, or allowed to influence, any public roles or duties. In recent times, the definition of the public realm has been extended to include more and more areas of life, so that now work life, and almost any interaction with people in public places, are regarded by some as

places where religion must be excluded. A little thought on the claims that Christianity makes on the whole of our lives, makes clear that such attitudes are incompatible with biblical Christianity.

Challenges to a New Testament view of the world

Let's look at some of the challenges to a New Testament view of the world that this kind of secularism represents. We will consider them under the following four headings:

- a. Spiritual/secular separation
- b. Primacy of God and His claims
- c. Public life
- d. Witness.

a. Spiritual/secular separation

I mentioned earlier, the way we often separate our lives into spiritual and secular parts. We do spiritual things on Sunday in our prayers and Bible reading, and when doing outwardly Christian service. We do secular things at work, in our leisure activities and when we eat and drink. However, this neat division is not really a biblical one, and can be rather dangerous. Both the Old Testament and New Testament writers clearly thought that **all** of a person's life is lived in God's sight and should be part of our obedience to Him. In 1 Corinthians 10:31, Paul lists 'eating and drinking' as activities that should be done before God. "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." In Ephesians 6:5-9 and Colossians 3:22-4:6, Paul also sets out how Christians must behave in what we would think of as employer/employee relationships. In short, God lays a claim on our entire lives, and no part of what we do can ever be considered completely secular. This means that it is simply not possible for Christians to accept that their faith be restricted to their private lives. We work as Christians, think as Christians, speak as Christians and debate as Christians. Clearly we don't have to explain to our work colleagues how each action we take is influenced by our faith in Christ, but sometimes it will be necessary to explain why we do, or do not do, certain things. In fact it is the very public matters of justice, social policy, ethics etc, where it is most likely that the thinking and attitude of a Christian will be most obviously guided by their beliefs. It is simply not reasonable that they should not be able to articulate the basis of their thinking in these areas. We also return to the glaring unfairness of the extreme secularist's position. The secular thinker is, of course, basing all his reasoning on secular grounds, and is therefore free to explain his case fully. The religious person is excluded from stating his case from a religious position; he must confine himself to secular considerations only. This is very far from being a level playing field.

b. Primacy of God and His claims

What makes militant secularism so incompatible with Christianity is the way that it deliberately excludes God, and puts human beings in first place. In my personal Bible study, I read recently the sad account, in 1 Samuel 8:1-21, of how the nation of Israel insisted that they must have a king, like the other nations around them (1 Samuel 8:5). Samuel was upset by their stubbornness, but God told him that the people were not rejecting Samuel; they were rejecting God from reigning over them (1 Samuel 8:7). It is a low point in Israel's history, and the consequences were far from happy. If Israel were wrong to reject God as their king, and insist on putting a human king between themselves and God, what can we say about a philosophy that attempts to entirely expel all mention of God from public life? It is this absolute rejection of God, that makes the position not just philosophically wrong, but fundamentally sinful. It reminds us of Paul's condemnation in Romans 2 of those who chose to exclude God from their thinking and were condemned to increasing degradation.

c. Public Life

Attempts to change the promises made by scouts and guides in order to omit the existing promise to serve God, may not be considered by all Christians to be very vital, but they do demonstrate again the double standard that often operates in these situations. Secularists argue that children who do not believe in God may be excluded from these organisations, because they cannot make the promise required. The assumption is that a promise along the lines of, 'I promise to be true to myself', will be acceptable to all, and therefore non-discriminatory. Leaving aside whether a Christian can actually promise to be true to themselves in good conscience, and even whether the phrase means anything coherent at all (!), we have to ask whether, using this logic, Christian children are being discriminated against by having to write about evolution in science exams. Any assertion that evolution is a fact, is no more fair an argument than me saying that God, and our obligation to serve Him are facts!

The case for allowing secular speakers in the '*Thought for the Day*' programme is equally biased. As the BBC usually points out when the issue is raised, secular points of view are expressed on the radio, in almost every programme. Religious expression is normally excluded from the majority of broadcasts. Therefore to allow secular speakers on the programme would actually distort balance, and to stop the programme entirely would mean that one point of view had

no public voice at all. A secular state is meant to prevent any religious group from having a privileged position. It is not necessary to exclude all religious voices to achieve this.

d. Witness

As the definition of the public realm in which religious expression is deemed unacceptable is continuously extended, there are fewer and fewer areas in which evangelism is permitted. This may be acceptable to those religions that do not have a strong belief in making converts, but it is not acceptable to Christians. If we really believe that every member of the human race is heading towards eternal judgement, we simply cannot accept being told that it is not permissible to speak to others with a view to converting them.

Our situation today is roughly parallel to that in Daniel 6:1-28. Daniel, and all the people living in the Medo-Persian Empire, were forbidden to make requests of any god or man, apart from the king, for 30 days. In effect, no public religious activity was permitted for 30 days (Daniel 6:6-9). Only secular requests to the king were permitted. Militant secularists would have been very impressed with the 'progressive' nature of this law! Daniel was rather unimpressed and proceeded to continue his practice of regular, daily prayer to God, refusing to hide what he was doing from onlookers (Daniel 6:10). Even though Daniel was an exile from God's land and living under Gentile rule, indeed Daniel held a very senior government job under the Gentiles, he clearly believed that some of his duties to God were more important than his civic duties.

How to respond

What does a faithful Christian response to these challenges look like? I will try and give a brief outline under five headings:

- a. With grace
- b. Reasonably or logically
- c. Biblically
- d. Robustly
- e. Campaigns and lobbying.

a. With grace

As the phrase 'militant secularism' suggests, some of its supporters can be rather aggressive. People like Richard Dawkins (a well known humanist and opponent of religions in general, and Christianity in particular) can sound very harsh and rather arrogant when they speak in the media. Even atheists can be alienated by the way they often sound more dogmatic and judgemental than the 'fundamentalists' they regularly condemn! It is important that Christians always speak graciously and thoughtfully, and the more strident the opposition, the more important it is to meet it gently. Paul says, in Colossians 4:6, "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one." I think too many of us believe this means, "With salt, seasoned with grace!" That is, we speak very bluntly, and add a few more gracious words at the end. We, who live constantly in need of God's grace, and were recipients of that grace even when we were still God's enemies, must be always ready to show it to everybody else. Perhaps especially to our opponents.

b. Reasonably or logically

Part of the purpose of this talk is to help us all think through the case against secularism carefully, and in such a way that we can explain ourselves to non-Christians in a manner they can understand. One of the most popular arguments for secularism is that religious views are arbitrary, traditional and unreasoned. We can make a very good case that our views are both reasonable and fair. It is tempting to say things like, "God says clearly...", and think we have made our point. Of course, we Christians know that God's statements are both logical and authoritative, but non-believers don't accept this form of reasoning, and it just makes us appear to be arguing for some kind of Christian state religion. "The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious", said Solomon in Ecclesiastes 10:12. Reasoned thoughts and gracious words still fit well together today.

c. Biblically

Please don't take my references to logic and reason to imply that I am forgetting the authority of God's word. Our thinking must always be based on God's thinking, and that is only revealed to us by the Bible. Christian voices in the public realm will only be valuable when what they are saying is based on God's word. We just need to remember that non-Christians do not share our belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, and so we will have to explain ourselves more carefully, and root our explanations in ideas and values that they **do** accept.

d. Robustly

It is possible to be gracious and reasonable and still be robust. By this I mean, that while we must speak thoughtfully and politely, we don't have to apologise for our beliefs or feel in any way inferior to secularist thinkers. If we believe what they say is wrong, we don't have to agree with them, or keep quiet! If our case is reasonable, we should be ready to defend it with confidence. The more militant secularists speak as if they had all the moral high ground. Their way of thinking, they infer, has all the weight of science and pure reason behind it, and religious believers are superstitious primitives, clinging to fairy tales. The debate is much more fairly represented as two competing views of existence: one that accepts only the material world, and one that **does** accept the existence of a material world, but also insists there is an interconnected, spiritual world as well. Neither side can conclusively prove their position is correct (at least not this side of Christ's return!), and both sides make a series of assumptions and statements that they could not prove in a court of law, and that their opponents strongly dispute.

e. Campaigns and lobbying

We have mentioned some of the campaigns that secularists have mounted in the past, or are still involved in. I firmly believe that Christians have things to do in this world that are of rather more eternal benefit than campaigning, but that does not mean we should just 'surrender the field' and let the militant secularists have their own way. We need to be aware of what our opponents are doing, and be ready to respond. The response must be on several levels. We should always pray. "Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men for kings and all who are in authority", 1 Timothy 2:1-2. We might also write to our MP, or to the BBC, or other media organisations. We should be ready to engage in conversation and debate with work colleagues and friends, so that they do not simply accept the propaganda of strident secularism without real thought. We need as many people as possible to at least understand the Christians' viewpoint, and the conflicts that these issues can cause for all Christians, but especially those with jobs in the public arena.

Final thoughts

We have been thinking, throughout this series, of some of the challenges that Christians face today. The challenges are many and varied, but they all arise from the fact that Christians are living in a world that has a different set of values and rules, and does not accept God's right to tell them how to live. Consequently, whenever we try and live faithfully to Christ and His claims, we find ourselves constantly running into attitudes, and structures of society, that are moving in another direction. This has been the case from the beginning of Christianity. Indeed it was the case in the Old Testament as well, and God has provided us with all the resources we need to live faithfully in these circumstances. I hope this series has helped you to see some of the challenges of the days we live in a little more clearly, and helped you to understand how you, like David, can "serve [your] own generation by the will of God", Acts 13:36.

I want to end by reminding us that the word 'challenge' can have positive overtones. For a while, it was fashionable in the business world to refuse to talk about problems, and to re-label these situations as challenges! The idea was that a challenge is something you can rise to, an opportunity to show initiative and learn new skills. There will never be any shortage of challenges for the faithful believer, so let's use them as opportunities to grow in our faith, and learn how to meet challenges by standing with the God who will ultimately defeat every thing and everybody that rises against Him.

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