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### THE PRESSURE OF SECULARISM

David Phillips

*“Do not let the world squeeze you into its mould.” – Rom 12.1 (J.B.Phillips translation)*

There is continuing pressure within the United Kingdom to see ourselves as a secular nation. This manifests itself in various ways including the continuing debates about the place of faith schools and even the coronation oath. But secularism creates a tension for the Christian because it requires that we be shaped by the world’s mould, that we allow our faith to impact only certain areas of life.

#### What is Secularism?

Secularism is “the view that religious considerations should be excluded from civil affairs or public education.” (dictionary.com) Therefore in a purely secular state there would be no preferential treatment given to any religious viewpoint, indeed in both local and national affairs there would be no place given to religious convictions. In education comparative religion is permissible and the simple description of religious practices or history, but such teaching must not attempt to present religion as attractive and certainly not appear to favour a particular religion.

Taking a definition along the lines above, it is quite clear that, whatever the pressure, Britain is not a secular state (see article below). But the pressure to become such is very evident and perhaps growing. For those who are atheists of whatever strand (or creed) it is perfectly understandable why they should wish the state to ditch any association with Christianity. However, the arguments for a secular state are more complex than this and are being put forward by some evangelical Christians. Part of the reason for this is the perception that Britain is now a multi-faith society and the growing influence of Muslims.

#### Holding Islam at bay

Faced with a growing Islamic militancy, and growing numbers of Muslims in Britain, there is a strong temptation to affirm that Britain is a secular state where there is a clear division between religion and politics. Therefore, on this basis, Muslims are free to practice their religion in Britain but should not bring their religion into the political sphere. Similarly there is a fear that Muslim faith-schools will exacerbate divisions within society, so the argument is put forward that we should not have faith-schools at all. Alongside this we have the recent innovation of lessons on Britishness which are an attempt to articulate values which mark out what we presently are as against what we might become. Secularists endeavour to sound reasonable in all this, and not to sound anti-Islam by ensuring that they equate fundamentalist Islam with fundamentalist Christians. So Christians who are involved in education are often portrayed as dangerous and wacky.

It would appear that in the eyes of many Muslims the battle between Christianity and secularism has been won by the secularists. In their view Christians have largely retreated from the public sphere and they see this as evidence for the weakness of the Christian faith. Many Muslims see secularism as the great enemy of their faith. If secularists are preventing them from living out their faith in particular ways then secularism must be the work of the devil. The only possible hope for the secularists is if Muslims do what many Christians have done which is make their faith secondary to their secular values, so that they become secular-Muslims. This is certainly how many feminists approach Islam, they believe, or have believed, that exposure to western values will change the outlook of Muslims and there is some evidence that this is so, but on the whole it is not working.

## **Christianity and secularism**

What about Christians? History shows that Christians can live and flourish in any state, indeed one could almost say that the more antagonistic the state is to Christianity the more the Christian faith has flourished. But there are outworkings of Christian faith which impact on the public sphere. Some of these have to do with the desire of Christians to love God and some to do with our desire to love our neighbour.

A classic example of love for neighbour would be the treatment of young and unborn children. In the Graeco-Roman world into which the gospel burst forth abortion was common, and so was infanticide. When Christianity began to take hold of the empire these practices were challenged not simply because Christians believed them to be a scar on society but because of a love for neighbour, a concern for those unable to help themselves including the baby and unborn child. Yet here is an area where Christian faith impacts on the public sphere. The best way to prevent such horrors is to change people's hearts so that they no longer wish to do such things, and this is to a large extent what happened, but Christians have also been prepared to use the law to protect the weak and promote what is good.

Another example would be gambling. In recent years the state has encouraged gambling and used it to raise funds. Christians have traditionally opposed gambling for various reasons including that we do not believe the universe is ruled by chance. The National Lottery is almost the official religion of Darwinism; pay your tithes and the great god of Chance will bless you, or not. But Christians historically have also opposed gambling, and state sponsored gambling in particular, because of the great social evil it creates and the damage done to individuals and families. Thus we oppose such practices partly because it is based on a lie, and partly because we love our neighbours, and do not wish to see them ruin their lives and turn themselves into slaves to addiction.

So too with education. Christians provided the great impetus for education. Whilst there is a strong desire amongst Christians to ensure that their children are taught within a Christian context and framework, this has not been the main motivation for Christian education. Rather what drove people was the desire to love their neighbour. Christians have been concerned to teach a clear moral framework. We believe that the world will be a better place without murder, theft, adultery and so on. Therefore, by teaching these commands to others we are showing the love of God. But Christians have also wanted to use the opportunities education provides to present the gospel, because we do not wish anyone to perish. The motive for such involvement in education, at its purest, is love. It is not hard to see why some atheists are infuriated by this. Christians have wanted to be involved in education although it is not hard to see why some atheists are infuriated by it. Of course we do also want our children to be taught in a Christian context and it seems only right therefore to allow others, whether atheists, Jews or Muslims have the same opportunities. But strident secularists are not prepared to allow such parity, they want to ensure that all children are taught in a purely secular context.

## **What is secularism?**

This brings us back to the question of what secularism really is. We have defined it as the desire to exclude religion from public life. Some argue for secularism purely on the basis that they wish to allow different religious groups to co-exist and believe this is the only way to allow such to happen. Yet for many people secularism is itself an ideology and as such can perhaps be better defined as secular humanism. This is the belief that religion is irrelevant and unnecessary and the genuine secular humanist will therefore be seeking to eradicate all religion. Some states, in particular communist countries, have pursued this as a goal. There is the famous quotation from the French Revolution when one of the revolutionaries boasted to a peasant "we are going to pull down everything that reminds you of God". This indeed is the objective of many political movements in

recent centuries. But the peasant responded “Citizen, then pull down the stars.” In the same way, to the obvious infuriation of some secular humanists, religion of all sorts has proved remarkably durable. At present in western democracies secular humanists do not try to suppress religion outright. Nevertheless there are those who take every opportunity to ridicule religion and to misrepresent it and the mainstream media is their chief tool and apparently all too willing to promote their views. The pernicious thing is that broadcasters appear unwilling to allow the promotion of religious views through their media but are content to promote anti-religion. In the same way the goal of a secular state is pursued by some because they see this as a positive step in achieving the marginalization of religion along the way to eradicating it entirely.

Christians are in danger of responding to the growing presence of other religions by capitulating to secularism. Part of the motivation for this is fear of Islam, yet we have no evidence secularism can resist Islam. By doing this we are also playing into the hands of those who oppose the Christian faith. It is a policy of defeat of admitting that we are beaten, that Christians cannot confidently live out our faith in the public arena. But it also means that we privatise our religion, largely keeping it out of the public arena, which involves us in large part rejecting the commands to love God and to love our neighbour.