

“The Seculosity Impulse”

Acts 17:22-31

Seems like everywhere Christians turn these days, there’s another article or survey about the decline of faith and the rise of secularism in Western culture.

The number of people who declare themselves to be religious “nones” (people who claim no religious faith) is on the rise. “Nones” represent 23.1 percent of the U.S. population in 2019, up from 21.6 percent in 2016. That means that “nones” are statistically tied with Roman Catholics as the largest religious — or non-religious — groups in the country.

We generally think of this shift as a rise in secularism, with people of faith increasingly feeling like they’re on a culturally endangered species list. But is this trend really a jettisoning of religion, or is it merely a shift *toward secularity as a religion in and of itself?*

This is the thesis that David Zahl explores in his book *Seculosity: How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics and Romance Became Our New Religion and What to Do About It*. Combining the word “secular” and “religiosity,” Zahl invents a new word that describes what might actually be happening in our culture: “the religious impulse is easier to rebrand than extinguish.”

He defines religion as “a controlling story” or “the question of how we dispose our energies, how we see fit to organize our own lives and, in many cases, the lives of others.” A *person’s “religion” in that case is shorthand for the lens through which that person sets priorities, focuses desires and looks at the rest of the world.* It’s religion as the ultimate pursuit of happiness or, the pursuit of “enoughness”:

the idea that if we were to just be successful enough, happy enough, thin enough, woke enough or good enough then we would actually *be* enough. As a result, we'll religiously pursue those things that promise to help us get to that enoughness even if, in the end, they don't satisfy our deepest needs.

To put it another way, people are seeking a religious faith that will help them feel like they are enough, but they're looking in all the wrong places. The real God they seek is the one many have actually rejected or, the God they have never known at all.

It's not hard to see the connection between the current state of our culture and the story of Paul's encounter in Athens, where much of the foundational philosophy of our current Western culture originated. In a cosmopolitan city known for its many gods, pursuits, ideas and pleasures, Paul will point out the religious impulse in people and redirect it to the "unknown God" who trumps all the others. *In that way, he provides a model for us as we navigate across the uncertain seas of our contemporary culture of secularity.*

As Paul waits for his companions Silas and Timothy to join him in Athens, Paul was "deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (v. 16). The pantheon of Greek gods and goddesses was well-known in the ancient world, and many of the same gods had been adopted and rebranded by the Romans.

Most of those gods were linked with some aspect of life, be it romance (Aphrodite/Venus), reason (Athena/Minerva), war (Ares/Mars) or even messaging (Hermes/Mercury). Religious cults developed around each god or goddess, and their temples were well-known across the Roman world.

In addition to the stone statues of the gods, philosophers were also present on the streets touting their ideas. Paul debated in the synagogue with his fellow Jews, but also with Epicureans and Stoics who wrestled over the culture's worldview. The Epicureans were upper-class elites — deists who believed the gods weren't that involved in human life and, if they were, they wanted people to be happy. Life for the Epicureans involved the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain.

The Stoics, on the other hand, opposed both pleasure and the Epicureans. They still professed belief in the gods but questioned the old traditions.

The connections between the secularity of our own culture and that of Athens aren't exact parallels, but there are a lot of similarities. People have developed their own quasi-religious cults around a variety of aspects of life.

- *Busyness* – “Busyness remains attractive because it does double duty, allowing us to feel like we're advancing on the path of life while distracting us from other, less pleasant realities, like doubt and uncertainty and death.” Ask someone how they are and they will respond, almost liturgically, “I'm very busy.” For me busyness is a god.
- *Romance* – “The love partner becomes the divine ideal within which to fulfill one's life. All spiritual and physical needs now become focused in one individual.”
Aphrodite is alive and well.

- *Parenting* – The rise of “helicopter parenting” betrays the belief that there is no future for our kids, no enoughness, beyond that which parents can engineer for them. Parents are the saviors in this religious expression.
- *Food* – “Food now expresses the symbolic values and absorbs the spiritual energies of the educated class.” “It has become invested with the meaning of life. It is seen as the path to salvation for the self and humanity, both.” In this cult, you are what you eat! Grilled homegrown Black Angus steaks and Dortmunders.
- *Technology* – We bow to our screens as a way of distracting ourselves from reality. “We flee from boredom because of what we encounter there, namely, ourselves ... Screens distract us from our core pain, which is the pain of not being enough.”

Politicians are worshiped as cult leaders.

- *Politics* – Political stances become religious claims. “Moral outrage fills a psychological need. It allows a person to feel like she matters, especially when she’s afraid she doesn’t.” Smaller cults like the Proud Boys join with other cults to give themselves the illusion that they matter when they are afraid they don’t matter.

The gods and goddess of the ancient world are still around; they’re just a little less statuesque. Philosophers still abound, be it the Epicurean pursuit of pleasure or the Stoic skepticism about old traditions and institutions.

Paul’s preaching about Jesus and the resurrection caused some level of intellectual discomfort, mostly because the truth he was proclaiming seemed to be about “foreign

divinities” (v. 18). In a world of secular religiosity, the good news about Jesus will always seem foreign. It did then, and it does now!

Like Socrates (who was accused of a similar kind of religious disruption), Paul was led to the Areopagus (the “hill of Mars”) near the Acropolis where the Athenian court was located. “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?” they asked. “It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means” (vv. 19-20). Luke notes that the Athenians and foreigners living in Athens loved to spend their time “in nothing but telling or hearing something new” (v. 21). Ironically, Paul was about to tell them the truth that emerged out of a very old story.

Paul’s address to the Athenians is both courageous and courteous. He begins by acknowledging their religiosity, even though Paul knows that their gods are no gods at all. “I see how extremely religious you are in every way,” says Paul (v. 23). That’s quite a different approach than criticizing a secularizing trend, which is what we Christians tend to do. Paul doesn’t see the Athenians *as far from God but as on the way to God*; that their good religious impulses only need to be redirected.

When people have a religious impulse, no matter where it’s directed, we should acknowledge that *they are moving in the right direction*. They’re seeking something and, like Paul, we need to be ready to point out the real object of their search when they’re ready to hear about it. Paul pointed the Athenians to the statue they had erected to “an unknown god” and then proceeded to fill in the blank (v. 23).

The Athenians were motivated to hear, and many people in our culture will be motivated as well when the alternate gods they've chosen ultimately fail to deliver the enoughness they seek. Paul doesn't begin by saying, "You idolaters! You've got it all wrong!" He begins with meeting people where they were and with encouraging them to keep looking.

"What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you," Paul continues (v. 23). He proceeds to talk about the one God, the Creator God, the Lord of heaven and earth, who doesn't dwell in temples (v. 24). This God is not served by human hands like the gods in the temples (and the gods in our kitchens, on our computer screens, and in our social media feeds) who require constant maintenance. He is the One who "give to all mortals life and breath in all things" (v. 25). This is the God who created humanity, the nations and their boundaries, and God did it "so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him — though he is indeed not far from each one of us" (vv. 26-27).

Paul even quotes from the Greek poet Epimenides in order to show his listeners the truth about the God they don't yet know. "For we too are his offspring" (v. 28). Since God is a living God, he is not the kind of god that can be formed by materials crafted by human hands, no matter how artistic (v. 29). Paul reveals the plan God has been working from the beginning — a plan that doesn't culminate in humans creating gods but in God becoming human. "And of this he has given assurance to all," Paul says, "by raising him from the dead" (vv. 30-31).

What Paul does here is increasingly narrow the focus from creation to humanity to Jesus. It's shorthand for the entire story of the Bible, which is the ultimate "controlling story" for human life.

In a culture of secularity, Christians must become storytellers who point to the climax of the story in Jesus Christ. He is the One who provides the enoughness we seek. As Paul puts it in Colossians 1:17, “He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

When we encounter the story of what God has done in Jesus Christ, it puts the gods of secularity into perspective. We recognize how they fail us and how they are really a mask for covering our fear of death. *We feel like having enough or being enough will keep death at bay, whereas the Christian story is one where death is defeated, and resurrection is the end game.* It’s little wonder that Paul’s mention of resurrection prompted some to scoff and others to want to hear more (v. 32). Those who’ve learned the hard way that the false gods of secularity can’t deliver what they’re looking for may be more willing to listen to a message of hope.

Rather than decrying the march of “secularism,” we would do better to share the story of Jesus. A few practical steps:

- Identify the places in your own life where you’ve relied on the gods of secularity for your “enoughness” instead of relying on God.
- Instead of railing about “secular” culture in person or on social media, tell more stories of how Christ has impacted your life and the lives of others. Demonstrate how Jesus has provided you with “enough.”
- Like Paul, meet people where they are rather than where you want them to be. Get to know their motivation before insisting on changing their behavior. Demonstrate the difference Christ has made in your life as you deepen your relationship. Such an approach invites people to “hear you again about this” (v. 32).

As we are tempted, so will our children be tempted by the gods of busyness, romance, food, and especially technology. Screens will distract them from relationships with family, friends, and church.

May the gift of the Holy Spirit entering into us as we grow our faith and love for God in the years to come.

May the peace of God . . .

#652 – Built on a Rock