

Should we fear or cheer the rise of Secularism?



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

Definitions of the term “secular” come from Latin, “saeculum”: the present age. Emphasis is on “attitudes and activities that have no religious basis.” In Astronomy, it refers to “slow changes in the motion of the sun or planets.”

Given these meanings, it never ceases to amaze me that so many fear secular ideas and secular people. Talk about “slow changes.” Personally, I think we should celebrate the word, since it isn’t anti-religious but offers a basis for any chosen worldview or belief, and protects everyone because it’s not beholden to any particular faith.

A famous preacher claims it has “infiltrated” the nation and “stormed through the gates” of America. In his mind, it’s a “very dangerous” threat to people of faith and our whole way of life.

The boogeyman? Secularism. And the scariest part of it, apparently, is that it’s “godless.” However, another definition of secularism doesn’t emphasize that. It is “the principle of separation of the state from religious institutions.” Secularism guards against theocracy.

Does any of this sound familiar? We need only think back to the 1950’s. People were so scared of “the menace” of Communism and its atheism (though not all Communists are atheists) that people were tried in the court of public opinion and our godly protectors added “under God” to the Pledge. That was supposed to expose the non-religious who would choose not to say those words.

Seems to me, when we judge, exclude or divide people based on religious beliefs, we actually threaten our own freedom to follow our conscience.

God-less doesn’t mean Good-less. When we define people by what they don’t have – home-less, job-less, god-less – it seems that it makes us all “less”: less united, less free, less human. There’s an assumption a person without religious faith is less of a good citizen, maybe less ethical.

Does Secularism worry you? Fact is, any “ism” needs to be scrutinized. A philosophy or worldview (including religious “ism”) is open to question and investigation. Secularism sees this world as the only one we can experience – the only one we know anything about – one planet to share. We know nothing about any other world. Many religious people, whose faith is “grounded” in another world, hear that as a threat – an imagined secular attack.

Nearly one quarter of Americans consider themselves “religiously unaffiliated” (PRRI.org). That doesn’t mean they are secular; they just don’t identify as religious.

Secularists (including humanists, freethinkers, agnostics and many atheists) are not seeking to destroy faith or remove all religion from society. Some believers want to “bring (their) God back” into schools and government, but many other believers join the secular community in resisting that. Most humbly considerate people of faith aren’t concerned with forcing their faith on others – they’re too busy addressing the needs of this world (perhaps using Jesus as their model) to be distracted by another world.

I’ve spoken with a few evangelicals whose faith isn’t so much about the after-life but the before-death. That doesn’t make them converts to secularism, just sensible.

In my days of youthful evangelicalism, a friend took me to the home of a Mormon family. I was uncomfortable and they could tell. The mother sat down by me and asked what was bothering me. “I think the Devil has deceived Mormons and your faith is not of God.” I could see she was genuinely hurt, and to this day I feel a pang of embarrassment that I said that. We were steeped in a culture “under siege” by the forces of

Evil, feeling our own satanic panic. Someone was out to get us, to attack our faith and take our God away. Now I wonder: was our faith so weak? Was our God so small?

If there was some force, power, philosophy or political ideology seeking to rid the world of great literature, art or ideas, I would stand beside anyone to resist. If someone made it their mission to tell people they couldn’t pray, read their holy book or practice their faith, I would stand up and speak out. But I don’t see or hear that.

The preachers of paranoia, who fill masses of minds with fear-based faith, are the ones to stand against. This is one powerful way believers and nonbelievers can stand together in resistance. A good secular thing to do!

“Secularism” is not “infiltrating” our communities to take anyone’s faith or freedom away. There is no devilish monster sneaking around to make us all atheists (or even seculars).

Are there people who would like us to believe the same things, giving up freedom of choice and rational freethinking to fearfully follow their “authorities”? Sure.

Chances are they’re not secular.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. Learn more at chighland.com.