

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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21-22 May 2011

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

A College Major in Secularism?

Pitzer College, a small liberal arts college in Southern California, will inaugurate this fall a department in secular studies. Classes taught by professors from the other departments of the college will include, “God, Darwin and Design in America,” “Anxiety in the Age of Reason,” and “Bible as Literature.” This new department is based on the premise that studying nonbelief is as valid as studying belief. Among other things, this department will also study the growing waves of secularization in Western Europe and in Canada. The head of the department is Phil Zuckerman, a sociologist of religion, who describes himself as “culturally Jewish, but agnostic-atheist on questions of deep mystery.” In his book, *Culture Wars* [Basic Books, 1991], sociologist James Davison Hunter argues that American culture is experiencing a crisis of moral authority. One side of the cultural cleavage, “the progressive,” claims that the individual self is the source of moral authority, while the other side, “the orthodox,” claims that something transcendent is the source of moral authority. This struggle to define America’s cultural center informs the debate over abortion, euthanasia, sexuality issues, education, law and the role of government in our lives. It is a battle for the future. The “progressive” side of this cleavage argues from a naturalistic perspective. There is an inherent antisupernaturalism in this position. For most people committed to modern thinking, physical matter is all that there is. God does not exist and religion is irrelevant. As religion fades, the “progressive” hopes peace and harmony will reign. This sentiment is perhaps best captured in John Lennon’s song *Imagine*:

Imagine there’s no Heaven
Its easy if you try
No Hell below
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today
Imagine there’s no countries
It isn’t hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace
You may say I’m a dreamer

But I’m not the only one
I hope someday you’ll join us
And the world will live as one
Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world
You may say I’m a dreamer
But I’m not the only one
I hope someday you’ll join us
And the world will live as one.

IMAGINE [Quoted in Ian S. Markham, ed., *A World Religious Reader*, 2nd edition. Blackwell: 2000, pp. 18-19.]

As Christians, how should we respond to such a curriculum that focuses on secularism as an academic major? What could we offer? What bridges could we build?

Bridge #1. Secularism affirms the value of human life and sees human happiness as its core value. This meshes with biblical Christianity, which also affirms the value of human life. However, secularism has no basis for its claim for the value of human life, for helping people, or for showing compassion. Why engage in such things if humans are simply the product of chance? Christianity affirms the value of life because humans bear God's image (Genesis 1:26ff). It provides the reason for compassion, care and concern that is missing in humanism. Secularism is most vulnerable on this point and we must lovingly press it.

Bridge #2. Secularism claims that in terms of religious beliefs and ethical standards it is impossible to have absolutes. In other words, there are absolutely no absolutes. In making such a claim, it affirms something absolute. That is a glaring inconsistency and as Christians we can point this out. Christians can press secularism to seriously reflect on the inadequacy of standards for truth and ethics. Are secularists willing to bank everything on there not being a God? What if there is? What if there is accountability? The Holy Spirit of God can use this inconsistency within secularism to bring conviction.

Bridge #3. Secularism teaches that at death there is extinction. Therefore, there is no hope of ever seeing loved ones again. Ultimately, there is no hope, for secularism provides no real incentives for living or for dying. This physical world is all there is, they argue, and we must live that way--for the moment. If there is no death, then there is no accountability and no motivation for virtue or goodness. Most people cannot live with this kind of teaching. Here is where Christianity is so compelling. It offers hope because there is life after death; there is hope of seeing loved ones and friends. Christianity also offers the certainty of salvation, which guarantees heaven and eternal life with God. Secularism offers no counsel to a family who has lost an infant in death, or to someone with a terminal illness, or to a wife who lost her husband in an automobile accident. The secularist can offer nothing; Christianity offers everything. It is in the real world of life that secularism's bankruptcy becomes evident. Naturalism/secularism pervade western civilization and are currently institutionalized in the academic centers of the West. It remains powerful, influential and informs so much of modern education. It will retain its position of importance only as long as the West seeks its purpose and its meaning from technology, science and reason. Its antisupernaturalism is difficult for most people, however, because the average persons cannot live without some sense that there is a transcendent realm, that there is something beyond death, that the physical is not all there is. Only genuine, biblical Christianity answers that quest for meaning and purpose.

See Laurie Goodstein in *The New York Times* (7 May 2011) and James P. Eckman, *The Truth About Worldviews*, pp. 11-19.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

The New Middle East

With the death of Osama Bin Laden and what some are calling the "Arab Spring," a new Middle East is emerging. Its parameters are far from clear but there are some discernible characteristics. Most of them are rather troublesome.

- First, the demonstrations that have swept most parts of the region at first were energized by opposition to corruption and repression. With unemployment rates so high, a real sense of frustration with authoritarian governments was real and played a major role as well. In a sense,

these movements have been about justice, democracy and modernity. Such sentiments contradict the goals Bin Laden and al Qaeda represent. Al Qaeda envisions the return of the Islamic caliphate, not embracing the West and its values. The so-called Arab Spring is a repudiation of everything Bin Laden and al Qaeda preached and represented. No one in Liberation Square in Cairo was yelling “Death to America.” The Arab Spring has simply overwhelmed the jihadists of al Qaeda. Yet, the Arab Spring that swept Hosni Mubarak from power has not been replaced by an encouraging state in Egypt. The caretaker government has already made some radical shifts in foreign policy. It has extended a strong hand to Iran. An Iranian destroyer was allowed to pass through the Suez Canal for the first time since 1979. It has also fostered a unity agreement between the two rival factions of the Palestinians—Fatah and Hamas, a renowned terrorist group. Both of these developments are not good news for Israel or for the United States.

- Second, why exactly did Bin Laden’s vision of a radical, almost medieval caliphate fail? Reuel Marc Gerecht, senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, writes that Bin Laden was undone by his love of violence. “He pushed it too far: Slaughtering innocent Africans in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 was tolerable since the targets were American embassies. . . Killing American soldiers on the USS Cole in the port of Aden was praiseworthy since no modern Muslim power had ever so humbled an American man-of-war. And destroying the Twin Towers and punching a hole in the Pentagon was just astonishing. But then came the slaughter that could not be ignored, as al Qaeda affiliates started killing in Muslim lands. The suicide bombers who hit Casablanca in 2003 and Amman in 2005 made an impact. But the war in Iraq was Bin Laden’s great moral undoing . . . the carnage there, carried in all its gore by Arabic satellite channels, produced a backlash. There was a limit to the number of Shiite women and children that Sunni Arabs could see murdered. Blowing up hospitals, mosques and shrines—even Shiite ones—became too ghastly to sublimate into an acceptable war against Americans.” Are we finally approaching a point where Islam is constructing a moral/ethical universe in which militants can no longer compellingly call upon Islamic history to justify rebellion? Is the dream of a caliphate enforced by militant Islam a dead vision? In my opinion, it is too early to reach this conclusion. But, with Bin Laden dead, the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East in flux, and Iran’s influence in ascendance, there is a real possibility that a new Middle East is being born. Only God knows whether this is indeed an accurate projection. One thing I do know, this new Middle East is not a positive for Israel.
- Third, the new interim government between Fatah and Hamas that was brokered by Egypt is not good news for Israel. Jimmy Carter, in a recent op ed piece, argued that “support for the interim government is critical, and the United States needs to take the lead. This accord should be viewed as a Palestinian contribution to the ‘Arab awakening.’” I could not disagree more! The major issue in the agreement is that Hamas still affirms its charter, which calls for Israel’s destruction. In all discussions about peace in the Middle East (whether brokered by the US or the so-called Quartet [the US, UN, Russia and the European Union]), the conditions have always been that Hamas must recognize Israel, accept previous agreements with it and renounce violence if it is to be a partner to the negotiations. Hamas refuses to meet these conditions and, even in the agreement with Fatah, has re-affirmed that refusal. This new agreement provides for the establishment of a government of technocrats that would prepare for parliamentary and presidential elections in a year and work for the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip. The accord also calls for elections to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the formation of a joint security committee. The thorniest and most difficult detail of the accord yet to be decided is the platform of the new Palestinian government. Will this new platform conform more to Mahmoud

Abbas and his renunciation of violence or will it adhere to Hamas and its terrorist agenda? Why should the world community expect Israel to negotiate with this new entity, when a major part of this new entity refuses even to recognize the right of Israel to exist? On the surface, this agreement seems impossible and absurd. But this is a part of the new Middle East. It is confusing and difficult. Only our Lord knows the future!

See Joel Greenberg in the *Washington Post* (27 April and 9 May 2011); Jimmy Carter in *Ibid.* (4 May 2011); *Wall Street Journal* editorial (3 May 2011); and see the Fouad Ajami and Reuel Marc Gerech essays in the *Wall Street Journal* (3 May 2011).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE

School Vouchers Do Work

The present administration in Washington is against school vouchers and even permitted the very popular and demonstrably effective voucher program in the District of Columbia to die. But Obama resurrected that program as a part of the deal he struck with the Republican Party over the 2011 budget. What evidence is there that vouchers serve students well and give parents a valid option for educating their children?

1. In the District of Columbia, voucher recipients, who number more than 3,330 in the D.C. area, made gains in reading scores and did not decline in math.
2. A University of Arkansas study demonstrated that D.C. voucher recipients had graduation rates of 91%. That is significantly higher than the D.C. public school average of 56%. This is especially important because high school dropouts are eight times more likely to wind up behind bars. Some 60% of black high school dropouts in their 30s have prison records. And nearly one in four young black male dropouts is in jail or juvenile detention.
3. A recent study of Milwaukee's older and larger voucher program found that 94% of students who stayed in the program throughout high school graduated, versus just 75% of students in Milwaukee's traditional public high schools. Vouchers foster healthy competition.
4. Jason Riley of the *Wall Street Journal* reports that "every empirical study ever conducted in Milwaukee, Florida, Ohio, Texas, Maine and Vermont finds that voucher programs in those places improved public schools."

This is compelling evidence. Vouchers give parents and their children an option for a quality education. The evidence summarized above shows that it works. Why would those who make public policy not support vouchers on an even more widespread basis? The only answer is politics. The NEA and other teacher unions do not support vouchers—and they raise a lot of money and a lot of votes for the current administration. That is not leadership that benefits our children. That is raw politics that only benefits one group of union employees.

See Riley's editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* (3 May 2011).