

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### ***The Pernicious Results of a Secularized Culture***

The familiar term “secularism” is often used today to define the ideology of western civilization, for it refers to the absence of any binding theistic authority or belief. Theologian Albert Mohler further defines its companion, “secularization,” as “a concept and a sociological process whereby societies become less theistic and they become more modern. Secular societies therefore drift toward conditions where there is little if any theistic belief and the rejection of any binding authority at all.” This is most certainly the major characteristic of Western Europe—it is thoroughly secular and confesses no absolute authority, save the autonomous authority of the individual. America used to be the exception within western civilization, but no longer, especially if you focus on the academy—colleges and universities. Sociologist and authority on secularization, Peter Berger makes these comments (as cited by Mohler) on the process of secularization in American culture:

- Although America remains a “religious” nation, the authority of biblical Christianity is lost. American Christianity is often noncognitive and “optional.” Americans may be religious, but it is a religion without any cognitive content and is devoid of all moral authority.
- Given this characterization of the American religious dynamic, as opposition to the moral authority of Christianity mounts, adherents to Christianity surrender to the secular agenda. Berger argues that “when the cultural tide turned against our society’s empty religious commitments, people were happy to jettison their moral judgment on homosexuality to retain their social capital.”
- The Postmodern civilization in which we now live “has made religious belief provisional, optional, and far less urgent than it was in the premodern world.”
- “Belief” now is a confidence in the exercise of personal autonomy and nothing more. Hence, “secularization in America has been attended by a moral revolution without precedent and without endgame. The cultural engines of progress driving toward personal autonomy and fulfillment will not stop until the human being is completely self-defining. This requires the explicit rejection of Christian morality for the project of human liberation.”

Is there evidence that indeed American civilization has embraced a full-blown secularization?

1. Secularization affects how we view human beings. Andrew Klavan poignantly observes that “The scientific method transformed a world of miracles into a world of material. Its successes, in time, made atheism seem the default setting of true reason.” But pure materialism strips humans of the logic of their humanity—the very foundation of Western liberty!! Klavan: [For the materialist] “a human being is a cross between a

chemistry set and a computer, his actions governed solely by a series of discharges and sparks.” This logic is seen in how the secular world views a baby. For centuries, western civilization viewed the baby growing in the womb as of worth and value. During the famous *Roe v. Wade* presentations before the Supreme Court in 1973, the view was presented that a fetus becomes a person at conception and is thus entitled to the due process and equal protection guarantees of the Bill of Rights and the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. But Justice Blackmun, who wrote the majority opinion in *Roe v. Wade*, rejected that argument. He wrote that “the word ‘person’ as used in the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment does not include the unborn.” His argument centered on the “privacy rights” under the due process and equal rights clauses of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment and that these rights extended to a woman’s decision to have an abortion in a pregnancy’s first trimester “free of interference by the state.” *Roe v. Wade* and subsequent Court decisions nullified abortion laws in 46 states and effectively legalized the procedure across the nation.

2. The LGBT revolution has witnessed the collision of two core American values—freedom of religion and freedom from discrimination. For some, religious freedom (“the free exercise” of religion phrase in the First Amendment) means they can oppose same-sex marriage and other practices (and lifestyle issues) inherent in the LGBT cultural revolution. Those in the LGBT movement argue that in the US no one should face discrimination because of their sexual preference. The two opposing positions summarized:

- “The phrases ‘religious liberty’ and ‘religious freedom’ will stand for nothing except hypocrisy as long as they remain code words for discrimination, intolerance, racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, Christian supremacy or any form of intolerance.”
- In opposition: Such language “stigmatizes tens of millions of religious Americans, their communities and their faith-based institutions, and threatens the religious freedom of all our citizens.”

In our secular culture, this tension will persist, with no resolution in sight. If anything, those advocating some form of religious liberty will be more and more marginalized.

3. The view of and practice of marriage is radically affected by the secularization of culture. For example, the Barna organization released a recent study that confirms the confusion that results from the secularization of culture:

- “If you were in your late twenties in the year 2000, you were much more likely to be married than if you were that same age today. These figures are staggering considering the relatively short time period in which they occur. The census bureau statistics from 2011 corroborate these broader shifts. Americans are getting married later and later. The average age of first marriage in the United States is 27 for women and 29 for men, up from 23 for women and 26 for men in 1990 and 20

and 22 in 1960. In 1960, 72% of all adults ages 18 and older were married; today, according to the Barna numbers, that number is just 52%.”

- “Among all American adults, almost six in 10 (57%) either currently live with their boyfriend / girlfriend or have previously done so—a number very close to the 65 percent who believe it is a good idea. Older, conservative and more religious (Christian or otherwise) Americans are the least likely to have ever cohabited. Surprisingly, Millennials are one of the groups least likely to cohabit. Younger, less religious and more liberal Americans are more likely to have lived with a significant other before marriage. Interestingly, church attenders are among this group, a fact that demonstrates the pervasiveness of this cultural shift.”

The secularization of American culture is profoundly changing everything. This brief sample above also confirms the counter-cultural nature of the church. The church does adhere to an absolute set of ethical standards. The church does embrace a cognitive set of propositions rooted in God’s revelation to humanity. The church does grasp tightly the belief that there is such a thing as truth and that it is knowable and certain. Thus, as the culture becomes even more secular, the church will find itself even more marginalized. The 21<sup>st</sup> century church may actually end up being more like the 1<sup>st</sup> century church. Studying the New Testament will help us know how to do that.

See Albert Mohler, Jr. in *Tabletalk* (March 2017), pp. 10-13; Andrew Klavan in the *Wall Street Journal* (30 December 2016); Tom Gjelten, “In Religious Freedom Debate, 2 American Values Clash” at [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org) (6 March 2017); “The Trends Redefining Romance Today” at [www.barna.com](http://www.barna.com).