Secularism is a belief system

It is a system of beliefs that places greater importance on material or secular concerns over religious or spiritual ones. Secularism is based on the idea that religion should be separate from state and society, and that people should be free to choose their own beliefs without state interference.

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Ideologies, “isms”, such as secularism, embrace the same concerns as the Christian gospel. They are concerned about the good life, about the purpose and meaning of being human, of living well in the world, forming communities, making moral choices etc.

This resource is designed to help people recognise a gospel by any other name.
The gospel of Christ, the gospel of God’s kingdom and reign in Christ, has always been proclaimed not only as the biblical vision and promise of life but always in contention with other visions and promises, other stories of the good life, told by emperors, educators, politicians and ad makers.

Such was the case in the days of the prophets when Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian or Persian stories of the good life were on offer. Such was the case in the days of Jesus and the 1st century disciples when Roman versions of the gospel were widely proclaimed – peace and blessing in the name of the Caesar who was lord and saviour of the world. When Paul proclaimed Jesus as Lord, he consciously did so in contention with the alternative Lord of the day, the Roman Caesar.

What are the threats and opportunities that present themselves in this era of secularism? Surely the greatest threat is that secularism will proclaim itself as the only way; that the secular ideology will be enforced as dogma to the exclusion of other faith positions. The danger in this is that the Christian gospel will be locked out of the main arenas of public debate and decision making, as though it was irrelevant or outdated.

However, there is also opportunity in the current secular context in which many find themselves in Western nations such as Aotearoa New Zealand. In the words of Stanley Hauerwas:

I think this is a time that God is finally helping us Christians get over what is called Christendom – namely, when we thought we were in control of the world. It’s terrific. We’re discovering we’re going to be forced to learn to live by our wits. When you have power, it dulls the mind, and it dulls the intellect. We’re learning what it means to live without power. We may learn to live wittily again. When you’re not in control then you have to know those who are in control better than they know themselves in order to survive. That’s great. We can do that now in a way that I think is quite promising.

(Sunday Asylum: Being the Church in Occupied Territory, p. 34)

Amen. May we graciously and courageously take such opportunity.

References

