

SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

Vol. 1, No. 6

The Twilight of Atheism and the Dawn of Secularism

David Klinghoffer, a columnist for the *Jewish Forward*, has suggested that its time we start identifying the secular faithful as such. "The word *Secular* should be capitalized, indicating a distinctive philosophical orientation. So, just as Mel Gibson is always referred to as a Catholic filmmaker, Michael Moore should be identified as a Secular one." Though a 2004 survey of religion and politics sponsored by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found only 7.5 percent of the American population self-categorized themselves as "secularists," Klinghoffer maintains that those embracing Secularism far exceed the 7.5 percent figure as many individuals who identify nominally as Jews or Christians are, in fact, devout secularists.

I would argue that the Secular religion is even more pervasive than Klinghoffer suggests. As encouraging as the "twilight" of atheism may be, evidenced by the celebrated conversion to theism of philosopher Anthony Flew, atheism is not at the heart of the Secular religion nor its principal challenge to Christian faith. The heart of the Secular religion is moral relativism, a *functional* atheism, if you will, which holds that what is moral is dictated by a particular situation in light of a particular culture or social location. As I wrote in *Serious Times*, with moral relativism "Moral values become a matter of personal opinion or private judgment rather than something grounded in objective truth."

So rather than rejecting the idea of God, the Secular religion simply ignores Him. As A.N. Wilson has written, "God's funeral was not, as many in the 19th century might have thought, the end of a phase of human intellectual history. It was the withdrawal of a great Love object." We function independent of any transcendent referent, fulfilling the desire for independence that Jacques Barzun argues has marked the last 500 years of Western cultural life. Thomas Oden observes that this is the true nature of heresy. The "key to 'haireisis' (root word for 'heresy') is the notion of choice – choosing for *oneself*, over against the apostolic tradition." As Paul M. Zulehner, dean of Vienna University's divinity school and one of the world's most distinguished sociologists of religion maintains, a "false spirituality" is rising that will prove to be "a more dangerous rival to the Christian faith than atheism."

Intriguingly, an online poll conducted by AOL soon after the selection of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to be the next Pope revealed what people perceived to be Pope Benedict XVI's greatest challenges. "Sanctity of life" issues, such as cloning or stem cells, came in first, followed by the priest shortage. Distant on the list was the rise of secularism. Fortunately, the new Pope does not seem driven by polls, exhibiting a sound awareness (as he has for many years) of secularism's threat, wisely discerning that "Sanctity of life" issues, along with the priest shortage, are the symptoms of secularism's rise (see his book, *The Salt of the Earth: The Church at the End of the Millenium*). Benedict XVI has had a courtside seat to secularism's deadly effects in Western Europe, and specifically his German homeland. Fewer than one of every 10 Germans worships even once a month, and a majority of Germans and other northern Europeans confess that God does not matter to them at all (which accounts for the absence of any reference to God in the draft of the proposed European constitution). Little wonder that in Ratzinger's pre-election sermon to his fellow cardinals he made the following declaration: "We are moving toward a 'dictatorship of relativism...that recognizes nothing definite and leaves only one's ego and desires as the final measure.'"

John Paul II began his papacy with the cry, "Be not afraid!" Benedict XVI has seemed to initiate his pontificate differently: "Be afraid. Be very, very afraid."

Would that our thinking be as keen.

James Emery White

Sources

"That Other Church," David Klinghoffer, *Christianity Today*, January 2005, p. 62.

James Emery White, *Serious Times* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

A.N. Wilson, *God's Funeral* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).

Philip Yancey, "God's Funeral," *Christianity Today*, September 9, 2003.

Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000).

Thomas C. Oden, *After Modernity...What?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

"Famous Atheist Now Believes in God", Associated Press, December 9, 2004 (www.abcnews.com).

"Analysis: Atheism worldwide in decline," Uwe Siemon-Netto, United Press International, published March 1, 2005 (www.upi.com).

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth: The Church at the End of the Millennium* (Ignatius, 1997).

"Christians must keep God's rules, new pope reminds us," David Yount, *The News Tribune*, Tacoma, Washington (www.thenewstribune.com), Scripps Howard News Service, originally published April 25th, 2005.

About Serious Times

Launched in conjunction with the release of the book, *Serious Times* (InterVarsity Press, 2004), the aim of this site is to serve the vision of the book in an ongoing manner. At serioustimetimes.com you will find reading lists and book reviews, "whitepapers" on critical issues and strategic links to other sites, small group resources and homeschooling curriculum, tapes/cd's and study guides. You can even sign-up for this bi-weekly "Serious Times Update."