

**Engaging the Secular Mind:
An Urgent Call to the American Church**

A Paper for the
Evangelical Missiological Society
South Central Meeting
April 7, 2018

by

Raphael Anzenberger

Adjunct Professor ICS
Columbia International University
Columbia, South Carolina

Abstract

Is the American Evangelical Church engaging the secular mind? How is it engaging it? I must confess that as a European, French-European, I have found much confusion on this topic here in America. It is urgent that we redefine exactly what we mean by “missions in a secularizing world.” In this presentation, I will quickly revisit some key definitions, moving then to an assessment of current issues in cultural engagement with secularization. I will especially call the American Church to focus its engagement in four areas: (1) telling the story of secularism correctly, (2) avoiding the culture wars, (3) moving beyond missiological theory, and (4) rediscovering the power of the Gospel. I will end the presentation with a model of cultural engagement for a secularized world from Scriptures.

Introduction

Is the American Evangelical Church engaging the secular mind? How is it engaging it? I must confess that as a European, French-European, I have found much confusion on this topic here in America. As such, I welcome the initiative of the EMS to revisit missions and evangelism in a secularizing world. It is urgent, urgent my colleagues, that we redefine exactly what we mean by “missions in a secularizing world.” Allow me, if you please, to start with some basic definitions, moving then to an assessment of current issues in our cultural engagement with secularization, before looking at a model of cultural engagement for a secularized world from Scriptures.

Framing the Conversation

What do we mean by secularization? Lesslie Newbigin will be of great help in helping frame the conversation. In *Honest Religion for a Secular Man*, Newbigin states that secularization is

... a historical process of which the writer and his readers are a part. This process may be looked at both in its negative and in its positive aspects.

Negatively, it is the withdrawal of areas of life and activity from the control of organized religious bodies, and the withdrawal of areas of thought from the control of what are believed to be revealed religious truths.

Positively it may be seen as the increasing assertion of the competence of human science and technics to handle human problems of every kind. . . . At its best the secular spirit claims the freedom to deal with every man simply as man and not as the adherent of one religion or another, and to use all man’s mastery over nature to serve the real needs of man.¹

First indication, secularization is a historical process with both positive and negative aspects. The secularization process started in pre-Reformation time and continues to this day. The result of the

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 8-9.

secularization process is secularity, a snap-shot if you wish of the secularization process at a specific time. Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age*, defines secularity around three modes: (1) as that which is retreating in public space (plurality of beliefs), (2) as a type of belief and practice which is or is not in regression (decline of religious belief), and (3) as a certain kind of belief or commitment whose conditions in this age are being examined (conditions of religious belief).² The secularization process will lead to different stages of the modes of secularity, depending which milieu of the West you find yourself. For instance, an atheist in the Bible belt will find it difficult to defend his belief system, but be at ease in Harvard. An evangelical, on the other hand, will find the reverse to be true. Both the Bible belt and Harvard are experiencing the secularization process, but at different speeds, which translate to different stages of the modes of secularity.

Let us move now to secularism. To quote Newbigin again,

I take “secularism” to refer to a system of belief, or an attitude, which in principle denies the existence or the significance of realities other than those which can be measured by the methods of natural science. . . . It was defined at the Jerusalem meeting of the International Missionary Council (1928) as “a way of life and an interpretation of life that include only the natural order of things and that do not find God, or a realm of spiritual reality, necessary for life or thought”.³

Secularization is a process, secularism is a system of belief. The two cannot be used synonymously. Yet, some would argue that one naturally leads to the other. Peter Wagner clarifies the matter:

Secularization theory is a term that was used in the fifties and sixties by a number of social scientists and historians. Basically, it had a very simple proposition. It could be stated in one sentence. Modernity inevitably produces a decline of religion. When I started out doing sociology of religion . . . everyone else had the same idea. And I more or less assumed that it was correct. . . . But it took me about twenty years to come to the

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 4.

³ Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 8.

conclusion that the data doesn't support this, and other people came to the same conclusion.

The world today is not heavily secularized ... Why? This is something that can be studied... The theory is wrong. Now, to conclude that the theory is wrong is the beginning of a new process of thinking. I came to the conclusion some years ago that to replace secularization theory—to explain religion in the modern world—we need the theory of -pluralism. Modernity does not necessarily produce secularity. It necessarily produces pluralism, by which I mean the coexistence in the same society of different worldviews and value systems.⁴

Berger clears out the confusion: secularization (historical process) does not lead to secularism (belief system). Secularization leads to pluralism, which in itself modifies the state of secularity (plurality of beliefs, decline of religious beliefs, modification of the conditions of belief).

“Missions and Evangelism in a Secularizing World,” which is the theme of our day, will then seek to assess the modes of secularity of the world in which we wish to engage, as well as the relevance of our cultural engagement. Talking about the latter, let us move on now to a honest look at current issues regarding the way we engage the secular mind in the US.

An Urgent Call!

I see at least four issues with the way we engage the secular mind in the US. Four issues that are hampering our effectiveness in engaging properly the matter at stake.

Telling the Story Correctly

The first issue rises with the way the story of secularization is told. Both from the secularist perspective and the evangelical perspective. Secularists in the US wish that the secularization theory was true. To quote one of its proponent in his *Letter to a Christian Nation*,

⁴ “A Conversation with Peter L. Berger, ‘How My Views Have Changed,’” The Cresset, last modified Lent 2014, accessed March 28, 2018 http://thecresset.org/2014/Lent/Thuswaldner_L14.html.

THIS LETTER is the product of failure — the failure of the many brilliant attacks upon religion that preceded it, the failure of our schools to announce the death of God in a way that each generation can understand, the failure of the media to criticize the abject religious certainties of our public figures —failures great and small that have kept almost every society on this earth muddling over God and despising those who muddle differently.⁵

I would argue that the failure that Harris refers to, is not *a lack of* cultural engagement from secularists, but another proof that secularization will not produce secularism, but rather pluralism. Europe for instance is moving into a “post-secular” age, which refers to the persistence of religious beliefs and practices in a society that has undergone a long process of secularization. In other words, European countries are becoming more secular and more religious, which Bérengère Massignon refers to as a “second era of secularization.”⁶

Why do Harris, and other like-minded secularists, fail to correctly assess the current situation?

Because they are not telling the story right. In the words of Taylor, Harris subscribes to the “subtraction story,”

Concisely put, I mean by these stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process—modernity or secularity—is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside.⁷

Secularists are guilty of not telling the story of secularization correctly. A common “subtraction theory” *en vogue* in the US attributes everything to disenchantment. Taylor explains:

First, science gave us “naturalistic” explanation of the world. And then people began to look for alternatives to God. But things didn’t work that way. The new mechanistic science of the seventeenth century wasn’t seen as necessarily threatening to God. It was to the enchanted universe and magic. It also began to pose a problem for particular

5 Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New-York: Vintage Books, 2008), 91.

6 For more on the state of secularization in Europe, see Poll, E W van de (Evert W). *Europe and the Gospel: Past Influences, Current Developments, Mission Challenges*. London: DeGruyter; Versita, 2013. 320 p.

7 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 22.

providences. But there were important Christian motives for going the route of disenchantment. Darwin was not even on the horizon in the eighteenth century.⁸

It would be too easy at this point to shift the blame squarely on the secularist for not telling the story right. In his movie *God is not Dead*, Harold Cronk seeks to offer a sound apologetic by embodying secularism in the discourse of a philosophy professor, who declares God a pre-scientific fiction. The evangelical believer will identify himself with the hero of the story, Harper, who delivers a solid rebuke of atheism amidst an amphitheater full of students who were won over by the professor's secularism. Pause. Is this really how things are happening in the academic world? Are all philosophy professors in secular universities disciples of Hitchens, to the point of starting their history of Philosophy with Nietzsche? As Taylor rightly argues, we need to

avoid the naïvetés on all sides: either that unbelief is just the falling away of any sense of fullness, or the betrayal of it (what theists sometimes are tempted to think of atheists); or that belief is just a set of theories attempting to make sense of experiences which we all have, and whose real nature can be understood purely immanently (what atheists are sometimes tempted to think about theists).⁹

We need to tell the story correctly. On both side of the equation.

Avoiding the Culture Wars

The second issue in our cultural engagement with the secular mind lays in lumping that conversation with the current culture wars raging in some segments of our church. As Taylor rightly discerns:

It seems that the fusion of faith, family values and patriotism is still extremely important to one half of American society, that they are dismayed to see it challenged, both in its

⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 14.

central values (e.g., the fight over abortion or gay marriage), and in the link between their faith and the polity (fights over school prayer, the phrase ‘under God’, and the like).¹⁰

Effective missions praxis in a secularized age requires great care to resist blurring the lines between cultural engagement and political engagement. As Bruce Ashford rightly acknowledge

Over the course of the past half-century, many American evangelicals have put their eggs in the basket of short-term political activism—with the emphasis on the political and the short-term. . . . we reduced culture to politics, and politics to short-term activism, assuming a large part of the remedy to our social and cultural ills lies in a quick political fix. Repeatedly, we’ve treated each presidential election or midterm election as the one that—despite all historical evidence to the contrary—will finally deliver our hopes and ease our fears.¹¹

It is urgent, urgent my colleagues to redefine the condition of our predicament, to recreate space in our structure of plausibilities for a fresh articulation of secularity and religion. As

Newbigin rightly asserts:

There are at least three ways in which the opposition between religion and the secular is referred to in current Christian writing. Firstly, a secular *society* is described as one in which the citizen is not subject to pressure from the state, or from the organs of society, to conform to a particular set of beliefs. Secondly, a secular *ethic* is described as one which does not subordinate the actual concrete decision to an alleged supra-natural law or standard, but permits it to be made on the basis of the empirical realities of the situation in each case. Thirdly, a secular *style* of life for the Christian is described as one which does not turn away from the world to seek God, but finds God by involvement in the life of the world. I hope that the discussion of these three issues will help us to make more precise distinctions, and to indicate the sense in which a Christian must still be a religious man and a secular man at the same time.¹²

Secularization, better understood in both its positive and negative outcomes, can help us seek ways to be both a secular man and a religious man, at the same time, without giving in to

¹⁰ Ibid., 527.

¹¹ Bruce R. Ashford, “Politics and Public Life in a Secular Age,” in *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor*, ed. Collin Hansen (Gospel Coalition, 2017), 96.

¹² Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 123.

secularism or retrenching in our evangelical fortresses.

Not Rival Theories but Lived Condition

A third issue with our current engagement with the secular mind is looking at the different facets of secularism (be it atheism, hedonism, naturalism, or another -ism), on the pure plane of theory, and as a result, developing an apologetics that engages only the mind on a rational level. Some call it “worldview comparison.” The idea is simple: probe the secular worldview, push it towards its logical conclusion¹³ and argue that Christianity is a better worldview. *Ne*, a superior worldview. But will this translate into effective evangelism and missions? What is the link between worldview and the proclamation of the Gospel, which is at the core of our Biblical mandate? Let me quote here Jacques Ellul.

The word is of the order of truth; it is located in the sphere of truth. It can also at the same time be falsehood if it does not speak this truth. For me, this possibility results precisely from the fact that the human word is a response to the Word of God. In this response it can lie. It is never dictated by God's Word. It has its own autonomy as we ourselves do, and thus it can say things different from what it hears in God's Word. . . . Seeing is of the order of reality and is indispensable if we are to grasp the world. It sets us in the world and incites us to act in it. It does not lead to truth, and it does not give meaning. The word is what can give meaning to what we see. Seeing enables me to apprehend at a stroke all that reality presents to us and that the word is ill-equipped to describe. But the word (I am thinking of poetry), with reference to the real, can bring out what is hidden in it. The two things cannot be separated. Truth must incarnate itself in reality; reality is empty without truth. If truth is the unfolding of meaning, this is the meaning of what we see to be real and not phantom. This is how it is with us.¹⁴

¹³ I am not disregarding the importance of Schaeffer's contribution to the field of apologetics. His approach was anchored in hospitality and relationships, which were conducive to bringing the seeker to a fuller understanding of the call of God on one's life (propositional truth imbedded in relational truth). Disembodying Schaeffer's approach to a pure confrontation of worldviews would not do justice to the ministry of L'Abri.

¹⁴ Jacques Ellul, *What I believe* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 23-4.

The word is of the order of truth, seeing is of the order of reality. What is the link between the two? The *word* is what can give meaning to what we *see*. In other words, Christianity is foremost a *voice* that speaks into *worldviews*, and calls man to repent for having assumed that he knows what truth is all about. “He who is of the truth listens to my voice,” says Jesus to Pilate. Remaining on the plane of worldview comparison will never lead us to confrontation with truth, but only to perspective about reality. Proclamation on the other hand will either lead to either obedience or rebellion. Pilate opted for rebellion. “This is how it is with us,” says Ellul.

So how shall we address the different facets of secularism? Not as competing worldviews (or theories about reality) but as lived condition. As Taylor argues,

In order to get a little bit clearer on this level, I want to talk about belief and unbelief, not as rival theories, that is, ways that people account for existence, or morality, whether by God or by something in nature, or whatever. Rather what I want to do is focus attention on the different kinds of lived experience involved in understanding your life in one way or the other, on what it’s like to live as a believer or an unbeliever.¹⁵

He goes on to describe the modality of this lived condition in a secular society:

There is a kind of stabilized middle condition, to which we often aspire. This is one where we have found a way to escape the forms of negation, exile, emptiness, without having reached fullness. We come to terms with the middle position, often through some stable, even routine order in life, in which we are doing things which have some meaning for us; for instance, which contribute to our ordinary happiness, or which are fulfilling in various ways, or which contribute to what we conceive of as the good. Or often, in the best scenario, all three: for instance, we strive to live happily with spouse and children, while practicing a vocation which we find fulfilling, and also which constitutes an obvious contribution to human welfare.¹⁶

The different facets of secularism are all just a fruitless attempt by man to find fulness, meaning and happiness, while running away from negation, exile, and emptiness. As a result, missions and evangelism in a secularizing West must move beyond the theory stage to address

¹⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

the particular lived condition of that stage. Whether it is deep ecology, or the American dream. We speak truth into visions of realities that assume knowing the whole story. Evangelism is about calling the secular man to repentance of dead works and faith in the living God, where true fulness awaits him.

Rediscovering the Power of the Gospel

The fourth and last issue related to our current engagement of the secular mind lies in the Gospel itself. Do we still believe that the Gospel is the power of salvation for those who will hear it (Rom 1.16), even the secularist? As a French evangelist, let me tell you that I have every reason to believe it still does! Let me also tell you how surprised I am to hear some who are skeptical about the possibility to evangelize secularists! No matter what your preferred news media tells you, there is still hope in the Gospel!

There is nothing new under the sun. Secularism is just another take on what it means to live *sicut deus*, in the likeness of God, rather than in the image of God. As Bonhoeffer rightly argued in his lectures at the University of Berlin in the winter semester of 1932-33:

Thus for their knowledge of God human beings renounce the word of God that approaches them again and again out of the inviolable center and boundary of life; they renounce the life that comes from this word and grab it for themselves. They themselves stand in the center. This is disobedience of service, the will to be creator in the semblance of being a creature, being dead in the semblance of life.¹⁷

Truth against truth – God’s truth against the serpent’s truth. God’s truth tied to the prohibition, the serpent’s truth tied to the promise, God’s truth pointing to my limit, the serpent’s truth pointing to my unlimitedness – both of them truth, that is, both originating with God, God against God. And this second god is likewise the god of the promise to humankind to be *sicut deus*. . . . *Imago dei* – bound to the word of the Creator and deriving life from the Creator; *sicut deus* – bound to the depths of its own knowledge of God, of good and evil.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid., 117.

¹⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and fall: a theological exposition of Genesis 1-3* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 113.

Now humankind stands in the middle, with no limit. Standing in the middle means living from its own resources and no longer from the center. Having no limit means being alone. To be in the center and to be alone means to be *sicut deus*. It now lives out of its own resources, creates its own life, is its own creator; it no longer needs the Creator, it has itself become creator, inasmuch as it creates its own life. Thereby its creatureliness is eliminated, destroyed.¹⁹

The issue is that man lives in the middle of the story and thinks that he is both *alpha* and *omega*. Secularism is only another take on this age long pattern of man being *sicut deus*. Amidst this certainty, resounds God's question to man: *Adam, where are you?* This is what drives evangelism and missions. The Gospel story reminds us that fullness and exile are only reconciled at the Cross where both become center: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law [exile] by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'— so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith [fulness]." (Gal 3.13-14)

Adam, where are you? This was God's question to man in the beginning. It is still God's question to man today, and it will continue to be, until the end of this age. There is power in the Gospel to save those who are trapped in their middle condition. Not only to the secularists outside the Church but also to the secularist Christians inside the Church. As Jen Pollock Michel rightly observes

... secularism is not the problem "out there." Instead, every Sunday morning, it is "secular" people filling our pews. They attest to loving Jesus—but accept "no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing." They pray for God's kingdom to come—and imagine the advent of their own happiness. In the secular age, God becomes the guarantor of our best life now.²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid., 115.

²⁰ Jen Pollock Michel, "Whose Will Be Done? Human Flourishing in the Secular Age," in *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor*, ed. Collin Hansen (Gospel Coalition, 2017), 117.

Perhaps the Church would be wise to first retell the story of the Gospel inside its walls before venturing outside and potentially confusing the world with its false beliefs.²¹

Telling the story correctly, avoiding the culture wars, moving beyond theory, and rediscovering the power of the Gospel. Four praxis that we must urgently recover in order to carry missions and evangelism well in a secularizing West.

We have framed the conversation, defined the terms, assessed issues in current cultural engagement towards secularism. Where shall we go from here?

An Example of Cultural Engagement

In this last segment, I would like to turn to Scriptures. The missional hermeneutical spiral encourages us to bring our ideas, or lack of, to the text of Scripture. From context to text to context. We surveyed the context, we now turn to the text before returning to our context, hence cultivating what Stott describes as “double listening,” called to listen both to the Word of God and to today’s world. Let us listen to the words of our Lord Jesus, as he engages a skeptical Nathaniel about the reality of the Kingdom to come. John 1.43-46.

43 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” 44 Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45 Philip found Nathaniel and said to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” 46 Nathaniel said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” (ESV)

I would argue that Nathaniel embodies the three marks of the secular man: individualism, cynicism and pragmatism. See how Jesus reaches out to him, and how this can in turn inform our praxis for missions today.

²¹ The reader will find helpful insights in *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor*. A much needed read for today.

Individualism: I see you!

The story of Nathaniel starts with him sitting under a fig tree, watching the world. Alone. What is he thinking about? We do not know. The text does not say. He may be wrestling with questions about origin (where do I come from), meaning (what am I doing here) or purpose (where do I come from here). He may be questioning his lived condition. What is fulness? How can I experience it? The fact of the matter is that Nathaniel is thinking about life, alone, and frames reality from the vantage of what he can see, under the fig tree.

Taylor reminds us that our current *epoch* is characterized by the Age of Authenticity, an age of “expressive individualism”.²²

And, crucially, this is a culture informed by an ethic of authenticity. I have to discover my route to wholeness and spiritual depth. The focus is on the individual, and on his/her experience. Spirituality must speak to this experience. The basic mode of spiritual life is thus the quest, as Roof argues. It is a quest which can't start with a priori exclusions or inescapable starting points, which could pre-empt this experience.²³

Nathaniel is on a quest. But Jesus precedes him in his quest: “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” (48b). I saw you! Before you were I am. Before you saw, I see. From all eternity.

What does it mean for us? Nothing but the obvious: *missio-Dei* precedes *missio-ecclesiae*. We teach it to those who seek the person of peace among UPG. We remember that Jesus precedes us also here in the West. He sees secularists like Harris and is neither taken of guard or unable to speak into their predicament. He sees them. He sees us!

²² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299.

²³ Ibid., 507.

Cynicism: I know you!

45 Philip found Nathaniel and said to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” 46 Nathaniel said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.”

The second mark of the secular mind is *cynicism*. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” From Nathaniel’s worldview, nothing good can come out of Nazareth. Jerusalem perhaps, Rome surely. But Nazareth? Nathaniel is trapped in his own story, his vision of reality defined from under the fig tree. Disconnected from history, he does not remember another story, the great story, that of old-time, that of the coming of the Messiah announced by Moses and the prophets. Nathaniel forgot the story. His vision of the possible is reduced to what he sees. For only what he can see is real (*individualism*). He judges Philip for failing to see the obvious. In a spirit of *sicut-deus*, Nathaniel infers that he knows, and Philip does not. Nothing good can come out of Nazareth, everybody knows this. But you Philip! Yet Philip remains confident that Nathaniel wants more and needs more.

What does this mean for us? Sartre once said: “even if God existed, that would make no difference.”²⁴ But how does he know? Has he come and seen for himself? Trapped in the immanent frame, the secular mind concludes that the *default* option is unbelief. Yet, as Taylor rightly demonstrate, this is not the *only* option. Some are open to transcendence, and some move to closure.²⁵ The buffered-self operates in both directions. Individualism combined with cynicism might lead us to think that the situation is desperate. Who can reach the secular mind? But are we growing cynical by the same token? As Taylor argues, lumping together the spiritual quest of the Age of Authenticity with

²⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, lecture 1946.

²⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 566, 595.

invitations to self-absorption, without concern for anything beyond the agent, whether the surrounding society, or the transcendent. . . . is an illusion which arises from the often raucous debate between those whose sense of religious authority is offended by this kind of quest, on one hand, and the proponents of the most self- and immanent-centred forms, on the other, each of which likes to target the other as their main rival.²⁶

The church needs more Philips who will see beyond the offence of credulity to invite the secular man to pursue his quest. “Come and see,” for yourself, move beyond your cynicism and explore other possibilities! The Church needs to be the place where the Philips invite the Nathaniels to come and see fulness embodied. As Newbigin rightly argues:

The Gospel offers an understanding of the human situation which makes it possible to be filled with a hope which is both eager and patient even in the most hopeless situations. It is only as we are truly “indwelling” the Gospel story, only as we are so deeply involved in the life of the community which is shaped by this story that it becomes our real “plausibility structure,” that we are able steadily and confidently to live in this attitude of eager hope. . . . That is why I am suggesting that the only possible hermeneutic of the Gospel is a congregation which believes it.²⁷

Missions and evangelism in a Secularizing West yes, but not alone. Together, in missions! Newbigin’s statement raises a profound question about the nature of the church as embodiment, indwelling of the Gospel story. The conversation is not finished. There is still much to say about how the Church can be *missional*, in the true sense of the term.

Pragmatism: I call you!

Rather than being offended, Philipp boldly invites Nathaniel to come and see Jesus. And Nathaniel is happy to accept. His curiosity is piqued. In the words of Newbigin, Philip remembers that

... skepticism is not the active principle in the advance of knowledge. The active principle is the willingness to go out beyond what is certain, to listen to what is not yet

²⁶ Ibid., 508.

²⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 232.

clear, to search for what is hardly visible, to venture the affirmation which may prove to be wrong, but which may also prove to be the starting-point for new conquests of the mind. In the traditional language of Christianity the name for that active principle is faith.²⁸

As Nathaniel, not knowingly, starts his journey of faith (*pragmatism*), Jesus sees him coming toward him and said of him:

47 “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” 48 Nathaniel said to him, “How do you know me?” (ESV)

How strange it is for our Lord to complement the cynic individual! Yet this affirmation of Jesus opens us a new reality for Nathaniel. I see you and I know you! Welcome Nathaniel!

49 Nathaniel answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” 50 Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” 51 And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you,¹³ you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

Nathaniel confesses that he does not know anymore. What suddenly appears evident is that “you are the son of God!” This is the heart of repentance. You are God, and I am not. From *sicut-deus* to *imago-dei*. Not only repentance of dead works but also living faith in God: “You will see greater things than these!” Jesus calls Nathaniel to more. Life to the full. At last, Nathaniel becomes what he was predestined to be, a gift of God, a gift from God, to the world.

What does it mean for us? Taylor reminds us that

Many young people are following their own spiritual instincts, as it were, but what are they looking for? Many are “looking for a more direct experience of the sacred, for greater immediacy, spontaneity, and spiritual depth”, in the words of an astute observer of the American scene. This often springs from a profound dissatisfaction with a life encased entirely in the immanent order. The sense is that this life is empty, flat, devoid of higher purpose.²⁹

²⁸ Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 84.

²⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 506.

There is hope! Many Nathaniels are looking for a more direct experience of the sacred, for greater immediacy, spontaneity, and spiritual depth. They are looking for fulness, fulness that they are unable to find in their lived condition. “Come and see,” for yourself, is as relevant of an invitation today as it was to Nathaniel two thousand years ago. The personal encounter with Jesus will lead them to see greater things!

But what about transcendental truth? Is this pragmatic view of missions a concession to post-modernism? Not at all. Missions and evangelism in a secularizing West is not the end of the journey. If missions and evangelism do not lead to spiritual formation through solid disciple-making within community, it is neither biblical missions nor biblical evangelism. As Brett McCracken reminds us

Christianity requires the submission of one’s individual will to the lordship of Christ. It is impossible to simultaneously assert the sovereignty of one’s subjective spiritual path and the supremacy of Jesus Christ. We are either in Christ on his terms and by his grace, or we aren’t. Christianity doesn’t work on the terms of consumerism.³⁰

As Nathaniel journeyed through faith, he discovered not only the One who is truth (relational truth), but trusted that his words were true (propositional true). But requiring a firm commitment to propositional truth as a necessary condition to encounter the living truth tells us more about our philosophical presuppositions than what Scriptures requires.

From context to text to context. Double listening requires us to listen to the world well, but also to the Word well. In this passage, we see the evangelist John giving us a brilliant example of culture engagement, well suited for the secular mind. To the individualist, Jesus says: “I saw you before you saw me.” You are not alone in your quest. To the cynic, Jesus declares: “I knew you before you ever knew me.” You do not know the whole story. To the pragmatist, Jesus

³⁰ Brett McCracken, “Church Shopping with Charles Taylor,” in *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor*, ed. Collin Hansen (Gospel Coalition, 2017), 80.

promises: “I call you to see greater things!” You can experience fulness in me. What better place than the Church to offer a solid hermeneutic of the Gospel to the secularist, so that he may receive life to the full. *Adam where are you?* Jesus sees you, knows you and calls you to see greater things!

Conclusion

We have framed the conversation and defined the terms: secularization and secularism. We have assessed issues in current cultural engagement towards secularism: (1) telling the story correctly, (2) avoiding the culture wars, (3) moving beyond theory, and (4) rediscovering the power of the Gospel. We have offered a model of cultural engagement from Scriptures which reminded us that: (1) Jesus precedes us in our cultural engagement, (2) the Church is *still* the best hermeneutic of the Gospel, and (3) evangelism within the continuum of spiritual formation in community will lead the skeptic to true discipleship. *Adam where are you?* Jesus sees you, knows you and calls you to see greater things!

It is urgent, urgent my colleagues that the Church in America recaptures the urgency of evangelism and missions in a secularizing West. Of course, many, if not all, would subscribe in the necessity of carrying the biblical mandate. But not all would define it as urgent. As a fellow evangelist speaking to other evangelists, I urge to carry on the task of an evangelist. The fields are white for harvest. I pray that the Church will see it. May the LORD bless the Church in America!

Bibliography

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Creation and fall: a theological exposition of Genesis 1-3*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.

Collin Hansen. *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor*. Gospel Coalition, 2017.

Ellul, Jacques. *What I believe*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989.

Harris, Sam. *Letter to a Christian Nation*. New-York: Vintage Books, 2008.

Newbigin, Lesslie. *Honest Religion for Secular Man*. London: SCM Press, 1966.

The Gospel in a Pluralist Society. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989.

Taylor, Charles. *A secular age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.