Secularism

A Brief Response from the Theological Perspective of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

Identity:

Secularism can be defined as “the ordering of the community without reference to God.”¹ In a secular society, religion is generally excluded from public affairs, with religious beliefs confined to the individual’s private life.

Founder(s):

None

Statistics:

While there are no statistics for those who may hold secularist beliefs, the rising numbers of people who regard themselves as atheists, agnostics or “nones” (those who mark their religious preference as “none” on surveys) may indicate the spread of secularist ideals. A survey in 2019 noted that 65% of American adults described themselves as Christians when asked about religion. In the past decade, this number decreased by 12 percentage points, while atheist, agnostic and nones show an increase from 17% to 26% in one decade (2009 to 2019). The number of nones has grown, primarily among young adults in multiple demographic groups. Among Millennials (born between 1980 and 1994), 4 out of 10 call themselves nones and 1 in 10 identify with non-Christian faiths. In the same group, 4 in 10 seldom or never go to church.²

History:

Secularism is, in part, a reaction to the history of church and state alliances and conflicts. In the medieval era, kings and popes struggled for religious, political and military control over people and lands, circumstances that often led to armed conflict. Religious plurality was shaped by the Reformation as Christendom split into different groups, including Lutherans, Calvinists, Anabaptists, Catholics and Anglicans. Pluralism led to long years of religious warfare in Europe.

Europeans who settled in North America, often seeking religious freedom (freedom not always granted to those with differing beliefs), “had in common a rejection of the standard traditional hierarchy, priestly authority, and traditionalism of Roman Catholicism, and to some extent

¹ Hunter Baker, The End of Secularism (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2009), 34.
Anglicanism as well.” The founders of the United States, in view of Europe’s history of religious conflict, provided the First Amendment to prohibit the government establishment of a religion and protect the free exercise of religion. This amendment “was not intended to secularize the national government, but instead to protect against sectarian conflict and exclusiveness and the power grab by some national church.”

In recent decades, the United States has moved from a nominally Christian society to a secular and pluralistic one; people follow many faiths. The survey category of nones includes people who reject religion as well as people who call themselves spiritual but not religious, often creating their own spirituality by choosing from among a variety of beliefs.

**Texts:**


**Beliefs and Practices:**

Secularism seeks to remove religion from public life. Secularists believe “that if they can remove differences among people, especially religious differences, our community will grow stronger. At the same time secularists tend to see religion as something human beings once needed, but no longer do.” In a society thought to have outgrown religion, secularism presents itself as a way to guarantee social peace in the midst of religious pluralism. However, Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) pastor, the Reverend Doctor Scott Murray, comments that secularism “is not a religiously neutral point of view, but rather an ultimate concern demanding faith on the part of its adherents.”

Secularists believe that religion should be kept as a private matter. It is thought that this approach will prevent religion from being forced on others, leading to greater harmony within the society. Followers of different religions often react to one another with anger and violence, so religious ideas should be kept out of public discussions, excluded from business, politics, education and other areas of society. Christians who seek to share the Gospel may be regarded as intolerant for attempting to “force” their beliefs on others.

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A secular society, however, is not necessarily a less religious society. LCMS author Gene Veith comments, “Today’s secularism draws away from Christianity, but it is arguably more credulous in its openness to a nonscientific, nonmaterialist paganism.” The nones, who claim no official religious preference, often show an interest in various forms of spirituality. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, in his 2007 book, *The Secular Age*, notes that a problem in secularism “is not the absence of religion but the abundance of religion.” Religion, while not included in public discussions, is still present as a matter of private, personal choice.

Advocates of a secular society celebrate human reason. They elevate science and technology, believing that religious people oppose the rationalism of science. The conclusions provided by science are thought to make religious beliefs obsolete, with reason and science providing better sources for society’s morals and values.

Some churches try to make themselves more acceptable to the culture, adapting their teachings to secularism through philosophical ideas and political views. Churches may censor their own teachings, unwilling to judge the decisions of others or force their beliefs on those who think differently. Even churches with theologically conservative teachings may believe that the church must change to be relevant, adapting to the trends of society and conforming to the culture. “This secularized version of Christianity dominates mainline Protestantism (though not exclusively) …. The point is, churches contribute to secularization by secularizing themselves.”

**A Lutheran Response**

Lutheran teaching acknowledges the existence of two kingdoms or realms, and emphasizes that both are ruled by God. The kingdom of power, sometimes called the kingdom of God’s left hand, is that of earthly rulers and governments. Through these God keeps order and restrains evil. The kingdom of grace, or the kingdom of God’s right hand, is the Church, over which God rules through the Gospel. As Christians, we are citizens of both kingdoms, of heaven (Phil. 3:20) and of earthly nations, where we live in obedience to the secular authorities, who receive their authority from God (Rom. 13:1). The Lutheran Confessions state: “The gospel does not overthrow secular government, public order, and marriage but instead intends that a person keep all this as a true order of God and demonstrate in these walks of life Christian love and true good works according to each person’s calling.”

Life in a secular society does not prevent us from living out our daily callings, or vocations, the tasks and relationships to which God has called us and through which we help and serve others.

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8 Veith, 235.
10 Veith, 273.
in Jesus’ name. Vocations include our daily work and careers, but also our relationships with others, such as husband or wife, father or mother, son or daughter, employer or employee. In his Exposition of Psalm 147, Martin Luther wrote that the work we do in our daily callings or vocations provides “the masks of our Lord God, behind which he wants to be hidden and to do all things . . . you must work and lend yourself as a means and a mask to God.”

In their “contempt of God,” many people today invent their own false religions or choose from among the world’s religions to create their own form of spirituality, keeping “the appearance of godliness, but denying its power” (2 Tim. 3:5). Churches that adapt their teachings in order to be acceptable to secularist thought fulfill the words of the apostle Paul: “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions” (2 Tim. 4:3). As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to proclaim the truth of the Gospel and follow “the pattern of sound words” of biblical teaching (2 Tim. 1:13).

Secularism is not a synonym for the separation of church and state. Secularists believe that societies outgrow religion and that religious conflict will be avoided when beliefs are kept out of public discussions. Yet the Christian faith is not merely a matter of private belief. We are to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, sharing the good news of salvation with others. We are to be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks us for the reason for our hope in Christ, “yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15). As Christians, we are not of the world, but we have been sent into the world with the truth of the Gospel. Jesus prays for His followers: “They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (John 17:16-18).

God reigns over both realms, His Church and the earthly kingdom, even in this secular age. “God will therefore also safeguard the orders of creation. God in his providence will protect marriage, the state, and the church until the end of time. Human nature is necessarily forged in the molds that God established at the beginning of creation through these orders.” Through the two kingdoms, secular and sacred, God provides for our salvation and orders the world He created and loves.

For Further Reading


12 Martin Luther, Exposition of Psalm 147 (1532), quoted in Gustaf Wingren, Luther on Vocation (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 138.


**Links and Websites**

*Secular Humanism: An Evaluation from a Lutheran Perspective* (2016)  
[www.lcms.org/ctcr](http://www.lcms.org/ctcr)

*Render Unto Caesar. . . And Unto God: A Lutheran View of Church and State* (1995)  
[www.lcms.org/ctcr](http://www.lcms.org/ctcr)

*We, the People: Citizens of Two Kingdoms* (a video-based Bible study from Lutheran Hour Ministries)  
[https://www.lhm.org/studies/studydetail.asp?id=15579](https://www.lhm.org/studies/studydetail.asp?id=15579)