

The Secularist Worldview: Examining the Core Beliefs of Young Australians

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Workshop led by Annette Ware - Head of Christian Studies - Abbotsleigh

Defining 'Secularist'

Secularists believe that *this world* and *this age* (Latin *saeculum*) is all that exists. In the arena where Secularists operate, the roof is always closed. There is nothing and no-one upstairs. It's a closed arena. There is no 'god' to whom we should make reference. We're alone in the arena. There is no life beyond this one, no supernatural realm, no evil presence, no divine plan and purpose, no divine guidance or revelation, no loving God, no God who hears our prayers, no God who is always there for us.

Practical Secularists are those who may be open to the possibility of 'something out there' or 'a life beyond this one'. Many have "a shy hope in their heart".¹ However, they live as though God doesn't exist and that the roof of the arena is closed. Such people may even speak of God or even align themselves with a church, but they do not bring any awareness of God into the practical outworking of their daily lives and their decision making. Most Australians could best be described as *practical Secularists*.

Theoretical Secularists are those who are intellectually committed to the view that this world and this age is all that exists. They would usually describe themselves as atheists.

Following Brian Hill, I make a distinction between 'Secularist' and 'secular' with 'Secularist' being a reference to those who deny religious assumptions concerning God and the supernatural, and 'secular' being a reference to "a state of society which allows religious pluralism but rules that no one religion shall be privileged in public policy"².

Young Australians and the Secularist Worldview

Many young Australians are fortunate enough to come from loving, supportive, stable families. However, the percentage brought up in Christian homes is very small. Whilst there may be respect for some 'Christian' values, very few practice the Christian faith. Few Australian families say prayers. Even the saying of 'grace' is a foreign experience for many. In most families the Bible is not read, discussed or taken seriously. Church-going is not part of the family routine and most families have lost all connection with a local Christian community. These days few children are baptised.

Young people who live in Australia and "move with the mob" probably won't end up Christians. For many the only reference to 'God' or 'Jesus' is as an expletive, or as a swear word. Secularist beliefs appear normal and almost universal. Very few television programs make reference to Christians except to mock them. Christianity has been marginalised. It is often presented as something that has had its day, is old fashioned, out-of-touch and misguided.

Secularist beliefs are the norm in our society. Popular television shows, magazines, musicians and movies continually promote attitudes and values consistent with a Secularist worldview. While we may not name it 'a religion', it is not difficult to see how the Secularist worldview serves a religious function for many individuals.

¹ Bouma, G. – Key note address, Australian Anglican Schools Network Conference 2005

² Hill, B. (2004) *Exploring Religion in School*. Adelaide: Open Book. p25

Most people do not consciously adopt a 'Secularist' worldview. Instead, most people drift into it or absorb this approach to life without any serious or deliberate thought. Australians tend to find it easier to describe what they are not (I'm not a Muslim, I'm not a Christian, I'm not religious) and what they don't believe (I don't believe in God, I don't trust the Bible, I don't think there is life beyond death) than to describe what they are, what they believe and why they believe it. Many young Australians will describe themselves as having 'no beliefs'. This of course is far from the truth. 'Secularist' is a label that is not familiar to many people. In fact many will ask: "*What is a Secularist?*" Given that most people who endorse Secularist beliefs will not give their beliefs this label, it may not be entirely appropriate to refer to it in this way. And yet until the beliefs are identified and labelled it will remain difficult for them to be explored and interrogated, and as Socrates said: *'the unexamined life is not worth living'*.

In most of our schools the majority of our students will not seriously consider embracing one of the major religions of the world, such as Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam or Buddhism. Rather, it will be Secularist beliefs that will present the most attractive alternative to the Christian faith. These Secularist beliefs are what most young people growing up in Australia will embrace, often without even knowing they've embraced them. The social gravity in Australia at the start of the 21st Century will result in people developing a Secularist outlook on life.

Furthermore, if Christians walk away from their faith, it will most likely be towards Secularist beliefs that they will wander. And if Christians need to defend their faith at school, at university, or in the workplace, it will most likely be the Secularist challenge that they will need to answer.

What's inadequate about a Secularist worldview?

For the Christian, the Secularist worldview is fine as far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough. A Christian will agree with much that a Secularist affirms, even though they would want to carefully qualify those affirmations. But it is what a Secularist denies that will cause Christians disquiet. Secularist beliefs deny too much and consequently do not foster complete, full, well-rounded, purposeful lives. For the Christian there's too much that is missing and we would argue that the Secularist outlook will ultimately short change our students.

Richard Eckersley taps into one of the ways in which a Secularist approach to life can lead to people being short changed:

When a society fails to imbue people's lives with a sense of worth and meaning, then they must attempt to find these qualities as individuals....robbed of a broader meaning to our lives, we appear to have entered an era of mass obsession, usually with ourselves: our appearance, our health and fitness, our work, our sex lives, our children's development.³

What is the nature of the impact of Secularist ideas/beliefs?

As people who are concerned for the spiritual development of our students, it is important that we consider the impact that Secularist beliefs are having on them. Listed below are three impacts:

1. Secularist beliefs allow people to think they have 'no beliefs' and since very often they are 'getting by' in life satisfactorily, they tend to live with the illusion that they don't need 'spiritual beliefs'.

³ *Apocalypse? No!*, Australia's Commission for the Future, p.14

2. For most of the time the majority of young Australians think and live as Secular Humanists (though few would be able to articulate this). However, some are also aware that there are times when life throws up a situation for which their 'no belief' approach to life is inadequate. Examples of such situations include the birth of a child, an untimely death, or a world tragedy. It is often at these times that many of them think and live like Christians, albeit briefly. For the most part they live with both feet firmly in the Secularist pond but are inclined to 'dip one toe' into the Christian pond when life throws up a situation for which a Secularist approach to life is inadequate. But when this particular situation passes they usually revert to the default position of operating with a Secularist worldview. Their engagement with meaningful spiritual realities is therefore very often occasional and short term, rather than consistent and life-long. And yet the latter is the kind of spiritual engagement we believe will serve our students best.
3. Since Secularist beliefs are rarely named and described, they remain unexamined. Until one's belief system is named and described, it can be neither critiqued nor defended. Only a belief system that withstands such investigation will ultimately be strong enough to stand the test of time and warrant wholehearted commitment. Furthermore, when an outlook is not named and described it is difficult to identify and deal with inconsistencies in a person's beliefs and convictions.

What can we do to aid the spiritual development of those whose beliefs are Secularist?

Anglican schools have a particular interest in nurturing the spiritual development of young people. A way forward is to identify Secularist beliefs, acknowledge what's good, explore the limitations of these beliefs, and contrast them with Christian beliefs.

1. We need to **identify** and describe Secularist beliefs in our classrooms. Given how concerned we are to help our students to be informed about other world religions, it is surprising that we rarely apply the same approach to the belief system that most clearly permeates Australian society. The fact that many of our students who hold Secularist beliefs often describe themselves as having 'no beliefs' highlights our neglect in this area. Students need to become critically aware of the manner in which such beliefs exist and operate in their own lives and those of others.
2. Having identified and described Secularist beliefs, it is then appropriate to **examine** them. We need to examine the credibility of the arguments that are used to support Secularist beliefs. Our role ought to be to help students to recognise the strengths in a Secularist worldview, but also to expose the weaknesses and limitations of a Secularist worldview. We might ultimately suggest that a Secularist approach to life is too minimalist. We might nudge our students forward by asking: *"Isn't there more?"* and *"Aren't you short changing yourself?"* Perhaps we should see our role as being to 'burst the bubble' where this might be helpful.
3. There is a place for **contrasting** Secularist ideas with Christian beliefs which we are convinced offer a more intellectually coherent, emotionally satisfying and liveable alternative. We do students a great favour by offering them what we consider to be the missing pieces that help to make sense of the jigsaw puzzle of life. These pieces concern Jesus. We give young people the opportunity to hear the story of Jesus and respond. Like many throughout the world we are convinced the story is true and that Jesus brings forgiveness, meaning, purpose and joy into people's lives in a way that Secularist beliefs cannot match.

Are we helping Christian students by teaching them about Secularist beliefs?

Most definitely! Just as missionaries need to learn the culture in which they live and operate, so too do Christians. We must teach them what to expect and how not to misrepresent Secularist beliefs. We must teach them to look for what is good in a Secularist worldview, whilst at the same time helping them to see why they might ultimately reject it. We must teach them not to be surprised or intimidated by the challenges of their friends who adopt this worldview. We must teach them how to move from being on the defensive to being on the offensive. We must model how to be gracious, yet clear and sharp in our rejection of a Secularist worldview.

Suggested Lessons

1. Eight key ideas - A personal response

Students will:

- i. Identify their own personal response to each key idea (Appendix 1) with a 1-5 rating (5 = strongly agree; 1 = strongly disagree)
- ii. Identify reasons for their response

2. Eight key ideas – Do they ring true?

PART A

Students will:

- i. Using the eight key ideas (Appendix 1), reflect on the following questions:
 - a) Do you think these ideas capture where most Australians are at?
 - b) Would you want to modify these points? If so, how?
 - c) How have people arrived at this set of beliefs?
 - d) What strengths and weaknesses can you identify in these beliefs?

PART B

Students will:

- i. Read through a list of key Christian beliefs (Appendix 2)
- ii. Reflect on the following questions:
 - a) To what extent do you think Australians practice these beliefs?
 - b) Can you think of times when individuals are more likely to practice these beliefs? What reasons can you give for this pattern?

3. Labels

Students will:

- i. Discuss the pros and cons of people being given 'labels'
 - a) When are labels helpful?
 - b) When are labels unhelpful?
- ii. Seek to identify the label they would give themselves when it comes to their religion or philosophical outlook.
- iii. Consider whether common Secularist ideas (see Appendix 1) describe their approach to life. Consider whether a 'Secularist' label would be a helpful way to describe their beliefs.
- iv. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of a Secularist approach to life.

APPENDIX 1

'EIGHT KEY IDEAS'

(SECULARIST) IDEAS YOU ARE LIKELY TO HEAR OFTEN IN OUR AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL CONTEXT		REASONS FOR MY RESPONSE
<p>1. There may very well be a God, I do have a hunch, a sneaking suspicion, a shy hope in my heart, that there is a Higher Being, or maybe a 'God-within', or maybe there's nothing, I'm not sure. In any case it makes no real difference to me. I just get on with life.</p>		
<p>2. Human beings are special because we're all unique. There's no-one quite like me. We're all gifted and capable of doing such amazing things.</p>		
<p>3. There's no ultimate meaning to life other than to make sure that we (and the human race) survive. Each of us needs to have dreams and goals. Both long term ones, and short term ones. This is what gives life purpose. We reach for our dreams and work to achieve our goals.</p>		
<p>4. The only way to receive guidance is to discover your dream and to pursue it. <i>"Be what you wanna be, do what you wanna do, yeah!"</i> That just about sums it up. No God, no Bible, no society, no person can tell you what to do and what to be. We have to be self-directed. Self autonomy is a prized virtue.</p>		
<p>5. We hate intolerance. By intolerance we mean anyone presuming to tell us what we can and can't do in any lifestyle area: in the area of speech and behaviour, in the area of marriage and children, in the area of drinking and drugs and sexual expression. What right do others have to tell us that we're wrong! It's our life! It's our right to choose to do whatever we want to do. There are so many intolerant, arrogant and divisive people.</p>		
<p>6. If it is to be it is up to us. Just do it. You can't blame anyone else if you don't accomplish your goals. You can't rely on anyone else to help you. You can't expect or assume people will want to help you with everything. People often tend to fall into the pattern of looking out for number one – themselves. God and prayer are alright for those who feel a bit weak and insecure, but at the end of the day people have to take individual and personal responsibility for themselves.</p>		

<p>7. Self belief is our great need. Think only positive thoughts about yourself. Learn to accept yourself – this can work wonders, the possibilities are endless. Set clear goals and go for them. Visualise success. Banish negative thoughts and don't listen to those who are critical and negative.</p>		
<p>8. Live life to the max. This life is all there is. And it's short. This life is as good as it gets. Life is like falling off a cliff, you grab onto everything you can before you hit the bottom.</p>		

APPENDIX 2

‘FIFTEEN CHRISTIAN IDEAS’

CHRISTIAN IDEAS YOU ARE LIKELY TO HAVE HEARD DURING YOUR TIME AT THIS SCHOOL	REASONS FOR MY RESPONSE
<p>1. God exists, God is real. There is a Higher Being, Someone greater than us. Most people have a hunch, a sneaking suspicion that this is the case.</p>	
<p>2. God is the Creator of this world. By whatever means God chose to create the world and human life (Big Bang, evolution...) everything ultimately owes its existence to God. God is the ultimate source of all that we enjoy. This world is God's world. Human beings have been given the responsibility of caring for God's world.</p>	
<p>3. Human beings are special. We are created in the image of God. All human life has value, worth, dignity and purpose. Our talents, our abilities, our intelligence... are all God given capacities which we do well to develop and to use in service of others.</p>	
<p>4. There is someone to thank for the things we enjoy. Praise, thanks and obedience are our appropriate response to God. We should give God the worship that is His due, and give Him His rightful place in our lives by living life on His terms.</p>	
<p>5. The Bible is God's Word, the way God reveals what He is like and what He has done, His plans and purposes, what He likes and what He hates. We don't have exhaustive knowledge, we don't know everything there is to know about God, but we do know what he has revealed.</p>	
<p>6. Sin is a problem for all of us. We are all guilty of ignoring God and taking Him for granted. No human being always does what's right and always avoids what's wrong.</p>	
<p>7. Forgiveness is our great need and it is something we cannot earn. God has taken the initiative and has made reconciliation possible by sending His Son to die and take the penalty for our sins on the cross. God's forgiveness and acceptance are freely offered, it's a gift for the taking, it's amazing grace, not something we merit or deserve.</p>	
<p>8. God desires that we repent and put our faith in Jesus Christ. Stop doing what's wrong and put your hand into the hand of Jesus. This is the only way to take hold of the forgiveness and acceptance God has made available.</p>	

<p>9. God's love for us been clearly demonstrated in the coming of Jesus and in his death for us. God loves us. He is interested in us and knows about every aspect of our lives.</p>		
<p>10. There is not meant to be such a thing as an isolated Christian. God wants loving communities, healthy churches where people can be welcomed and find a sense of belonging, encouragement, acceptance and support, and where they can grow in their Christian faith.</p>		
<p>11. God's desire is that we care for those in need, support those who are weak, assist those lacking basic and other necessities, offer practical love to our neighbour, and serve other people in the way that Jesus served us.</p>		
<p>12. God is always there for us. He hears and answers our prayers. God delights when we come before Him in prayer. It's not so much that 'prayer works' but that God works through prayer. When we pray, 'coincidences' happen.</p>		
<p>13. Knowing God's providential care we say: "Things happen for a reason." God is sovereign; He is in charge of everything that happens in our world. We don't know why he allows some things to happen, but he has not lost control, interest or concern.</p>		
<p>14. The time is coming when we will all be asked to give an account of our lives. There is a Day of Judgement when God will address injustice and deal with all evil, and there will be ruin for those who have rejected God and opposed His purposes.</p>		
<p>15. There is reason for hope. The best is yet to come. There is hope, not only in this life (nothing is impossible for God), but for life beyond this one. The hope of heaven, of eternal life, of a resurrection, of being with God in a new creation.</p>		