

“Defining Terms – Belief, Secularism and Pluralism”

“How the Media Cover Religious Pluralism in Canada: “Centre for Faith and the Media” Conference

Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

October 21-22, 2005

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It is a great pleasure to be here and I'd like to thank Richelle Wiseman and the organizers of this conference for the invitation to give this paper. I understand that the Centre for Faith and the Media was founded by the late Religion Editor for the *Calgary Herald*, Gordon Legge. I remember well meeting Gordon in the early days of the founding of the Centre for Cultural Renewal over a decade ago in Calgary. His enthusiasm and encouragement meant a good deal at that time and I would like to acknowledge his memory with grateful thanks in this place this afternoon.

Meanings of Words and the Use of Language:

May I begin with an anecdote about terminology and language?

Jesus said to the disciples: “Who do you say that I am?”

The disciples answered: “You are the Eschatological manifestation of the foundation of our being, the kerygma in which we find the ultimate significance of our inter-personal relationships.”

Jesus said: “What?”

So you see, language matters. Much turns on how we use words and often what is hidden in the meanings as much as what is express. My paper today is about hidden assumptions and how they affect our thinking about religion and society - - a matter that ought to be of interest to all those, such as those at this conference, dealing as it does with “How the Media Cover Religious Pluralism in Canada.”

Owen Barfield, the writer and friend of C.S. Lewis, has noted the crucial point that “the most fundamental assumptions of any age are those that are implicit in the meanings of

its common words.”¹ Barfield was of the view that one should pay special attention to those times *when words change their meanings*. The words I want to look at, in particular, “secular” and “secularism” both have important meaning changes that we should note.

With the term “secular” the “hidden” meaning of a “sacred secular” has been almost totally overtaken by the secularistic turn in culture to replace the term “secular” with a reading that is anti-religious and anti-sacred. Barfield notes:

One good reason for troubling to concentrate on the moment of change of meaning is that it directs our attention – awakens us – to fundamental assumptions so deeply held that no one even thinks of making them explicit.²

Barfield makes a distinction between “speaker’s meaning” and “lexical meaning” and notes that shifts in language can occur both by expansion of meaning and by contraction. He then states something of great importance to the change in the meaning of “secular” when he discusses the notion of lexical contraction. Of this Barfield states:

Whereas expansion of meaning can be seen to be the product of the mental *activity* of individual speakers, contraction of meaning can also be – it generally is – the product of their passivity. It is more often the product of something like force of habit, or rather the inertia of habit.³

The “inertia of habit” is evident when religious believers or believers in the idea of the sacred permeating all of human existence and all aspects of culture speak of the term “secular” as if it means “free *from* religion or the sacred.” In short, they do not mean what they say.

This ambiguity is different from the usual ambiguity that can accompany the meaning of words but is a different sort of confusion. How we understand these different meanings with respect to the “secular” and the related term “secularism” can lead us, and I would say, *ought* to lead us to re-evaluate them and to take care in how we use them, mindful of the problems they raise, and once we understand how misuse of both terms can undercut the very things we are trying to achieve.

I want to get us to look together at the terms “pluralism”, “secular” and “secularism” and a few other related terms (“belief/unbelief” and “faith”) and how these are used by everyone - - religious and non and often in ways that undercut what we think we are saying. Get these terms wrong and you cannot move towards fair and appropriate treatment of diversity in a society.

¹ Owen Barfield, *Speaker’s Meaning* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1967) p. 44

² *ibid.* p. 46

³ *ibid.* p. 46 emphasis in original.

I will suggest that the way most people use most of the central terminology relating to religion and culture is incorrect and actually furthers an ideology that most people who use the terms incorrectly would not support. Briefly then, I'd like to clear some underbrush first by looking at the terms "belief/believer" and "faith/faith communities."

Who is a "Believer"?

The starting off point for my comments is an observation; "all human beings are believers, the question is not one of belief or non-belief but of what is believed in.

Yet how often we hear those who do not believe religion described as "unbelievers." Similarly, everyone has faith but the question, as with belief, is "faith in what?"

What is "faith?"

It was John Henry Cardinal Newman who, in one of his articles observed that "to act is to assume and to assume is to have faith." Why then do we speak of "communities of faith" or "people of faith" when we mean those who have religion or are religious and implicitly suggest that all the others do not have faith?

As with belief, the separation of the world into two sharp divisions - - one of "faith" and the other ofwell, that's the problem. The implicit suggestion of the contemporary period is that those who are not in communities of faith are people of facts.

So the fact/belief distinction is furthered by those who, ironically, don't actually believe that religious beliefs are unfactual or that atheism and agnosticism have stronger claims to material reality than religious beliefs.

In short, the world is made up of believers called humans and all are parts of communities that have faith in this or that - - some of this faith and belief is religious some of it is not. These distinctions play out in terms of other major categories and I'd like now to turn to the terms "pluralism" and "liberalism."

Part I: Pluralism and Liberalism:

There are basically two broad approaches to pluralism and liberalism. One ultimately assumes that we are moving towards agreement on everything ("convergence liberalism") and the other that we cannot assume this and so must find ways to live together despite differences (I call this "diversity liberalism" or "diversity pluralism"). Though the term "pluralism" is used frequently in relation to law, politics and education, "pluralism" and "liberalism" are seldom defined or analyzed. This paper argues that it is important to recognize these two different approaches and that which one we accept will determine whether or not freedom and diversity are tolerated or not. To pursue the wrong sort of pluralism or liberalism or to have an incorrect notion of "the secular" will, in fact,

determine whether our society can continue to nurture “liberalism”, “tolerance” and liberal democracy itself.

Two Approaches to “Pluralism” under the Canadian Constitution

It is important to consider the nature of pluralism in Canada. Like so many terms in our public discourse (“values”, “the secular”, “liberalism”, etc.) its common use masks the fact that it is seldom analyzed. As such, if there are presuppositions in the term, or an ambiguous usage that is not discovered or discussed, we can be misled as to what is actually being said when the term is used. Pluralism can connote a kind of relativistic approach, as in “because we are a pluralistic society, such and such a moral position cannot have any public validity.” It does not have to mean this, however, and in Canada our linkage of a language of pluralism with a firm commitment to group rights, for example, points us to a principled and structural or shared pluralism rather than one that is relativistic or, perhaps, totalistic.⁴ For this is a notion of pluralism that views society as moving towards the articulation of one public policy and this language is antagonistic to the notion of plurality and tolerance of diversity.

Recent court challenges have raised these questions in a sometimes stark fashion. Professor John Gray has described the two main approaches to liberalism in relation to pluralism as follows:

Liberalism contains two philosophies. In one, toleration is justified as a means to truth. In this view, toleration is an instrument of rational consensus, and a diversity of ways of life is endured in the faith that it is destined to disappear. In the other, toleration is valued as a condition of peace, and divergent ways of living are welcomed as marks of diversity in the good life. The first conception supports an ideal of ultimate convergence on values, the latter an ideal of *modus vivendi*. Liberalism's future lies in turning its face away from the ideal of rational consensus and looking instead to *modus vivendi*.

The predominant liberal view of toleration sees it as a means to a universal civilization. If we give up this view, and welcome a world that contains many ways of life and regimes, we will have to think afresh about human rights and democratic government. We will refashion these inheritances to serve a different liberal philosophy.

We will come to think of human rights as convenient articles of peace, whereby individuals and communities with conflicting values and interest may consent to coexist.⁵

The political condition in Canada respects the “*modus vivendi*” or as I prefer to call it

⁴ By “totalistic” I mean the implicit or explicit claim that all citizens must endorse a particular contested viewpoint or belief in “public” settings. Such views claim that certain practices must be endorsed publicly and that such public endorsement (of, say, homosexual or lesbian conduct) trumps other viewpoints. This is to claim total control over the public sphere for a contested viewpoint - - hence it is a “total” claim or is “totalistic.” This paper argues that these claims are inconsistent with allowing genuine diversity of belief and expression for all citizens.

⁵ John Gray, *The Two Faces of Liberalism* (2000), the New Press, Page 105

“diverse pluralism.” Properly diverse pluralism is under attack in Canada today.

Professor John D. Whyte has noted that the Canadian Constitution has not been promulgated upon any individualistic conception of liberalism but, rather, one that respects and nurtures each person’s communities. Moreover, the two kinds of rights protected by the *Charter*, group rights and individual rights, derive from different conceptions of the proper role of the state, which are both reflected in the Constitution:

There are two theoretical models for describing the modern democratic state. One derives from the political philosophy of liberalism, under which society is arranged without a particular conception of the good and in which individuals have claims of right to equal regard and respect. The other might be labeled the organic society, in which the primary focus is not the autonomy of the individual but the importance of nurturing communities or corporate life. Such a society adheres to a conception of the good in the sense that it accepts that the superior condition for individual well-being is not the maximization of personal autonomy but the growth of strong communities formed around common interests. The interest of individuals are best vindicated not through the recognition of each person’s formal equality but through the joining together of those with similar interests to create nurturing, supportive, normative communities. An organic nation is comprised of these various communities each working out a political accommodation which reconciles conflicting interests but which allows as much of the normative role to the particular communities as possible....The truly effective way to respect life and to achieve a fulfilled life may be through identification with a group and having the assurance that one community or another recognizes one as having distinguishable substantive value. 6

Professor Whyte points out that since Confederation, the Constitution has provided for group rights in addition to individual rights. S. 133 of the *Constitution Act, 1867*, confers language rights that may be asserted by individuals because of their membership in a protected group. The Royal Proclamation of 1763 accommodates claims by members of aboriginal communities to special status. A number of provisions of the Constitution protect denominational rights including Section 93 of the *Constitution Act, 1867*, Section 17 of the *Saskatchewan Act*, and Section 17 of the *Alberta Act*.

This tradition of providing constitutional protection for group rights has been continued under the *Constitution Act, 1982*, including the Charter. *Native rights* are protected by s. 25 of the Charter and Parts II, IV and IV.1 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*. *Language rights* are protected by s. 16 through 21 of the Charter. *Minority language educational rights* are protected by s. 23 of the Charter. Denominational education rights are protected by s. 29 of the Charter. These group rights comprise almost a third of the Charter’s provisions. Further recognition of the value of communities and their role in

6 John D. Whyte, “Is the Private Sector Affected by the Charter?” in *Righting the Balance: Canada’s New Equality Rights*, L. Smith, ed.(Saskatoon: The Canadian Human Rights Reporter Inc., 1986) p. 145 at pp. 174-175

Canadian society is found in the Charter's guarantees of freedom of religion and association (s.2), its recognition of legal or customary rights or privileges (s. 22), and of the multi-cultural heritage of Canada (s. 27), and the limitation on Charter rights and freedoms (s.1).⁷

Consequently, as Professor Whyte observes:

...It is impossible to discern in the constitutional text either the clear direction to promote liberal values as wholeheartedly as possible or the direction to sustain communitarian values to the greatest extent possible. The Charter reflects the tension. Of course, it gives impetus to the nation's change to liberalism, but it does not reveal, in any precise way, where the limit should be drawn to protect other political values."⁸

The Canadian model depicted above does not start with the proposition that either form of right is paramount or will necessarily converge or has a "trump" over other claims, but instead looks for the proper sphere of operation of each. This is a form of structural pluralism which must be respected. Recent commentary in the United States has recognized the principles of "structural pluralism." James Skillen notes that:

...a just society is one in which multiple institutions and diverse spheres of responsibility can function together in freedom, under protection of the law [so] then part of the legal obligation of a just government is to recognize and protect that complex diversity of society. Closely related to this principle, and mutually interdependent with it, is the principle of religious freedom...government should act in accord with the principles of justice by treating faiths and faith communities with equal public protection. Government cannot do this, however, without respecting the freedom and diversity of those faiths.⁹

Claims that are, therefore, totalistic and which claim to represent in themselves all of "public policy" where such recognition effectively delegitimizes other perspectives, must be rejected as overreaching. Totalistic claims for "recognition" by any particular advocacy group do not respect diverse pluralism that holds together notions of group as well as individual rights and a plurality of moral perspectives.

The same sort of confused language applies to the term "secular" but here the use by religious believers is almost exactly the same now days as it is by those who are non-religious believers. Consider how we speak of "Religion AND the secular."

I want to suggest that this use is deeply erroneous and mis-describes the nature of the contemporary society and its state dimensions of law and politics. The media, given its

7 *ibid.* pp. 176-177

8 *ibid.* 177-178

9 James Skillen "The Theoretical Roots of Equal Treatment" in Stephen V. Monsma and J. Christopher (eds.) *Equal Treatment of Religion in a Pluralistic Society* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998) 55 – 74 at 72.

importance to our contemporary society, in perpetuating this set of linguistic errors just furthers the separation of religious relevance from the various aspects of society.

Sometimes this wish to marginalize religious significance is expressly desired but often it is not. To understand the variants and why they are significant I want to suggest that we learn about the nature and origins of another term: “secularism.”

Indoctrination and dogma, after all, are not limited to religions and, as French philosopher Jacques Maritain once observed, there is such a thing as “atheist theocracy” or as another writer, Graham Good, has noted, there is a rise of what may be termed “the new sectarianism” animated by pious zeal but not by religious convictions.

Our societies and their constitutions set out protections for respect, diversity and tolerance yet a sizeable and growing body of academic literature and court decisions are having to wrestle with just how terms of general application apply in the specifics of cases. I have had the privilege in various cases over the last decade or so, of acting for various religious bodies and inter-faith groups over the years and have seen how many of them believe that religions are not being accorded the respect they deserve and are entitled to. In Canada, many religious believers and groups speak openly about feeling excluded and threatened by developments they see around them but often fail to see how key assumptions buried within their own language perpetuate the very exclusion of religion from cultural relevance that they lament.

Simply put: they fail to engage because they use the wrong language.

Part II: The Nature of the “Secular”:

The term “secular” has changed its meaning over the last century and a half. The term in general usage now means, essentially, free *from* religion as in “we ought to keep religion out of the schools because they are secular.” This was not the original meaning, nor is it a meaning which recognizes the *modus vivendi* or diversity pluralism referred to above. In short, the term “secular” must have a neutral meaning lest it be taken in an anti-religious direction.

All citizens, as a matter of fact, make their decisions in life based upon their beliefs. On one level, therefore, we are all “believers.” The question is: “what do we believe in” and “for what reasons” and does the origin of our beliefs mean that some people (or some beliefs) have less importance in a society that says it will respect the ability of citizens to have the fundamental right and freedom to “belief” and “expression” in addition to “conscience and religion.”

Courts have, recently, come to acknowledge that any pre-emptive exclusion of “religion” from the category of “beliefs” that may operate in the public sphere of society, is an unwarranted attack on the freedom of “conscience and religion” set out in Section 2(a) of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. To allow only the beliefs of atheists and agnostics to have any public relevance is not to treat those beliefs and those who hold them as

equal citizens. To allow only those beliefs that emanate from the convictions of atheists and agnostics to have public relevance is discriminatory against religious beliefs just as much as to allow only religious beliefs to have public relevance..

The principles of a free and democratic society require that all citizens are entitled to have their viewpoints respected within certain very broad parameters. It is not simply a matter of how beliefs are expressed but of what communities are nurtured and created by the analysis that must be examined. To the greatest extent possible society must try to encourage the diverse communities of belief that make up the tapestry of Canadian society or any “plural” society.

We must be careful to guard against definitions that build into their use an assumption that is unexamined. Just as this has happened where totalistic pluralism can look like diverse pluralism (when they are very different) so, too, how we define what we mean by the term “secular” is also important.

Where the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “secular,” the uses of the word that suggest that the secular is “non-sacred” in character arise as recently as the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁰ The term as we now have it originated in the mid 19th Century in the works of George Holyoake, Charles Bradlaugh and their fellow secularists. It is in works such as theirs (atheistic and agnostic in belief) that the current usage is adopted in which the “secular” is viewed as free from religion.

In fact, this more recent use of “secular”, which we may justly call the atheistic or agnostic interpretation, is seldom viewed alongside against alternate understandings. This is not helpful since an atheistic definition, if used as the meaning for a central term such as “secular”, fails to give a proper place to religion in the private and public dimensions of society. The atheistic “secular” becomes, in effect, a blueprint for the naked public square. A more informed historical understanding, built upon a richer epistemological ground, better reflects both the reality of beliefs in society and the principles of freedom that ought to undergird a properly civil society.

If we start off with the assumption (building into our use of the term “secular” for example) that religion has no place in the secular, then, of course, we will tend to diminish the role of the religious in civil society. But this is really to adopt implicitly or explicitly the ideology of atheistically driven “secularism”, because the “secular”, viewed historically, does not require such a removal of the sacred dimension from all aspects of life. The secular is, properly understood, a realm of *competing faith/belief claims*, not a realm of “non-faith” or “non-belief” claims. Given the dominance of the atheistic definitions of “secular” and “separation of church and state”, it will take some time for them to be redefined so as to better support the right ordering of freedoms in contemporary society.

¹⁰*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., “secular,” “secularism,” and “secularity.” All uses suggesting a meaning of “secular” that denotes an absence of connection with *religion* post-date G.J. Holyoake, *The Principles of Secularism Briefly Explained* (London: Holyoake & Co., 1859).

In contemporary usage, “secular schools”, “secular government”, etc. are generally understood to mean non-religious or not influenced by religion or religious principles. I suggest that this is because we have adopted the atheistic or agnostic definition of “secular” rather than a richer and more properly inclusive conception. The separation of church and state is, after all, a jurisdictional distinction important to both the church and the state. A valid separation should not preclude a valid *cooperation* between church and state. Most religious groups in the west, for example, do not in fact want the state to run the church or vice versa.

The historical shift in the use of “secular” should be recognized. It is tempting to glance off the historical critique by continuing to use the term “secular” and “religious” as if they describe different worlds. But they do not describe different worlds; they describe different functions. The “secular” is the state and “religion” is a set of practices within the state. Therefore the separation of “religion” from something constructed as “the secular” is clever (and serves an anti-religious goal) but neither accurate nor just.

When the British Columbia Court of Appeal overturned the newer atheistic use of “secular” and affirmed the secular as a realm that has, properly, a place for beliefs that emerge from religious commitment. Justice McKenzie, for a unanimous three-justice panel, analyzed the term “secular” as follows:

Can "strictly secular" in s. 76(1) of the *School Act* be interpreted as limited to moral positions devoid of religious influence? Are only those with a non-religiously informed conscience to be permitted to participate in decisions involving moral instruction of children in the public schools? Must those whose moral positions arise from a conscience influenced by religion be required to leave those convictions behind or otherwise be excluded from participation while those who espouse similar positions emanating from a conscience not informed by religious considerations are free to participate without restriction? Simply to pose the questions in such terms can lead to only one answer in a truly free society. Moral positions must be accorded equal access to the public square without regard to religious influence. A religiously informed conscience should not be accorded any privilege, but neither should it be placed under a disability. In a truly free society moral positions advance or retreat in their influence on law and public policy through decisions of public officials who are not required to pass a religious litmus test.

A contrary interpretation is not only insupportable in principle, it would raise immense practical difficulties. How would it be determined that a moral position is advanced from a conscience influenced by religion or not? If the restriction were applied only where the religious conviction was publicly declared it would privilege convictions based on a conscience whose influences were concealed over one openly proclaimed. The alternative would be to require inquiry as to the

source of a moral conviction, whether religious or otherwise. Both alternatives are offensive and indefensible. 11

A leading American scholar on the law relating to religion, Michael W. McConnell, writes that:

The beginning of wisdom in this contentious area of law is to recognize that neutrality and secularism are not the same thing. In the marketplace of ideas, secular viewpoints and ideologies are in competition with religious viewpoints and ideologies. It is no more neutral to favour the secular over the religious than it is to favour the religious over the secular. It is time for a reorientation of constitutional law: *away* back from the false neutrality of the secular state, *toward* a genuine equality of rights.¹²

Consistent with the criticism of the term “secular” presented in this paper, however, observe that while Professor McConnell correctly identifies the “non-neutral” nature of the secular, he perpetuates the false bifurcation between “the secular” and “the religious.” This, too, must change for there to be a proper delineation of the issues that are at stake in these areas. Still, despite this error, McConnell rightly criticizes the notion that there is a “neutrality” that can be stripped of religious beliefs and claims in such a manner that what is left represents an adequate “consensus” for civil society.

Secularism:

The term “secularism” is not often examined and I want to show why an examination of that term ought to lead us to challenge fundamentally any idea that “secularism” is a valid principle upon which to base an open and democratic society.

The reason this needs to be challenged is that the majority judges of the Supreme Court of Canada, in the *Chamberlain* decision in December 2002 said that Canada was “based upon the principles of secularism” and referred to the *Charter of Rights* imposing what they called “the requirement of secularism.” I suggest that they were deeply wrong to do so and had they looked a little (as they did not) at the meaning of “secularism” (there was no argument before them on the point) they would not have said what they did about Canada being based upon “secularism.”

Consider the following definition of “secularism” from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* 11th Edition.

Secularism, a term applied specially (see Secular) to the system of social ethics associated with the name of G.J. Holyoake (q.v.). As the word implies, secularism

11 *Chamberlain v. Surrey School Board* (2000), 80 B.C.L.R. (3d) 181 (C.A.); reversing (1998), 60 B.C.L.R. (3d) 311 (S.C.). A more detailed analysis of the Court of Appeal decision may be found on the *LexView* section of the website of the Centre for Cultural Renewal at <www.culturalrenewal.ca>

12 Michael W. McConnell “Equal Treatment and Religious Discrimination” in Monsma and Soper (1998) 30 – 54 at 33.

is based solely on considerations of practical morality with a view to the physical, social and moral improvements of society. It neither affirms nor denies the theistic premises of religion, and is thus a particular variety of utilitarianism. Holyoake founded a society in London which subsequently under the leadership of Charles Bradlaugh advocated the disestablishment of the Church, the abolition of the Second Chamber and other political and economic reforms.¹³

Secularism on this reading “neither affirms nor denies the theistic premises of religion.”; so matters stood, apparently, in 1911, when the above definition was published. *The Oxford English Dictionary* informs us, the term “secularism” was, in fact, coined by George Jacob Holyoake around 1851.

The official website of The National Secular Society, the society that emerged from the work of Holyoake in 1866, states, amongst various goals and principles that “[w]e assert that supernaturalism is based upon ignorance and is the historic enemy of progress.”¹⁴

Turning to Holyoake’s major work, *English Secularism: A Confession of Belief*¹⁵ we discover the inaccuracy of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*’s claim, simply, as it turns out, lifted from Holyoake’s book directly, that secularism “neither affirms nor denies the theistic premises of religion.” The claim is false but the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and later works, have missed this fact.

Extolling the liberation of humanity by the exercise of reason, Holyoake writes:

Self-regarding criticism having discovered the insufficiency of theology for the guidance of man, next sought to ascertain what rules human reason may supply for the independent conduct of life, which is the object of Secularism....
Secularists say we have found [truth] at least, so much as replaces the chief errors and uncertainties of theology.¹⁶

Setting out the essential principles of Secularism, Holyoake states that it is “a code of duty pertaining to this life, founded on considerations purely human, and intended mainly for those who find theology indefinite or inadequate, unreliable or unbelievable.”¹⁷

Holyoake stakes out, as it were, a high ground that is “beyond speculation” which he says is the limitation of both the atheist and the theist. He claims that:

¹³ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, above, p. 573.

¹⁴ Web site of the National Secular Society <http://secularism.org.uk/> emphasis added.

¹⁵ George Jacob Holyoake, *English Secularism: A Confession of Belief* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1896)

¹⁶ *ibid.* pp. 34 – 35.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 35.

Though respecting the right of the atheist and theist to their theories of the origin of nature, the Secularist regards them as belonging to the debatable ground of speculation. *Secularism neither asks nor gives any opinion upon them, confining itself to the entirely independent field of study – the order of the universe. Neither asserting nor denying theism or a future life*, having no sufficient reason to give if called upon; the fact remains that material influences exist, vast and available for good, as men have the will and with to employ them. Whatever may be the value of metaphysical or theological theories of morals, utility in conduct is a daily test of common sense, and is capable of deciding intelligently more questions of practical duty than any other rule. Considerations which pertain to the general welfare, operate without the machinery of theological creeds, and over masses of men in every land to whom Christian incentives are alien, or disregarded.¹⁸

For Holyoake the “order of the universe” is ascertainable by human reason and all this outside of any necessity of asserting or denying theism or a future life. His work is, as the sub-title affirms, “a confession of belief” and a bold one at that. But it is not, and secularism so conceived cannot hold itself “beyond assertion or denial.” For his claim to comprehend “the order of the universe” without, at some point, necessarily denying or affirming the claims of a creator God is inaccurate. The significance of such a high stance - - today we might call it the claim to “liberal neutrality” is clear for later developments.

Holyoake, under the chapter heading “Rejected Tenets Replaced by Better” suggests the superiority of “secularism” and invites the reader to “suppose that criticism has established...” the following:

1. That God is unknown.
2. That a future life is un-provable.
3. That the Bible is not a practical guide.
4. That Providence sleeps.
5. That prayer is futile.
6. That original sin is untrue.
7. That eternal perdition is unreal.¹⁹

Secularist truth “should tread close upon the heels of theological error”²⁰ and, to counteract such errors, Holyoake would turn against the theological so that, for example, “...for the providence of Scripture, Secularism directs men to the providence of science, which provides against peril, or brings deliverance when peril comes.”²¹

Instead of “futile prayer”, secularism proposes “self-help and the employment of all the resources of manliness and industry.” Instead of belief in “original depravity” (one assumes by this that Holyoake means the concept of “sin”) secularism aims to

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 37 emphasis added.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 71

²⁰ Ibid. p. 72

²¹ Ibid.

“...promote the moralization of this world which Christianity has proved ineffectual to accomplish.”²²

That Holyoake views secularism as a substitute for religion is clear in his book. He seems to believe that secularism and Christianity have different missions in many ways and, as I have quoted, secularism’s is superior. The following passage shows that Holyoake saw secularism as a superior ethical system for society. He describes the mission of secularism in the following terms:

None of the earlier critics of Secularism, as has been said (and not many in the later years), realized that it was addressed, not to Christians, but to those who rejected Christianity, or who were indifferent to it, and were outside it. Christians cannot do anything to inspire *them* with ethical principles, since they do not believe in morality unless based on their supernatural tenets. They have to convert men to Theism, to miracles, prophecy, inspiration of the Scriptures, the Trinity, and other soul-wearying doctrines, before they can inculcate morality they can trust. We do not rush in where they fear to tread. Secularism moves where they do not tread at all. ²³

The Secularist policy is “...to accept the purely moral teaching of the Bible, and to controvert its theology, in such respects as it contradicts and discourages ethical effort.”²⁴ In fact, we are informed that it is Christians who do not respect God:

True respect would treat God as though at least he is a gentlemen (sic). Christianity does not do this. No gentleman would accept thanks for benefits he had not conferred, nor would he exact thanks daily and hourly for gifts he had really made, nor have the vanity to covet perpetual thanksgivings. He who would respect God, or respect himself, must seek a faith apart from such Christianity.²⁵

Finally, in listing the early and continuing aims of Secularism, Holyoake notes the desire to:

...convert churches and chapels into temples of instruction for the people....to solicit priests to be teachers of useful knowledge.²⁶

As if to highlight the alternative religious nature of Secularism, Holyoake ends his book with a rewriting of what he terms “secularist ceremonies” since he recognizes that ceremonies should be consistent with the opinions of those in whose names the ceremonies take place. Listed are descriptions of a Secularist theory for the ceremony of marriage; the naming of children; the death of children and a kind of admonition regarding how everyone should have “a career of public usefulness.”²⁷

²² *ibid.* p. 73.

²³ *Ibid.* pp. 82 – 83 emphasis in original.

²⁴ *ibid.* p. 91.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 113

²⁶ *Ibid.* 119.

²⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 126 – 141.

With a variety of typically Victorian quotations from Tennyson, Edwin Arnold and Harriet Martineau, of the “every man should do his duty in the face of life’s vicissitudes” type, there is something strangely certain (and empirically unverifiable) about Holyoake’s concluding statements in which we are told, with certainty, that “between the cradle and the grave is the whole existence of man.”²⁸

To conclude on this part then, it would seem that “secularism” is not properly described as “neither affirming nor denying the premises of theism”²⁹ a claim made by Holyoake himself but denied by the rest of the book in which this claim appears. Holyoake, in fact, as we have seen, denies theism root and branch. The error made by the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in picking up Holyoake’s own phrase uncritically, has been adopted and repeated by later dictionaries through the twentieth and into the present century.³⁰

There is far more in the clearly stated objectives of “secularism” than the dictionary or encyclopedia uses suggest and secularization itself, in so far as it represents a move in the direction of “secularism” can be shown to have an expressly anti-religious motivation from its earliest roots.

Because secularism of this sort has set itself expressly against religion it is surprising, therefore, to note that modern dictionaries, with few exceptions, repeat the same mistake as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and fail to note an “anti-religious” definition of the secular and the goals of secularism itself. It is as if all the language relating to the “secular” has simply been co-opted in an anti-religious direction and that few have noticed.

Similarly, the notion that there could be a religious view of a “sacred secular” has been ignored here and dominated by the secularist definitions. The “secularistic” sense has dominated the dictionary entry just as thoroughly as that interpretation has dominated contemporary culture. Secularism is and always has been anti-religious.³¹

It is to be hoped that those who recognize the importance of religions to society will cease using the terms “secularism” and “secular” in ways that further drive religions out of society in a “secularistic” direction. A richer understanding would necessarily reject “secularism” as an ideology inconsistent with the equality of all citizens. Such a

²⁸ Ibid. p. 141.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 37.

³⁰ See, most recently, Pearsall J. and Trumble B. eds. *Oxford English Reference Dictionary* (2nd ed. Revised, 2002) where the definition of “secular” is secularist in nature. For further detail of the dominance of “secularistic” definitions and some suggestions as to how this occurred based upon the conception of “hidden” versus “express” meanings of words see: Iain T. Benson “The Secular: Hidden and Express Meanings” *Sacred Web* 9 (2002) 125 – 139.

³¹ That the principles of “secularism” and “religion” will inevitably conflict has been made by Kathleen Sullivan, “Religion and Liberal Democracy”, 59 U. Chi. L. Rev. 195 (1992) at p. 197 cited in Christine L. Niles, *Epistemological Nonsense? The Secular/Religious Distinction*, 17 Notre Dame J.L. Ethics & Pub. Pol’y (2003) 561 – 592 at 577 footnote 62. I thank Joseph Hammon for bringing this article to my attention.

rejection of “secularism” would also be consistent with its correctly religiously inclusive use of the term “secular.”

Conclusion:

Only a richer conception of how citizens with differing belief systems can co-exist can solve the dilemma posed by erroneous uses of key terms in aid of universal consensus. What is clear is that claims for “neutrality” based upon the prior exclusion of religious beliefs but the inclusion of other beliefs under misuse of terms’ such as “believer/unbeliever”, “secular” or “faith” should cease. Terms such as “pluralism”, “equality” or “tolerance” that implicitly or expressly see us moving towards eventual agreement on all matters, need to be rejected as inconsistent with human freedom. Law and politics (aided by media coverage) should keep ever before us the need to find ways in which people who do not believe the same things can, nonetheless, share the public realm.

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Educated at various universities in Canada, Scotland and England, Iain Benson has degrees from Queen’s University and Cambridge and is a lawyer, legal consultant, lecturer and writer. He has been involved as counsel or been asked to advise on many of the important cases dealing with religious and human rights in recent years. Recently he has worked on leading cases in Canada, England and South Africa. He also serves as the first Executive Director of the Centre for Cultural Renewal, an Ottawa based think-tank dedicated to developing a language of engagement between religions and contemporary culture. The Centre’s website is: www.culturalrenewal.ca He is currently preparing a book on the nature of the “secular” and now lives with his family in the South West of France when he is not traveling and lecturing.

