

Dear everyone, greetings once again.

I have been doing some reading recently on the dynamics of urbanization, globalization and post-modernity. The Board has asked me to prepare a framework for urban ministry and this requires some thought with a small team of colleagues to get some basics in place before a wider conversation is initiated. These 3 phenomena of urbanization, globalization and post-modernity appear to be mutually reinforcing around the world today. Part of this study is focusing on secularism and the challenges of ministry among secular communities, many of which are urbanized, post-modern and connected globally. As I read, I have realized that many SDAs are in fact Secular(3) SDAs.....although allow me some time to unpack this concept. I want to share some of the insights I have been picking up in this and the next couple of worldviews. I am typing at 30,000 feet somewhere over the north Pacific, so if things get a bit bumpy in the text, please forgive me.

While at Newbold studying for my NT Biblical studies program, I fondly imagined that I was going to graduate, and depart for ministry among the secular communities of the UK. Among these communities, I would find people living financially successful but spiritually unfulfilled lives. The alleged "God-hole" would never be filled without the presence of God.....and that would be an open door for ministry. What I found was quite different. Many in the secular world are busy with their own projects, longings and quests for significance.....within an entirely immanent framework, i.e. within an immediate material world without any consideration of the possibility of an afterlife and no sense of the transcendent. Many were in fact almost finding their own significance and meaning in life within that immanent frame. The secular pursuit of meaning, significance and truth seems to have almost satisfied many....with the key word being "almost." The exclusive humanism seems to offer the possibility of significance without the transcendent dimension in life. Ministry would be much harder in reality than in anticipation! Many seculars have constructed a world in which the gods and idols of the past have been done away with, yet their lives are "haunted" at crucial moments, e.g. the burials of loved ones, by a curious and haunting sense from the past of the transcendent.

One Christian philosopher, Charles Taylor, has written a *magnus opus* on this topic called *A Secular Age*. Over 900 pages in length, it is dense and provides a whole new vocabulary that helps to articulate the concepts he is expressing. The book provides a cultural archaeology for how we came to inhabit such a secular age and the implications this has for Christians. From a reading of his writings, he appears to be a Roman Catholic, and yet with that caveat in mind, I want share some of his thoughts. They relate quite well to an understanding of how we came to be in our modern secular age, and how we as Adventists are also often operating within a secular framework, even if only unwittingly.

After the disenchantment of the enlightenment, we are living in an era of aggressive secular humanism. Radical atheists such as Dawkins and Hitchens offer maps of our new post-God social experience, providing empirical explanations tied to natural science for much of our daily experience. They flatten our world through disenchantment with the rapidly disappearing transcendent. Alleged graveyards of the gods are a highlight of such writings. In response, fundamentalists of various hues and colors offer alternative maps of reality, but they generally tend to be out of touch with the realities of modern life. The alternative maps of secularism vs faith, creation vs evolution, belief vs unbelief and belief vs reason outline modes of living that rarely correspond to the messy realities of our rushed lives. We somehow live in the betwixt and the between, believers and unbelievers alike.

According to Taylor, our modern secular age is haunted. In our radically secular era, we live under a brass heaven, rooted in the empirical, in immanence. Yet, we live in the twilight of gods and idols from

the past. These ghosts from our past occasionally return, and every once in a while secular man feels tempted to belief by an innate and oft-ignored sense of the transcendent. Likewise, people of faith live with fraught and fragile faith, where our confession of faith is often haunted by an inescapable sense of its contestability. We don't choose belief over doubt, but we believe while we doubt...as did Thomas. Our faith is fragile, ever fighting "reason" and the doubts pressed on us by avowed and evangelical atheists.

Taylor's philosophical musings are reflected by some novelists, such as Julian Barnes and Charles du Bos. Du Bos compares the modern secular world to being woken up unexpectedly each morning to find ourselves in an unfamiliar hotel room at a very early hour in the pitch dark. Panic, questions of "where am I?" and the sense of living in a rented world crowd in on us. We once lived in a philosophical cosmos – a place created by a loving Creator, a place of order and purpose and meaning and intent, in which we found our home within an hierarchical creation. Thanks to modern philosophy and evolutionary biology, we now live in the universe metaphorically and metaphysically, a random collection of particles arising from a random explosion of random nothingness....and rather than being our home, we are adrift literally and philosophically in a cold, uncaring and purposeless universe. As my mountain guide told me when I broke my leg in Canada – "The mountain doesn't care." The unanticipated wake-up call in an unfamiliar place is what many experience in our secular age. In this era of radical philosophical uncertainty, we may agree with the novelist who wrote, "I don't believe in God, but I miss Him." Hence our era of radical but fragile secularism, haunted by the gods and idols of our past, which represent the transcendent we deny to its face.

In this secular world, believers live lives of fragilized faith. Christendom has passed. Society no longer upholds basic Judeo-Christian tenets or assumptions. The burden of proof is now on the believer to justify and defend the transcendent in an avowedly immanent and secular world. And so believers must learn what it means to live lives of faith in an avowedly secular age.

Evolutionary psychology and expressive individualism are characteristics of our secular age, in which the search for significance / fullness is sought within a strictly material and immanent frame. Yet, although Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell, Darwin and Dawkins seem to drive our modern era, secular man is still captivated by Oprah and Tolkien and the searing soul-searching soaring of Kings College Cambridge's Christmas carol services. Steve Jobs represents our modern ambiguities well. His search of different spiritualities led him to Buddhism, reincarnation and spiritual transcendence. He wanted to believe that something existed after this life, but as he faced death recently he wasn't sure if this life was for real, if death was like a click – and it is all over. In practice, he avoided putting off-on switches on his Apple devices....just in case.

In our modern secular world, the writer David Wallace argues that hell is self-consciousness, the escapes are distraction and entertainment rather than rapture and spiritual ecstasy. God is dead, but He has been replaced by everybody else....everything is permitted, but everyone is watching and judging on social media. Perhaps the best "salvation" our secular world has to offer is in behaviors that numb us to the dreary secular landscape: sex; drugs and endless entertainment. This search for escape, from the demands of immanence and the hauntings of transcendence, leads to the "nova effect," i.e. the explosion in searches for alternative spiritualities and answers in a supermarket of non-exclusive options where everyone must find their own path / "dharma."

Taylor's writings explore how we moved from 1500 when it was virtually impossible to not believe in God to 2000 where the majority of seculars find unbelief inescapable. His writings present a

philosophical archaeological tour that provide a framework in which to understand how we live as faithful SDA disciples in an era of unbelief. Some definitions from his writings will be helpful.

1. In classical accounts up to the Reformation, the “secular” was the temporal, e.g. mundane and earthly professions like the butcher, baker and candlestick maker. The priest however pursued a “sacred” vocation. This is the classical secular / sacred divide. Taylor calls this S1.
2. In modernity, and particularly after the Enlightenment, we have S2. “Secular” now refers to a nonsectarian, neutral, and areligious place, space of standpoint. The public square is secular insofar as it is allegedly non-religious. Public schools are secular. Parochial schools are not secular as they have religious beliefs / confessions of faith. More and more people in the 20th century identify as non-religious, or S2 secular. According to secularization disenchantment theory, as societies experience technological advance and modernization, the divisive, irrational and unprovable claims of religions slowly wither away in a process of disenchantment. Such theories are also applied to the individual’s life experience. Maturity + life experience + wisdom = a secular outlook. Secular humanism is all that is left after the process of disenchantment is complete. The transcendent disappears as we focus on an exclusively immanent world. We are so fixated by the ball game in the park that we don’t notice the stars disappearing as the stadium roof closes over our heads. S2 seculars seek a secular, areligious public space governed by allegedly universal and neutral rationality and free from the irrationality of religious belief. This is S2 secularism, e.g. the ACLU and LGBTQ movement.
3. There is however, according to Taylor, an S3 version. In this stage, religious belief or belief in God is understood as merely one option among many others. This is the post-modern mindset. Such faith is contestable, and must not be intolerant or discriminate against other faiths or lifestyle choices. In this sense, in the USA we live in an S3 society where many still practice a fervent faith in God....but such faith is merely a lifestyle choice that cannot impinge on another. Faith in God is possible, but it is merely an option and is always contestable. As I said above, we believe while doubting. While Paul struggled between the life of the Spirit and the life of the flesh, our struggle as S3 Adventists is much more existential, between faith and doubt.

Taylor argues that in the USA we are in the S3 stage. Even if there were a nationwide religious revival, we can never turn back the clock on secularization, so we would always know that we used to believe something different, and that there are other plausible explanations of and pathways to meaning and significance on offer. Such a revival of faith would be a revival of intrinsically contested faith. We would believe in the midst of S3 secularism, and so conversion becomes a response to secularity, not an escape from it.

Understanding this is important to be able to respond to the secular subtraction theories. These hold that while we are young, naïve and gullible, we believe in gods, demons, angels and fairies. As we age and grow sadder, wiser and more mature, the supernatural is seen as non-viable, prayers are ostensibly not answered, the innocent suffer meaninglessly, and we end up embracing / lapsing into secularism. Secularism and functional atheism is thus equated with maturity. Despite this alleged correspondence between secularism, atheism and maturity, we remain haunted by the ghosts and gods of our heritage, and so we live in the cross-fire no-man’s land between the road maps of radical atheists and fundamentalist religionists, exploring new options, unwilling to commit, and intrinsically suspicious of the concept of “no man comes to the Father except through Me.”

Maybe some of what I am sharing is “ringing some (jingle) bells.” Some may be saying “Merry Christmas” over the next few weeks, but they are surrounded by those who say “Merry Holidays,” a

reminder that any faith is a contested faith in our S3 era. And it is in such a milieu that the Good News is to go forward. May God grant us wisdom and the anointing of the Holy Spirit as we live, minister and witness in such an era.

So, to make sure there is no doubt where I stand....Merry Christmas, one and all! May the Prince of Peace arise with healing in His wings in your home, heart and hearth.

Best wishes,

Conrad.