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There are No Secular "Unbelievers"

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Introduction

A popular summary of an article published in the University of British Columbia Law Review (Iain T. Benson, "Notes Towards a (Re) Definition of the "Secular" [2000] 33 U.B.C. Law Rev. 519 - 549, Special Issue: "Religion, Morality, and Law."). Mr. Benson draws attention to the erroneous notion that "secular" means "faith-free". He argues that this error is transmitted through the culture and imposed by the courts, thus allowing the "implicit faith" of atheists and agnostics to dominate and displace all others. "Why," he asks, "should the opinions of those who don't know or refuse to articulate what they believe dominate those who can say what they believe in and why they think it matters?"

How we use words matters a great deal. This is especially so when we are trying to communicate the things we think matter most in life. Thus, for religious believers it must be significant if it turns out that much of the language they use to discuss society is erroneous. Such is the case today with regard to various terms. This article will examine the use of the two terms: "secular" and "unbeliever."

Most people use the term "secular," and many religious adherents use the term "unbeliever" to describe those who do not believe what they do. Put the terms together and many religious believers would not be troubled by the notion that, say, "the secular society is made up of unbelievers." This paper will suggest that this way of understanding society and belief is deeply in error and will, in fact, undercut both religious faith and attempts to share religious beliefs in important ways.

"Secular" is a very important term for western societies. But what do people mean by the term? Most judges and politicians use the term in relation to religion as in "we now live in a secular society", one that now pays no public attention to religion. Of course we are all free to do what we want as long as we don't hurt others; as Canadians we are free to develop and discover our own "values" (religious or otherwise), so long as, in public matters we are "secular." Or so the reasoning goes.

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There is a current crisis in Canada and few people seem willing to address it. And it is raised by how we use this term “secular;” especially in what we avoid by trying to say there is such a thing as a “faith-free” realm anywhere. We seem to be massively afraid of ultimate questions. How else is it that we are not daily speaking about the thousand-fold increase in teen suicides in Canada from 1955 to 1995? Fear. Only ultimate questions about meaning and purpose could be implicated in that kind of increase in suicides amongst the youngest (and the most idealistic) in our midst. The “canaries of our generation” are telling us something by their deaths. Are we listening?

The new usage of the “secular” is recent and is, in fact, wrong. It suggests that society (or culture) is “faith-free” - or that only “non-religious” faiths ought to have access to the public realm. Either of these interpretations is incorrect. The term “secular” is from the Latin word *saeculum* meaning “world” and was used historically to distinguish between those things that were deemed to be “in the world” and those that were expressly and technically “religious.” As such, the term did not draw a line between “faith” and “non-faith” or “religious” and “non-religious.” The so-called distinction between the “sacred” and the “secular” is only jurisdictional, meaning who runs or operates what; it is not a distinction between some functions that are less holy than others or that realm where God is and that where he is not. While a sacred/secular split is advocated by those who like the idea of countries being “secular,” the term “secular” did not, historically, mean “non-faith.”

Thus, in the Catholic tradition, there is a distinction between “secular priests” and “religious.” Secular priests are those who work “in the world” (in parishes, education or health care) and “religious,” those men and women who have taken specific religious vows, such as poverty, chastity and obedience, often living a cloistered life “set apart from the world” for prayer, fasting and the more contemplative life of a monk or nun. Certainly no secular priest or nuns I know could ever be described as “non-religious.”

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But note how this use of the term “secular” has been changed so gradually, so cleverly, that even religious leaders and writers speak and write of the world as if it is divided between those who believe and those who don’t; those who worship and those who don’t; those who have faith and those who don’t; or, in today’s most

common form, between those who are “religious” and those who are “secular.” In this changed use the "secular" is deemed to be free of “belief,” “faith” and “worship.” This notion is wrong both philosophically and theologically and religious people, especially religious leaders, ought to know better. Sadly, many don’t - and even those politicians, lawyers, doctors or religious leaders who themselves are committed to their faiths - confuse categories and compound the problem rather than assist its resolution.

It is important to note that every man and woman functions out of “natural faith” in his or her daily life. Every day we must act on things that we take on faith. We do not prove to ourselves, for example, that the rear-view mirror in our car actually represents reality; we trust on faith that it does. We do not prove that the sidewalk is there in front of us; we have faith in what we see, hear and taste. Imagine the host of faith commitments there are when we fly in a plane or eat at a restaurant. Yet these are largely unexamined faith claims.

Religious faith is just a different sort of faith. It is a series of express shared beliefs about the nature of reality including the claims of God, the existence of evil and matters related to whether or not there is purpose to life and what we must do to live well or better. This is true for all the great religions. Those who believe in God believe that there is a creator behind creation. Most religions, even those that do not require belief in God, such as Buddhism, still believe that there is a purpose and end to life and prescribe disciplines to achieve these ends.

Those who do not believe in God may or may not believe in a creator; they may or may not believe there is a purpose to life. But here is the key: both theistic believers and non-theistic believers have just as much faith (confidence) in how they live. The difference between them lies in what and whom (if anyone) they believe in; you can tell much about what people believe by looking at what they love.

This obvious fact is so big that many people no longer see it. We overlook it and our common but inaccurate language about “Canada being a secular society” just masks a corresponding slackness in our thought about faith. Unless we see this important distinction we will fail to see that the “implicit faith” of atheism or agnosticism when systematized in public education is just the domination of public education by one form of (largely implicit) faiths. But once we see this we see how wrong it is for implicit faiths to trump explicit ones. All are faiths. Why should the opinions of those who don’t know or refuse to articulate what they believe dominate those who can say what they believe in and why they think it matters? Silence about the most important things can be either wisdom or cowardice.

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There are implications to this big, simple and often overlooked understanding of the nature of the secular. Once we realize that everyone necessarily operates out of some kind of faith assumptions we stop excluding analysis of faith from public life. We cannot simply banish “religious” faiths from our common conversations about how we ought to order our lives together while leaving unexamined all those “implicit faiths” in such areas as public education, medicine, law or politics.

It is only human to fear the unknown, especially death - and that fear prompts many of us to avoid the key questions about life, meaning, purpose and God. But it is a shallow population that avoids ultimate questions of good and evil, life and death. Our society is amazingly shallow at the moment.

We have great commitment to tolerance and equality but are afraid to discuss what moral framework exists to support or restrict our “tolerances.” To be in favour of tolerance, after all, one must be against intolerance: but we can’t simply be in favour of tolerance without a reason for being tolerant and a rationale for judging what is to be tolerated. An open-ended “tolerance” is nonsense. And it is here that our public argumentation is so weak and our politicians and judges particularly unconvincing when they are forced to speak on these matters. Too often they simply avoid them.

Part of the problem is that those who have a duty to instruct on matters of faith and morals have, in many cases, lost the ability to speak to the age. They have ceased to understand their own categories and been led astray by language which pulls the rug out from under their own explanations. "Values"

is just such a fraudulent category. The great Canadian philosopher George Grant was perceptive when he called this weasel language of values “an obscuring language for morality used once the idea of purpose has been destroyed - - and that is why it is so wide-spread in North America.” In the lexicon of obscurity perhaps “values” and the “secular” both deserve the same fate.

The term “secular” is used validly when it refers to the parts of the civil order (government, law, media and medicine to name a few) that are not run by the Church or churches, temple or synagogue. This does not mean that there ought not to be avowedly religious schools or hospitals, rather that those that are not explicitly religious can be, properly, secular. In this respect the term “secular” makes sense. However to say that secular means “non-faith” and therefore “beyond the influence of and consideration of faith claims to truth (including religious ones)” is incorrect.

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Our hollow state and its increasingly hollow citizens need to be filled. The longing for Truth, Meaning and Purpose has been the quest of the Great Religions and faith searches of all human beings throughout history. Implicit atheism is to the soul what candy-floss is to human nutrition and our implicit State atheism in public education, government and law is the intellectual and spiritual equivalent to candy-floss: this implicit atheism makes our legal decisions and political discourse superficial,

inconsistent and increasingly unable to deal with the questions they must for civil society to flourish. We must grow up and begin to discuss our faiths and how they relate to meaningful notions of freedom. For only this can save us from the chasm that looms when meaning has been banished and the youth of our generations kill themselves for lack of hope and love. Evil and Goodness, Hate and Love, Hope and Despair are alternatives and Faith is the means to learn which ought to win out and for what reasons.

So let us banish this notion of a “faith-free” secular once and for all. Everyone “believes.” The question is what do we believe in and for what reasons? Only when we begin to speak about these things will we have begun to get beyond the “feelings” “wants” and the confused and relativistic “values” of our adolescent culture. It is time for us all to grow up and misuse of terms such as “secular” or “unbeliever” will not help the religious to communicate with the non-religious or either category to understand why the “secular” is full of a variety of beliefs.



Iain T. Benson is a lawyer, lecturer and writer who travels and lectures widely in North America and overseas on topics related to law and culture (including medical ethics - - he served for a time on the ethics committee of a large Vancouver hospital). He has appeared on a variety of issues before House and Senate Committees and Royal Commissions and is invited frequently to be a guest on leading radio and television programs and in recent years has been heard on CBC Radio’s “Ideas;” “Tapestry,” “Commentary,” “Cross-country Check-up” and on television on the Learning Network and other programs across Canada. His writing has appeared in academic journals and major newspapers such as *The Globe and Mail*, *The National Post*, *The Calgary Herald* and *The Ottawa*

Citizen. As Executive Director of the Ottawa based think-tank, The Centre for Cultural Renewal, Benson has established an International Research Council that numbers amongst its members leading thinkers at such institutions as Oxford and Cambridge in England, Princeton in the United States and Toronto and Queens in Canada.

Centre for Cultural Renewal: an independent, not-for-profit, charitable organization that helps Canadians and their leaders shape a vision of civil society. To this end, its focus is on the important and often complex connections between public policy, culture, moral discourse and religious belief, and produce discussion papers, forums and lectures on key issues affecting Canadian society, public policy and culture.

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