

# THE RELIGION OF SECULARISM

## UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES 2



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A REVISION STUDY FROM  
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

*The Religion of Secularism*

The Religion of Secularism  
Understanding the Times 3  
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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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*The Religion of Secularism*

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## Welcome to *The Religion of Secularism*

Our friends and neighbors who have chosen to live under the sun rather than under the heavens congratulate themselves for having outgrown what they consider the childish and futile practices of religion.

But nothing could be further from the truth.

Our secular friends are as seriously religious as we are. They've simply chosen to follow a religion other than that of the Bible.

Secularism is a belief system and, therefore, merely another form of religion. But what does it worship? How does it counsel us to live? And how's it doing as a religious faith?

These are some of the questions we will explore in this study as we continue seeking to understand the times in which we live, so that we as Christ's witnesses might know what we should do.

*ReVision* studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore  
Principal

## 1 Inescapably Religious

*Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever.*  
Romans 1.24, 25

*Done with religion?*

We think of secularists as people who, because they live *under the sun* rather than *under the heavens*, don't have anything to do with religion. Secularists are persuaded that there is no God, at least, not such as they need to worry about; and they prefer to get on with their lives without reference to faith and all its burdensome baggage.

The secularist is convinced, as the late Carl Sagan so glibly put it, that "The cosmos is all there is or was or ever will be." Life has no ultimate meaning, and there is no life beyond this temporal and material one. We must face this reality bravely, and make do as best we can, without the crutch of belief in some non-existent or irrelevant deity.

Religion is of marginal value, if any, according to the secular worldview, and we'll all be better off as soon as religion's sway over our lives is eliminated.

If only it were that simple.

*But wait...*

What, after all, is *religion*? Religion is a system of beliefs, focused on some ultimate being or notion of what is true or good, which is sustained by disciplines and practices, fueled by hope, and issues in forms of behavior, all in the belief that these are the best ways to realize the promise of life – however that promise is conceived. Religious people believe so strongly in their convictions, that they undertake great exertions to propagate their faith, and to defend it against other religions.

Religions orbit around unseen worlds, whether of places and beings, or merely ideas. They depend on faith and hope, and they commit adherents to certain rituals, routines, and rites which they consider important to achieving the good they seek.

But wait a second: Doesn't this describe secularism as well, and those who proudly identify themselves as secularists?

The secularist believes in some unseen, unknown, and ultimate truth or good, the attainment of which he hopes for earnestly, believes in passionately, and orders his life by routines and disciplines to achieve. It doesn't matter that the good he seeks is a material one – a world of equal justice, say, or fair distribution of resources, or scientific and technology solutions to all our ills. These are as much unseen realities as the Christian's vision of heaven and the Kingdom.

Or the secularist's hoped-for good may be merely more personal – a quiet retirement in comfy surroundings, without a care in the world. This too, however, is but a vision, an unseen but longed-for prospect which commands his devotion, fuels his hope, and dictates his conduct.

Whatever the good he seeks, the secularist *believes* this is what he must devote his life to attaining. He *disciplines* his daily activities accordingly, fixing in his imagination the *vision* of what the as-yet-unseen good life will look like once he has achieved it. The material cosmos may be all the secularist has to work with, but he

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approaches his particular *vision* of that cosmos, and his place in it, as an enterprise of *faith*, ordered by *disciplines* and *rites*, in the devoted pursuit of an unseen idea of what is true or good, which he is determined to achieve. And secularists today are the most fervent, unbending, determined, and ubiquitous proponents of their worldview, having captured all the major bully pulpits of the land to proclaim and inculcate their religious vision and way of life.

Secularists, because they are made in the image of God, are inescapably religious. If they will not worship God, they will worship something else *as* God.

### *Not the right course*

Secularists may insist that they aren't religious, but what they mean by that is they aren't religious in the same way you and I are – believing in God and Jesus Christ and the life of worship, holiness, and self-denying service that entails.

But secularists are religious nonetheless, and it behooves us, as ambassadors for Jesus Christ, to understand as much as we can about their religion. For, since they do not believe in God, they must believe in something else *as if that something else were God*. And this means they are living a lie. Oh, their lives may be filled with fun and things, and they may be very confident of their views, and insist that they're doing just fine, thank you. But, in the larger scheme of things, they're like the man who has fallen from a tall building and reports, en route to the ground, that the trip is exciting, the breezes are great, and he's certain, therefore, that he's on the right course.

But secular religion is anything but a right course in life. The secularist's chosen lifestyle, all the *devotion* to his favored ideals, and the *discipline* with which he pursues them, may, indeed, *seem* right to him. But the end of this course is death, as the Christian knows (Prov. 14.12; Rom. 6.23) – vanity of vanity, and feeding on the wind.

The better we understand the secular religion of our unbelieving friends, the more we will be able to help them see the folly of having exchanged the truth about God for the lie of whatever substitute deity has captured their imaginations and is dragging them down to hell.

### *For reflection*

1. What are some ideas of ultimate truth or goodness to which secular people subscribe? That is, what is the secularist's *hope*? How can you see that these ideals play the same role in the secularist worldview as God does in the Christian worldview?
2. The Christian life involves the practice of certain disciplines that aid us in realizing our hope of knowing, enjoying, and glorifying God. Such as? Isn't this also true of those who adhere to a secular worldview? Do they not also *hope* to realize their vision of what is true or good? And do that not *discipline* their lives accordingly? Give some examples of the disciplines that characterize a secularist's daily life.
3. Secularists will not agree that their worldview is religious. Does that make it any less so? Explain.

*Next steps – Preparation: How could you find out what your secular friends believe? Everyone believes in something, and what we believe in plays a large part in how we live. See what you can find out about the beliefs of your secular friends.*

## 2 The God of Self

*There is a way that seems right to a man ...* Proverbs 14.12

### *The age of narcissism*

In 1979 Christopher Lasch published *The Culture of Narcissism*, a concerned critique of what had come to be referred to as the “me generation.”

Lasch’s point was that Americans were rapidly losing sight of all things transcendent, and were settling instead for a vision of life no larger than their own narrow circles of self-interest. He intended his book as a diagnosis of a growing sickness, to be recognized and checked if society was not to destroy itself by self-consumption.

At about the same time, Robert Ringer, a popular motivational speaker, published a series of books intended to capitalize on the growing narcissism of the day. In books with titles like *Looking Out for Number 1*, *Winning by Intimidation*, and *Getting What You Want*, Ringer welcomed the self-interest turn, identified its operating principles, and urged others to make the most of it for their own best interests.

Lasch and Ringer were not the first voices to herald this trend. In the early ‘70s, George Harrison provided a budding generation of narcissists with a rallying-cry, in a tune on The Beatles’ *Let It Be* album called, “I, Me, Mine.” There the Fab Four sang about the rising tendency to self-seeking:

*All through the day I me mine, I me mine, I me mine.  
All through the night I me mine, I me mine, I me mine.  
Now they’re frightened of leaving it  
Everyone’s weaving it,  
Coming on strong all the time,  
All through the day I me mine.*

Whether Harrison meant his song as an endorsement or a warning is not clear, but that his lyrics captured a growing sentiment among secular young people is undoubted.

### *The new normal*

Narcissistic personality disorder – which Lasch warned was becoming the new normal in our society – has long been recognized as a condition of unstable mental health. Someone who can only think about himself, and who invariably thinks about himself in the best possible light, while expecting that everyone else should as well, and should let him know how wonderful he is – such a person has a difficult time empathizing with others, feeling compassion, or showing sincere love. It is comforting to know that psychiatrists can diagnose and treat this condition and, hopefully, enable narcissists to be a little more like the rest of us.

But perhaps being more like the rest of us is what they’re already doing. What Lasch, Ringer, and the Beatles’ heralded a generation ago has now become a defining motif of our secular age. In 2013, the editors of the fifth edition of the mental health handbook, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, seriously considered dropping narcissistic personality disorder from the list of treatable conditions. With so many narcissists around, one can hardly regard the condition as abnormal.

In fact, narcissism has come to be accepted as the new normal of our secular generation. We even have a magazine designed to tout all things pertinent to the *Self*. Yet the narcissistic spirit of our secular age, with its materialistic and hedonistic proclivities, all its puff and posturing, is only the outward manifestation of the inward operation of one of secular religion’s principal deities.

We have met our god in this narcissistic and secular age, and he is – us!

*The worship of self*

The religion of secularism is devoted to two primary deities. The first is the self, or as David Bentley Hart (*Atheist Delusions*) identifies it, the individual will. So widespread is the idea that everyone should be able to do or have or say or be whatever they want, that even the United States Supreme Court has recognized the sovereignty of self. In *Casey v Planned Parenthood*, the Court declared that each individual American is free to determine his or her own worldview and way of life. There is a way that will seem right to each one of us, and it is each person's right, privilege, and duty to choose and pursue that way.

The primary god of our secular age has a familiar face – the one we see in the mirror each morning. Here is a god to be adored, showered with gifts, protected and celebrated, and given whatever pleasures he considers his due. Nothing matters more in life than the freedom to exercise my will on behalf of my self. Naturally, I must be careful and adept at how I do this, lest in overstepping someone else's will and self I frustrate or damage my own. But my willingness to allow you to indulge your self according to your will is only another way of acknowledging my absolute right to do the same.

The primary god of our secular age is the god of self: Looking out for I, me, mine.

Each day our secular friends take up the devotions of pleasing their god by advancing its interests, indulging its pleasures, and improving its status and condition. It is indeed difficult to define narcissism as a *dis*order when so many of our contemporaries *order* their lives around the gratification of self.

The folly of worshiping so finite and feeble a deity should be self-evident. The Gospel of self-denying love will sound like strange truth to those who continually refresh the candles at the altar of self-love. But when seen as embodied in the sacrifice and love of Jesus Christ, the Gospel can expose the folly of self-worship and open the way to a Kingdom where love for God and neighbor gives a whole new meaning to loving oneself.

*For reflection*

1. What evidence can you cite to support the idea that the worship of self is the primary religion of our secular age?
2. The self matters, and is very important. Each individual self is an image-bearer of God, and thus should be taken seriously. But the *worship* of self distorts this Biblical teaching, and turns it into a deadly corrosive (Augustine). Why is it not a good idea to embrace the worship of self?
3. How does the Gospel put self-love in a proper light?

*Next steps – Transformation: The worship of self is so widespread that even Christians can be affected by it. How might you be able to tell when mere self-interest is operating in your life? What should you do to check it? Talk with some Christian friends about these questions.*



### 3 The God of Happiness

*“And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.’”*  
Luke 12.19

#### *A shape-shifting deity*

Those who are committed an “under the sun” approach to life congratulate themselves on having outgrown the confining garments of religion.

In fact, they have done nothing of the sort. They have merely exchanged one form of religious garb for another. Because all people are made in the image of God, they will, if they deny the Creator Who appeals to them daily, establish some other ultimate notion of goodness, truth, or desirability to which they will devote themselves in every area of their lives (Rom. 1.18-23).

For the secularist, the god of self or will is the ultimate deity, who must be identified, pursued, realized, actualized, satisfied, and made secure. The *notion* of self, as of something inherently true though unseen, and precious though the product of mere chance, is common to all who embrace the secular worldview. The particular *nature* of the god of self, and the *means* to his satisfaction, varies from individual to individual, though the rough outlines remain the same in every case.

The adoration of self, which is the defining characteristic of our secular and narcissistic age, depends for its satisfaction on another deity, equally important, but harder to identify. In fact, like many pre-Christian Celtic gods, this second deity is a shape-shifter. He can be known only by his effects, by the impact he has on the self. Yet he appears in many guises and is attended by a troika of lesser deities, all indispensable for him to be able to fulfill his uniquely personal task.

I refer, of course, to the god of happiness.

#### *Happiness*

The term *happiness* carries with it the sense of random circumstances (*hap, happenstance*), favorably combined in a manner agreeable to the god of self. Self imposes order on a chance-determined world as it arranges conditions to achieve the happiness it seeks. One man’s happiness may not excite his neighbor, but with the god of happiness, it’s not the particular *form* in which it appears that matters, but the degree to which it brings *pleasure* to the god of self.

The god of happiness, therefore, exists on terms dictated by the god of self. The god of self is alone able to describe the conditions of maximum satisfaction, enjoyment, pleasure, security, and ease. And the god of self will decide what form the god of happiness shall take in order to achieve that optimal state.

Put more simply, “I want what I want, and when I get what I want, I’ll be happy.” I, me, mine; lookin’ out for number 1, getting what you want. The self directs the pursuit of happiness, and the realization of happiness satisfies the self.

For some, happiness may be nothing more than a condition of material comfort, free from the cares and wants of normal life.

For others, the pleasing of self may require different conditions and, as a result, a different form of the god of happiness. Some take pleasure in oppressing others, subjecting random strangers to sudden violence, or

numbing mind and body with barbiturates and alcohol. Others gain maximum pleasure in simply winning, no matter what the game or what's at stake. In every case, while the satisfaction of the god of self remains the primary mission, the form the god of happiness will take must necessarily be different.

*Falling standards*

In our secular and relativist age, moreover, where self reigns supreme, no single standard of happiness can define the legitimate bounds of its experience or pursuit. Civil society, of course, attempts to put certain strictures on what one may pursue in the name of happiness. However, like the disorder of narcissism, many of those boundaries, as they have become more widely violated, have fallen by the wayside, and either are no longer enforced, or have been abandoned. One need only reflect on recent dramatic changes in human sexual practice, the proliferation of gambling, the definition of marriage and the terms of divorce, and the widespread availability of pornography, as indications of society's retreat from boundaries staunchly defended by previous generations, but transmogrified over time in the service of self to merely another form of the god of happiness.

We can only speculate on the forms the pursuit of happiness might take in the generations to come. Surely some of those will entail the *un*happiness of many, but that is neither here nor there.

Happiness is not just a shape-shifting deity; he is also a throw-away god, like much else in our disposable generation. If at any time he fails to satisfy in his existing state, he can be traded in, reshaped, or replaced by the latest and hottest model of whatever might be passing for happiness; and the previous form of the deity has no say as to what his successor might be. Self alone determines the true nature of happiness. The goal of secular religion is the happiness of the self. The god of self demands his pleasure; and the god of happiness exists to provide it, whatever self may require.

The confidence with which practitioners of the religion of secularism take to their calling each day is bolstered by the seemingly unlimited forms happiness can take. The fewer the boundaries defining the nature of happiness, the more adventuresome and determined the practitioners of secularism become in their quest to satisfy the god of self. Should one form proved to be a disappointment, more stand at the ready.

The god of self seeks happiness; happiness realized brings satisfaction to the self. Together, these constitute the driving force of secular religion.

*For reflection*

1. How do people define happiness? What is happiness, and on what does it depend?
2. How can you see that the worship of self and the pursuit of happiness have eroded standards of decency in our society?
3. What's the difference between happiness and joy? Is it possible that those who are driven by the pursuit of happiness may actually be seeking joy instead? Explain.

*Next steps – Preparation: What makes secular people happy? The pursuit of happiness is a basic right of all Americans, but what forms does it take? Ask a few of your secular friends what the pursuit of happiness means to them.*

## 4 The Best Laid Plans

*But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God ... 2 Timothy 3.1-4*

### *A hierarchy of gods*

The god of self commands the ultimate devotion of those who practice the religion of secularism. Seated alongside the god of self, his executive deity, as it were, is the god of happiness, who changes form according to the fickle requirements of the self.

The god of happiness has at his disposal a troika of lesser deities to aid him in serving the changing and often unpredictable demands of the god of self. And, as in all pagan religions, where a wide range of unseen powers must be invoked from time to time, depending on these lesser gods is not always as satisfying as one might hope. Here the adherents of the religion of secularism might learn a lesson from the various failed paganisms of the past.

For example, in book VII of *City of God* Augustine took on the Roman religion of his day. In a masterful *tour de force* of pagan beliefs and practices, the great bishop showed the confused, contradictory, incongruent, and feckless state of the Roman pantheon. His treatment is comical, brilliant, and sad as he demonstrates the follies men will turn to rather than worship the one, true God.

In the course of his exposé, Augustine distinguished between two levels or tiers of gods. The most important – measured by their widespread acceptance, recognition, and putative powers – he referred to as “the select gods.” In the religion of secularism, the select gods, as we have seen, are the uniquely personal god of self or will, and the shape-shifting god of happiness. These rule on the Olympus of secular religion, and command the devotion of all adherents.

The second level of gods Augustine referred to as “meaner gods.” By this, he meant that they were lower in importance because they existed primarily to serve the select deities, so that these primary gods could enjoy maximum adoration by bringing maximum satisfaction to their devotees. The problem with these meaner gods, however, is that they frequently found themselves in competition with other lesser deities, and could be powerless to fulfill the demands imposed upon them.

Something like this hierarchy of deities exists in the religion of secularism as well. Here we may identify three “meaner” gods, whose purpose is to assist the god of happiness in bringing satisfaction to the supreme god of self. These “meaner” gods of secularism are experience, possessions, and position. We’ll consider each of them briefly, and, in the process, we’ll see that they can be “meaner” not just because they are lower on the secular totem pole.

### *The god of experience*

The god of experience acts according to the dictates of happiness to surround the god of self with whatever circumstances and conditions he may require for maximum fulfillment and satisfaction. The god of experience is a concierge of many talents, but with limited powers. He has a fixed remit – maintain agreeable conditions – and that remit can accommodate many different designs. His role is to provide just the right set of circumstances, at any moment, to maximize the self’s sense of happiness.

So, for example, the self may require an experience of excitement, adventure, or fun in order to satisfy some whim or longing – not continuously, but in measured doses, as at a sporting event, a rock concert, a tryst, a

winning lottery ticket, or on vacation.

At another time, the self may prefer peace and quiet, to be able to think or rest. The meaner god of experience then works to comply with the demands of self and happiness, if only for a brief time. Cell phones are turned off. Appointments are cancelled and obligations postponed. A special hideaway or retreat may be secured, to satisfy the needs of the self.

At other times, the self may require conditions either of danger or security, high risk or total predictability, teamwork or individual conquest. Whatever the self dictates, the god of happiness conceives, and enlists the meaner god of experience to bring into being such conditions or circumstances as may satisfy the need or desire of the moment.

*An unreliable deity*

But the god of experience is not always, shall we say, a five-star concierge. No matter how carefully one plans or how earnestly one hopes, circumstances frequently conspire against the secular celebrant, frustrating the purposes of happiness, and leaving the self disappointed, wounded, or worse.

For, in any situation, the god of experience serves many masters, and many shape-shifting notions of happiness, to satisfy many different selves. Competition among selves in any situation can arise, and the god of experience is not sufficiently powerful to satisfy the demands or fulfill the hopes of all who require his services.

And if, in the melee of competing desires, such as Paul outlined it in 2 Timothy 3.1-4, some of those selves are slighted, or their hoped-for conditions either don't pan out or must be postponed, well, that's just the way things go in a universe where the supreme deity has only so much power and ability to control the circumstances of life and realize the happiness he seeks.

As Robbie Burns might put it, "The best laid plans," and all that.

So the god of experience can seem mean not only because he is inferior to the gods of self and happiness, but because the circumstances or conditions he *does* bring to pass frequently disappoint. But the god of experience is not the only meaner deity who can dampen or dash the hopes of the finite self.

*For reflection*

1. How is it evident to you that many people seek happiness in agreeable circumstances? How do such people react when circumstances are not to their liking?
2. Meditate on Philippians 4.4-7. Comment on this passage as an approach to dealing with disagreeable circumstances.
3. Meditate on Hebrews 12.1, 2. How did Christ handle the adverse circumstances He faced? Were His circumstances His god? Explain.

*Next steps – Preparation: How do your secular friends deal with adverse circumstances? When conditions aren't just what they want, what do they do? Ask a few of them? Do you see any of their responses to adversity in yourself?*

## 5 No Guarantees

*But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God ... 2 Timothy 3.1-4*

### *The gods of secularism*

In the religion of secularism, the satisfaction of self is the ultimate good, the only lasting truth, anyone should acknowledge. The self or will is god – ultimate, all-important, demanding the devotion of heart, mind, and strength.

The god of self intends to be happy. He is thus accompanied on his Olympian throne by the god of happiness, a deity with an unchanging remit, but an endless variety of shapes and forms to satisfy the demands of self.

The secular god of self, and his co-deity, the god of happiness, depend for their success on three “meaner” deities – the god of experience, the god of possessions, and the god of position. Of these three, experience is the concierge who conjures possession and status as the means of satisfying the demands of happiness and the desire of the self.

In any situation, and, indeed, over the course of an entire life, the god of happiness – in working to satisfy the demands of the god of self – must enlist these meaner deities for a delicate balance of “just right” and “just in time” circumstances if the goal of secular religion is to be realized. As we have seen, the god of experience can sometimes prove himself to be a meaner deity by more than just his place in the pantheon. Circumstances not only let us down from time to time, they’ve even been known – as doubtless many of your secular friends will protest – to conspire against our happiness.

### *All of life, all the time*

The worship of self embraces all of life, and is the means whereby people devoted to living “under the sun” try to make sense and find contentment amid the seas of vanity, uncertainty, and tentative hopes.

In situations where the self is seeking to maximize happiness – which is *every* situation in life, since no one in our secular age chooses sadness or depression as co-deity with his god of self – certain objects and possessions must be available to the self as part of the requisite conditions for happiness. The secular self knows no concept of happiness apart from material conditions and things. Since the material cosmos is all there is or was or ever will be, the only way to achieve happiness is to possess as much of the cosmos, in its many and diverse forms, as the self deems essential to happiness. Advertisers – those priests of the secular religion – understand this, and they work incessantly to connect the self with such possessions as hold the promise of greatest happiness.

The god of happiness, then, must decide. What should he choose in order to maximize the satisfaction of self? How should he direct the concierge of experience to create the best possible circumstances for the self? Which brand of cereal? What style of underwear? Which deodorant? How big a home? How many pairs of shoes? What kind of car? Which brand of tooth-whitener? How much in the retirement account?

This can all be very confusing, as you can imagine, what with shape-shifting happiness changing his priorities willy-nilly, as it can sometimes seem, in order to keep up with the self’s changeable sense of fashion.

Frequently the god of possessions is able to deliver the goods, on-time and in just the right quantity. At other

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times, not so much. Indeed, in some situations the desired possessions turn out to be more a source of trouble and irritation than happiness and fulfillment, as anyone knows who has ever dropped an important cell phone call, burned out a hard drive, got a bone in his fish, or had to change a flat tire in the middle of nowhere.

### *No guarantees*

The god of possessions, moreover, does not provide his wares with any guarantees that they will continue to produce the desired effects over time.

How many of our secular friends have closets full of clothes they no longer wear? Lockers filled with chic sporting goods equipment that hasn't been used in years? The god of possessions can thus be a truly "mean" deity, since, rather than enhancing the self's quest for happiness, he can just as often introduce contrary conditions for which he is then promptly cursed, discarded, and replaced.

That's the problem with the meaner gods of the secular religion. They have a hard time, amid the melee of competing selves and their changeable interests, keeping up with the demands of a changeable self and the shape-shifting requirements of whatever may be the latest incarnation of happiness.

So if it seems that many of those who practice the religion of secularism are as often irritable, depressed, frustrated, anxious, and angry as they are happy, content, and generous, it's only the consequence of living a life with no guarantees. We'll need to understand this, and have patience with our secular friends, at the same time exercising vigilance to avoid the trap in which they have become ensnared, that of thinking that possessions are the way to lasting happiness.

### *For reflection*

1. How should we understand the allure of things? Why do people tend to invest so much importance in possessions?
2. In what sense are advertisers the "priests" of secular religion? What do priests do? What do advertisers do that is like the work of priests?
3. Why is the life of getting-and-spending a life in which there are "no guarantees"? How does this compare with living "under the heavens"?

*Next steps – Conversations: Ask some of your secular friends about how important things are for being happy. How do they decide which things will make them happy? Do the things they choose provide the happiness they seek?*

## 6 As Good as It Gets

*But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God ... 2 Timothy 3.1-4*

### *Seriously religious*

People who are committed to the under-the-sun lifestyle of secularism like to think they've moved beyond religion. They have moved beyond the *Christian* religion, to be sure, but they can never move beyond religion *per se*. Because they are made in the image of God, they are made for transcendence, and will always strive to achieve something bigger than themselves and beyond what they presently know.

After all, religion is just a system of beliefs, focused on unseen things, that finds us channeling love, devotion, and work in the pursuit of whatever we regard as most ultimately beautiful, good, and true. What we believe, and what we're devoted to, determines how we will live, and what ethic will guide our conduct.

In the religion of secularism, self is the ultimate god, which must be made happy by the right combination of circumstances and things. In one form or another, "I, me, mine" is the rallying cry of our secular contemporaries. Self sits as the supreme god of the secular person, accompanied by happiness, a shape-shifting deity subject to the whims and wants of self, and having at his disposal the lesser deities of experience and possessions to aid in arranging the optimum conditions of self-interest.

These unseen powers – self, happiness, and all that goes with them – are as eagerly served and receive as much devotion as the Christian accords the God of Scripture. The secularist *believes* these to be his best hope in life, no less than the Christian *believes* the promise of forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus Christ. And, like the Christian, the secularist organizes his life according to his beliefs.

So it's not that the secularist is *not* religious. He is indeed *seriously* religious, only within a form of religion determined by the spirit of the age and the finite resources of the self, rather than the Spirit of God and the infinite powers of the risen Christ.

### *One more meaner deity*

Besides experiences and possessions, the god of self and the god of happiness require one more "meaner" deity in the quest for the ideal life.

We recall that Augustine used that term "meaner" to refer to those Roman deities, lower down in the pagan pantheon, which were enlisted by the "select gods" to help them wield their powers on behalf of their devotees. We've already considered the importance, to those who adhere to the secular religion, of just the right *experiences* and just the right *possessions* in pursuing the *happiness* which the god of *self* so earnestly desires. And we've also seen that, just as often, these two meaner deities can fail the demands of happiness, and leave the self disappointed, frustrated, anxious, and confused.

Unlike the gods of experience and possessions, which serve the consort god happiness, the god of *position* reports directly to the self. He has no power to affect external conditions. His only focus is on the self and its immediate and ongoing need for reinforcement. No matter how often the other meaner deities may let down happiness and the self, the god of position is always there, fanning and cooling the self, and whispering in his ear, "You're Number 1!" And now that the melee of competing selves is becoming more complicated, and narcissism is more acceptable, the god of position feels bolder and more important than ever.



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So, even in the midst of the worst circumstances and experiences, where happiness sits with head in hands, wondering what to do next, and the gods of experience and possessions search frantically here and there, the god of position says to the self, “You da man! No big deal! You’re still on top. All the people you work with are jerks and idiots. You were about to cut that chick off anyway. You’ve got better things to do with your valuable time. You’ll get them next time around, they’ll see.” He possesses a seemingly endless litany of slogans, lines, and motivational jargon to prop up the self and keep it from drifting toward the horizon of despair and self-destruction.

Moreover, when things *do* work out, and happiness, be it ever so fleeting or slight, is realized, then the god of position becomes more assertive still: “Just like you said it would be! Look at you, looking down on those chumps! You can have whatever you want, and you deserve the best!”

*Yes Man of the self*

The god of position is the “Yes Man” of the self. He *has* to be there to assure the self that, even when everything is falling apart and going wrong, he’s still better by far than all the other people he knows. He’ll be back on his feet or back on top in no time. Or at least, he deserves to be.

He’s the perfect Yes Man, except for those times when, if only *sotto voce*, he’s brutally honest.

Like the comedian whose only routine soon becomes only a series of stale jokes, the incessant self-reinforcing, others-negating practices of the god of position can begin to lose their credibility. In spite of his urgings, self-doubt and second-guessing creep into the self’s outlook. Self-assurance gives way to resentment and fear. After a while complacency rather than confidence becomes the mindset of the self, and then the god of position shelves his “Atta-boys,” and can be heard muttering, “Face it, pal: this is as good as it gets.”

Or as McCartney and Lennon put it early in our narcissistic age, “I’m a loser, and I’m not what I appear to be.”

It doesn’t get much meaner than that.

*For reflection*

1. People need affirmation, and Christians should be consistent in affirming what we can in our neighbors’ lives. But these are not very affirming times. Would you agree? Explain.
2. Do people you tend to think of themselves more as *winners* or as *losers*? Why do you suppose that is?
3. Because people are made in the image of God, we should always be able to find something we can affirm. Can you give some examples? How might such affirmations create opportunities for us to point our secular friends to God?

*Next steps – Conversations: Talk with some Christian friends about the importance of affirmation. What affirms them? How can we practice more affirmation with one another, and thus be better equipped to affirm our unbelieving neighbors?*



## 7 Treacherous Ground

*There is a way that seems right to a man,  
But its end is the way of death.* Proverbs 14.12

### *A failed faith*

Secular religion, with its twin deities of the self and happiness, and its meaner gods of experience, possessions, and position, has not proven to be a source of great hope and joy. As a generation, we are not achieving the righteousness, peace, or joy we consider ourselves entitled to in a secular and material age.

The use of anxiety-reducing drugs is on the rise. Consumer debt has become as American as apple pie. Relationships are frailer than ever. Our society seems more divided than ever. The bottom can drop out of our economy at any moment, and then everything we've hoped for and trusted in evaporates into thin air.

In short, very few of those who have chosen the religion of secularism over that of the Bible seem to be experiencing the promise of happiness. What *seems* so right to them is proving to be a dead-end of disappointment. The religion of secularism is a failed faith.

Not that devotees of the religion of secularism don't realize moments or seasons of happiness. They do. But the overarching mood of our day is one of angst, anger, discontent, escapism, blame-laying, entitlement, crudity, coarseness, incivility, and uncertainty. Not exactly the kind of neighborhood in which one might hope to flourish.

### *Just what we'd expect*

But this is simply what we might expect. While the way of secular religion seems right to many people, those beliefs, and the daily devotion they inspire, derive from and hinge on nothing more than the authority of the individual self. How reliable can any finite self actually be? How much power can any self wield in the pursuit of happiness, especially given the chaotic, competitive, dog-eat-dog times in which we live? After all, every human being is finite, limited to a particular place, time, and set of experiences, resources, and skills. It's hard to see how that qualifies anyone to set himself up as something to be worshiped and served.

Further, the individual self is fallible; it makes mistakes, lots of them. And not even the meaner god of position can eradicate the feelings of guilt, shame, and failure that stack up in the soul's basement like so many moldy containers of unwanted memories.

So how can we rely on the opinion of our own fallible selves in making decisions that may have eternal consequences? After all, we've been wrong about a good many minor and mundane things in the course of our lives. Is it reasonable to rely on such a fallible source for the really big questions in life? And we've proven largely unable to obtain the elusive vision of the good life we think will bring us the lasting happiness we seek.

The self is also fickle, as changeable as this year's fashions. What seems so important to us today can be easily set aside tomorrow, when something promising more happiness comes along, and after we've squandered precious resources and time. We change jobs, relationships, fashions, and our minds as easily we do our clothes. And yet this waffling and changeable self is what we rely on for the big decisions about life?

### *Sands, bogs, quagmires, and mine fields*

The fact is that relying on our own selves – catering to *our* best ideas, following *our* latest whims, or even pursuing *our* most passionately self-serving dreams and desires – can be treacherous ground on which to take

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one's stand in life. The religion of secularism is a landscape of shifting sands, unseen bogs and quagmires, mine fields, and box canyons. And still, millions of people choose to devote themselves by acts of sheer faith to realizing the happiness of self through experiences, possessions, and position or status.

And they complain that the Christian faith doesn't make sense?

Which only goes to prove, I think, that those who exchange the truth about God for the false hopes of the exalted self, are not only finite, fallible, and fickle. They're simply fools. They deceive themselves and others that they know what's best for them, and they can manage their experiences, stuff, and relationships to ensure maximum personal happiness and fulfillment. The evidence of our ennui-plagued generation points, I think, to another conclusion.

But they are fools who deserve, not our scorn, but our attention, compassion, love, and witness.

The Christian, who knows the truth of God in Jesus Christ, has a responsibility to help his secular neighbors and friends face up to the reality of their chosen religion, and give an intelligible account for why they believe the religion of secularism to be a better way than what the Bible teaches and millions have proved out, in all kinds of cultural settings, for nearly 2,000 years.

The religion of self, which is the religion of secularism, is treacherous ground, and if we truly love our neighbors as ourselves, we'll do our very best to help them see that.

### *For reflection*

1. "Fool" is how the Bible refers to those who choose to believe in themselves rather than God. Why is this an appropriate term? We wouldn't use this in talking with our unbelieving friends, but is it important we understand why God considers this so?
2. Why is secularism as much a *religious* way of life as that of the Christian faith?
3. Why is it important that Christians understand the secular religion of their unbelieving friends?

*Next steps – Preparation: Suppose you wanted to engage an unbelieving friend or co-worker in a conversation about their religion, not yours. What are some questions you might use to initiate and conduct that conversation?*

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*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. Why can we think of secularism as a form of religion? Why is it important for us to understand that secularism is a religion?
2. How do the various gods of secularism – self and happiness – determine the way of life of those who believe in them?
3. What evidence would you point to in showing that secularism is a failed religion?
4. How can you help your unbelieving friends and co-workers to see that their *unbelief* is really only another form of religious faith? Why should you do this?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

*For prayer:*

## The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at [www.ailbe.org](http://www.ailbe.org) to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the contribute button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.