



## DIALOGUE WITH SECULARISM

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I wish to speak of two kinds of dialogue, the first being more important in the last analysis than the second: internal and external. Internal: that within our own hearts and minds, and that within the circles of believers; external: our conversations and discussions with secularists of various kinds and degrees of intensity.

### A) Internal Dialogue

#### 1) *Secularist Influence on Believers*

Some examples:

a) Demise of the sense of sin; more and more we tend to measure ourselves against our own expectations of ourselves, not God's. It is in this demise that we must look for the "trouble" the Sacrament of Reconciliation is in.

b) Pelagian catechetics: often our moral striving is spoken of with little or no reference to God's grace.

c) Absence of ecumenical pain: we have become very tolerant, too exclusively tolerant in fact. We live side by side with other Christians or non-Christians, we get along quite well, we collaborate often, in one enterprise or another. But are we driven by Jesus' "That they may all be one" or, at least to a degree by the secularist "Plague on both your houses" in regard to religion?

d) Television has become the chief educator of our children. It is thoroughly, almost quintessentially, secular, indeed secularistic. I am not certain that there is a "quick fix" available. Yes, we ought to offer religious, programming on TV, radio, etc., but we may not be able to exorcize the secularist virus thereby. There is an interesting remark made by Owen Chadwick (*The Secularization of the European Mind in the 19th Century*, Cambridge, 1975, p. 40) about TV's elder sibling, viz., the press; "It strengthened Whigs everywhere, even when it was Tory, because its genius lay in change, and not in preservation".

#### 2) *Our largely unacknowledged complicity with secularism*

a) Two books, Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (Yale Univ. Press, 1987) and James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985), make basically the same assertion, Buckley's in regard to European Catholic theology, Turner's in regard to North American Protestant theology. The assertion: theologians must accept a large share of guilt for today's atheism. The reason: they were so afraid of atheism that they accepted any "proof" of God's existence and any conceptualization of God provided by whatever current philosophical trend happened to dominate. Thus they accepted the notion of God held by Descartes, then Newton, then Malebranche. Then came Denis Diderot, who did away with the need of God in his thought. God, the Father of Jesus Christ, the God of Israel and the Church, played little or no role in theological thinking. When philosophy decided to do without God theologians had nothing to offer.

b) The ungodly rush to "christianize" prevalent trends, revealing both a kind of inferiority complex on the part of Christians and an inability or unwillingness to examine thoroughly these trends. One can think of such examples as the journal *Esprit*, which attempted to "baptize" Communism in the 30's, or of some Catholics', particularly clerics', enthusiasm for the Sandinista movement in Nicaragua.

c) There is always the temptation to legitimize our mission by being socially useful in a manner approved of and appreciated by the secularist. We are tempted to subject Jesus' claims and demands to the criteria of Kant's "man come of age" and to trim our sails to his expectations and ideals. Such rather humiliating acts of currying favour will do nothing to make the Gospel acceptable or even respectable. It may well have the opposite effect: if we feel obliged to prove our usefulness on secularist terms we shall convey the impression of having little trust in the convincingness of what we are really about.

d) Defense of our "turf" – our society, our Christian world – leads to an occasional failure to tell the entire story in the public square: call to repentance and conversion thus becomes a private matter. We have been fighting a rearguard action for three centuries now. In this struggle we have invoked various values to support our side, such as common decency, patriotism, common sense, fairness, public order, self-discipline, etc. There is nothing the matter with that, except that now these values are either being taken away from us or corroded. While we must uphold all human values and promote them, they must be seen by us and presented to others as part and parcel of a Gospel whose heart is the death and resurrection of Jesus, and whose first demand is conversion.

e) Quebec and Catholic Holland, almost "ideal" Catholic societies, have become religious wastelands. Schools, media, Universities, Labor unions – all were in Catholic hands, and there was real freedom.

There must have been a secularist virus in their make-up.

### 3) *Benefits of Enlightenment, the source of secularism (Peter Gay's interpretation)*

a) There was, in the 18th century at least, a Catholic enlightenment, an attempt on the part of "progressive" clergy to raise the material, cultural and religious level of the people: a campaign against superstition, a return to the Bible, teaching people how to farm, raise bees, etc. Owen Chadwick (*The Popes and European Revolution*, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1981) speaks of it as a religious reform. Suppression of the Jesuits and their *ratio studiorum* made possible the entry of various new disciplines into the University curricula-according to Chadwick.

In our own world certain things are inevitable: science does not operate with miracles, nor ought it to do so; politicians do not invoke divine authority in favour of their programmes. Our world is more and more man-made.

I am happy to live in this world; I enjoy its freedom; when I am sick I want the latest medicine. In many respects I can afford more than Count Esterhazy, the richest man in the Habsburg dominions during the 18th century, who had his own orchestra; even he could not summon it within a minute if he could not sleep at night.

I must ask whether all these benefits would be available if man had not become the most deserving object of man's study, which he is to be according to Kant.

b) The more I think of Vatican II, the more I am convinced that it was, either mainly or at least significantly, an attempt to reconcile the Gospel and the Enlightenment, particularly in the *Gaudium et spes*. How well has it succeeded? I cannot help but think that the modern world has raised the ante since the Council: abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality are signs of this.

We believers still have a momentous job ahead of us, that of truly suffusing the values of the Enlightenment with the Gospel: self-affirmation and humility, obedience and freedom, etc. We may be able to do it on the intellectual level.

## **B) External Dialogue**

1) I cannot claim to be unduly optimistic about this kind of dialogue, viz., our discussions with secularists. Most of them are not interested in discussing what they see as a relic of the past, viz., our faith. Oh yes, they will discuss history of religions, but not faith. Proud of their tolerance, they will tolerate us, possibly even respect us (but not our faith) on condition that we accept their priorities, agendas and sacred cows. Solzhenytsin's Harvard address and its aftermath in intellectual and media circles of North America are not encouraging. Having dared question some aspects of American democracy and culture, he has been written off.

They try, not intentionally but really, to push us, as did the Anglicans in regard to the recusants, into an intellectual, cultural and possibly social ghetto, not by persecuting but by ignoring us. And we might be tempted to tend our home-fires, waiting, more or less passively, for a brighter future.

2) Vatican II has provided us with a strong antidote against the retreat into a cultural ghetto. It has made it imperative to accept and rejoice in the advances of the human spirit. Yet I think that, for all our involvement in this world, we shall have to wait for the moment when the Enlightenment concentration on the human being alone implodes – as we had to wait for the implosion of Communism.

3) Our point of contact with secularism: the human being and his enhancement. Concerns which echo in public are of a more negative nature: abortion, euthanasia, manipulation of all kinds.

But when we discuss the human being we cannot, we must not, allow ourselves to argue within the narrow intellectual and cultural confines of the secular humanist. Somehow or other we must let it be known that full humanity for us is that of the risen Lord. This conviction of ours must shine through our conversations and debates. I am, by the way, very uneasy when the meaning of the resurrection alone is spoken of. If there is no fact there is no meaning. If we "adapt" our argumentation to mere humanist ethics we shall have nothing to offer when our apparently merely humanist concerns are responded to.

## **C) Some Concrete Suggestions**

a) We ought to become more aware that simple Christian decency will no longer do, a decency which depends, not entirely but strongly, on the support and acceptance of the environment; our environment no longer supports it, sorry to say.

A more sustained and conscious striving for holiness is noticeable, among lay people in particular. Various lay models of holiness are being proposed and developed. More and more lay people are making retreats, saying the Liturgy of the Hours, etc.

b) We must deepen and re-express our awareness of dependence on God. While we are less and less inclined to try influencing the weather by praying, and our prayers for health tend to be generic – because of our consciousness of the autonomy of creation, we must somehow revive our awareness of God's grace, of His providence, of His creative and sustaining action.

c) Catechesis of the Good Shepherd developed by Sofia Cavaletti for children before the "age of reason".

d) Christian community: *Mk 10:20-31*. We cannot stand alone. Experience of the young attending the World Youth Days: they meet other young people who believe and strive like them.

e) Family, of course. The importance of the nuclear family (father, mother, children): it has time and energy to pay attention to each individual, so that he does not disappear in the anonymity of the tribe; it provides support – the individual is not alone.

The problem: how do we strengthen and deepen the notion of the permanent bond?

f) Can we regain the broad cultural agenda in our world? For the last three centuries "the other side" has been the driving force. We have played the game of "catch-up ball", letting the humanists determine the agenda. Traipsing along, we have been contributing to our own demise.

Gustave Bardy, *Menschen werden Christen* (Herder, 1988), translation and commentary by Josef Blank (original in French 1949).