



## CHAPTER 2

# Surrounded by Secularism

*Don't be fooled: Secularism  
is anything but neutral*

There are plenty of situations in life where being in a minority is of little consequence. If your favorite animal is the anteater while the favorite animal of 80 percent of those around you is the dog, you're not going to experience any kind of life pressure from the majority group. You can have your anteaters, others can have their dogs, and everyone can easily co-exist with their varied animal preferences (maybe even with a clever bumper sticker!). But being in a worldview minority is no case of anteaters and dogs. *The secular worldview by which we're surrounded is fundamentally at odds with a biblical worldview, and that has extensive implications for our daily lives.* The task of this chapter is to demonstrate just how deep this conflict is so we'll be able to fully grasp the spiritual significance of the secular pressures we'll discuss in the rest of the book.

To do this, we need to better understand what the word *secular* means. In chapter 1, I briefly defined it as "irreligious." That's a good starting point, but more needs to be said. People use the word in many different ways and contexts, and the meaning has even shifted

throughout history. Furthermore, even if everyone were working from the same definition, there would still be little shared understanding of the *significance* of the word from a worldview perspective. So we need to spend some time fleshing out this term.

### **Secular—as a Political Structure**

In saying that secular means irreligious, notice that we're defining it by what it's *not*—religious. But what, then, does it mean to be religious, and to whom or what does the word apply?

Scholars debate how to best define *religion*, but for all intents and purposes, it's a worldview that systematically defines reality based on the existence of a god or gods. By their very nature, most religions are authoritative for their adherents because they not only *describe* reality, but also *prescribe* correct human responses. Christianity, for example, is authoritative for Christians because we believe in a God who defines right and wrong and who has revealed His will for humanity in the Bible. Similarly, Muslims believe Allah's will is revealed in the Quran, Mormons believe God's will is revealed in the Book of Mormon, Sikhs believe Waheguru's will is revealed through gurus, and so on. To be religious, therefore, is ultimately to be committed to the *authority* of one such worldview, based on the will of a god or gods. Conversely, to be irreligious—secular—is to *not* be committed to the authority of a religion and its god(s).

Perhaps the most common context for the word *secular* is in how a society runs. For most of history, there has been little or no divide between religion and the state.<sup>1</sup> The official religion of a given country shaped all of its society, institutions, and cultural practices. It was supported financially by public money, and there was a symbiotic relationship between religious and political leaders. In other words, these societies were committed to the *authority* of a particular religion in public life. *It wasn't until the founding of the United States that an explicitly secular country was established.* The US Constitution states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." This so-called Establishment Clause of the First Amendment ensures that the government will not

establish a state-supported church and will not force individuals to practice a particular religion. The United States, therefore, is secular in political structure because it's not committed to the authority of a particular religion in public life. Given our world's long history of problematic church-state entanglement, Christians should be happy to live in a politically secular country with freedom of religion. Secular doesn't necessarily have a negative connotation.

That said, people often misunderstand the nature of our political structure and think it's a constitutional rationale for forcing religious people to keep their beliefs to themselves. They have a mentality of "Yes, fine, believe whatever you want, but don't try to use your religious views to influence public matters—we're a *secular* country." This sentiment, however, is not what was intended by the writers of the Constitution. The Establishment Clause says nothing about how individuals should or shouldn't *use* their religious beliefs to inform their participation in public life—only that the state cannot establish a church and that people are free to exercise the religion of their choice. Although it's become considered uncouth today to openly acknowledge that your religion is what's motivating your view on a public matter, this was never intended to be the case. Our secular society may not be committed to the authority of a particular religion, but individuals who *are* have every right to bring their views into the public square for discussion and consideration.

Many people would read that last paragraph and ask, "But why? Why even try to shape society according to your personal views when you know there are so many conflicting views out there? Why not work toward social harmony by agreeing that everyone should keep their religious beliefs to themselves?"

The key to understanding the answer to those questions is in dispelling the myth of secular neutrality.

### **The Myth of Secular Neutrality**

Our would-be questioners are confusing the secular *structure* of our society (freedom of religion and no state church) with the nature of what we should or shouldn't do with our religious freedom *given*

that structure. They're assuming that in the spirit of keeping church and state separate, there's a way to build a worldview-neutral public square—like some kind of pie crust we can all agree on as a foundation for society. As the thinking goes, people should be free to add their religious fillings in private if they're so inclined, but no one should bring a filled cherry pie into public matters—that would be religiously biased! If some prefer blueberry pie, some prefer apple pie, and others prefer pecan pie, we should simply dump the fillings and run society according to the least-common denominator—the pie crust. Then everyone can be at peace and live happily ever after, right?

No, and here's why: There's no such thing as a worldview-neutral pie crust. *By their very nature, societies must function from some idea of what is good and bad, but the definition of good and bad depends on a person's worldview.* Societies make value judgments all the time, such as, What rights should its people have? Who should be protected, how should they be protected, and from what should they be protected? When one person's rights appear to conflict with another person's rights, how should the conflict be resolved? How far should parental rights extend, and how much oversight should the government have in family life? What should be considered criminal behavior? What should be taught in public education? The list could go on and on. The answers to questions like these—questions that every modern society must address—depend on one's assumptions about the existence and nature of God, the will of God (if any), the nature of man, the value and purpose of human life, and much more. These are all worldview questions. That's not to say that everyone who shares a worldview will always agree on how to answer them (or that people with different worldviews will always *disagree*), but rather, that even the most basic questions of how to run a society are inherently connected to assumptions about the nature of reality—*assumptions that aren't universal*. And without universally held assumptions, there's no way to bake a worldview-neutral pie crust.

Perhaps you're thinking of some possible exceptions, so let's look at an example of a value people often think we should all be able to agree on regardless of worldview: the idea of human equality. To be sure, if

a person at a dinner party were to casually mention they *don't* believe in human equality, there would be a horrified silence in response, and they'd be encouraged to take their truffles to the door. But as it turns out, this is morally problematic only in polite company. In some (often academic) circles, it's not a foregone conclusion that human beings are equal in value. For example, ethicist Peter Singer is well known for arguing that there are morally justifiable circumstances for killing a disabled infant. Singer says,

When the death of a disabled infant will lead to the birth of another infant with better prospects of a happy life, the total amount of happiness will be greater if the disabled infant is killed. The loss of the happy life for the first infant is outweighed by the gain of a happier life for the second. Therefore, if killing the hemophiliac infant has no adverse effect on others, it would, according to the total view, be right to kill him.<sup>2</sup>

While many people recoil at Singer's blunt devaluation of the lives of disabled children, such a statement is actually consistent with his atheistic worldview. If God doesn't exist, the universe came into existence by chance, the first living cell developed from nonliving matter by chance, and all living things are the eventual product of the blind, undirected process of evolution. In such a case, there's no objective basis for saying that *any* life has inherent value greater than dust, much less equal value. Singer's criteria for determining who should or shouldn't be killed would be no less moral than anyone else's criteria in an atheistic world. Only if there's an author of life who creates and imbues us with a meaning beyond our physical parts can human life actually be inherently valuable and equally so. While human equality may initially seem like a value we can safely bake into a worldview-neutral pie crust, that's far from the case. It's *inextricably* tied to worldview assumptions.

In short, having a politically secular country doesn't imply that society should then function in some kind of worldview-neutral way. It's

not even possible. Answers to basic governing questions will always presuppose certain views of reality. Note that doesn't mean they'll always presuppose the *same* views of reality. Given our country's religious heritage, many values of consensus today are still rooted in a Judeo-Christian worldview (such as the idea of human equality). But as more and more Americans have explicitly rejected Christianity, other values of consensus now presuppose a very different worldview (such as the acceptance of gender fluidity). The result is a public pie crust of values rooted in varied worldviews and shifting over time as consensus changes. And that's exactly what we would *expect* in a country that's not committed to the authority of a particular religion in public life; everyone is free to bring their differing and often conflicting worldviews to bear on public matters. What we *shouldn't* expect is to develop a worldview-neutral pie crust for public life that everyone agrees on. That's a pipe dream.

These realities of living in a politically secular country place Christians at a crossroad today for two reasons. First, the changing religious makeup of our country means that the popular consensus on societal values is now increasingly rooted in a worldview at odds with Christianity. For many years, Christians have enjoyed living in a secular country with freedom of religion while *also* living in a country with people who shared many of our values in public life. With our quickly changing religious landscape, we must now process what it means to live in a secular country where that same freedom of religion has led to a popular consensus at *odds* with our values in public life.

Second, Christians must grapple not only with the result of worldviews organically shifting over time, but also with the increasing militance many are using to proactively *push* Christian values out of public life. For many people today, Christianity isn't just one more worldview in the marketplace of ideas. It's a morally offensive weed preventing the growth of a harmonious and beautiful cultural garden, and it needs to be uprooted at all costs. To understand the significance of both factors—organic shifting and aggressive pushing—we need to now transition from understanding the word *secular* in political terms to understanding it in worldview terms.



## Secular(ism)—as a Worldview

When you think of worldviews, you probably think in terms of organized religions—Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Mormonism, and so on. Perhaps less obvious is that atheism is a worldview as well; if a person believes there is no God, that has implications for answers to major questions about the nature of reality (Who are we? Why are we here? What happens after we die?).<sup>3</sup> And perhaps even less obvious is that those who don't associate with a specific religion *or* atheism (for example, those who say they're "spiritual, not religious") also have a worldview. Everyone has a worldview, whether they've consciously arrived at their answers to life's biggest questions or not. But with so many different views of reality shaping people's thought lives, how is it that we see such clear cultural trends toward the same ways of thinking?

Enter *secularism*, an umbrella term for a variety of worldviews that ultimately function in the same way—without a commitment to the authority of a religion and its god(s). Just as this meaning of *secular* can be applied to a political structure, it can also be applied to the worldview of individuals and groups of individuals. *The tie that functionally binds the worldviews of millions of people is the authority of the self rather than the authority of any given religion and its god(s).*

People can be just as committed to secularism as they are to a religion. That's because secularism isn't what you get when you simply subtract so-called religious beliefs from a person's worldview. As in the political sense of the word, there's no worldview-neutral pie crust for the individual. When you take away the authority of a religion and its god(s), you aren't left with *no* authority—you're left with the authority of the self. And the umbrella worldview of self-authority has its own assumptions, beliefs, and prescriptions for life. Let's look at how that plays out in the secular view of three major worldview subjects: God, man, and morality.

### *The Secular View of God*

In saying that secularism is a matter of worldview authority, it's important to underscore that this doesn't necessarily imply atheism.

Only about 10 percent of Americans say they don't believe in any higher power or spiritual force.<sup>4</sup> That means 90 percent of people believe something or someone exists out there, whatever that might mean to a given person. The following findings from Pew Research give some insight into what those eclectic spiritual beliefs are:

- 74 percent of Americans say they talk to their God/higher power
- 56 percent believe their God/higher power is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-loving (even if it's not the God of the Bible)
- 42 percent believe spiritual energy is located in physical things like mountains
- 41 percent believe in psychics
- 33 percent believe in reincarnation
- 29 percent believe in astrology

As you can see, there's no lack of spirituality among Americans. But, as we saw in chapter 1, the vast majority don't view the Bible or other holy books as authoritative for their lives. They might have some level of respect for various scriptures revered by religious adherents, but not in the sense of consistently submitting their own lives to those teachings. Some of the general moral principles, like loving others? Sure. But specific teachings that require significant personal commitment and are at odds with the popular consensus, like a biblical view of sexuality? Likely not.

It's important to see, therefore, that belief in a generic god or spiritual force is perfectly at home in secularism as long as that belief requires nothing other than what a person decides it requires for themselves. Secularism can readily accommodate a generic god who requires nothing, but not a specific one who requires everything.

In summary, a secular view of God isn't necessarily that God doesn't



exist, but rather that any God who *may* exist has not given us any kind of reliable, binding revelation. If He exists, He remains comfortably in the distance, content to leave us to the authority of ourselves.

### *The Secular View of Humanity*

The nature of man is something philosophers, theologians, and scientists have grappled with for ages. Are we merely a collection of atoms, or something more? If more, what kind of more? If a soul exists, what is the relationship between the soul and the body?

In a secular worldview, there's no divine and authoritative revelation on the nature of man to look to, so what we can know about our human identity—at least with any epistemic confidence—is limited to what we can know from science at a given time. What do scientists say? The mainstream scientific consensus is that all life developed from a single-celled organism that lived roughly 3.5 billion years ago. According to evolutionary theory, the process of natural selection acting on random mutations to DNA has produced the wide variety of life forms we see today, including humankind. Furthermore, it's assumed that the evolutionary process is blind and purposeless—not directed toward any goal. (The exception to this is “evolutionary creationism,” which is a belief that God *directed* the process of evolution.)<sup>5</sup> Given this picture from mainstream science, man is not the product of a purposeful creator, but rather, the product of an indifferent chance process. This also implies that man is different from other living things only in degree, not kind. We're simply a highly developed animal lucky to have come into existence after billions of years.

In case it's not obvious why this secular view of man is so different from a religious one, consider what the Bible says about the nature of man as one example (other holy books would make other claims). In a biblical worldview, humans are the purposeful product of a creator. We were *intended* to exist. Importantly, the Bible says we're made in the image of God Himself—a fact that fundamentally sets us apart from animals (Genesis 1:27). While Christian theologians debate what exactly the image of God encompasses, it's generally agreed that it refers to our moral nature and our ability to enter into a relationship

with God. Beyond the creation account in Genesis, the rest of the Bible reveals that God has a moral law for humanity, that every human has transgressed that law (“sinned”), that He sent a Savior—Jesus, who is God Himself—to rescue us from the consequences of sin, that those who put their trust in Jesus’s sacrifice on the cross for sin will have everlasting life with Him, and that He will eventually return to judge all of humankind. *This is a very specific account of who man is.*

The secular and biblical views of man could not possibly be more different. If we’re no more than a product of blind chance, we belong to ourselves and are “the measure of all things,” as the ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras famously said. We owe no one anything. We can “follow our hearts” all day long because whatever *we* want is all that matters. If, however, there’s a supernatural creator who has brought us into existence and has specifically revealed our identity and purposes, we ignore that information at our own peril.

### *The Secular View of Morality*

The secular view of God and man boils down to the idea that we’re free to be who we want to be and do what we want to do because there’s no higher-than-human authority who’s given us specific information about or directives for our lives. It would logically follow, then, that a secular view of morality is one in which everything is relative to individual preferences and nothing is right or wrong for all people. Interestingly, however, that’s actually *not* the functioning view of morality in secular culture today. Instead, our culture often believes it can and should determine what’s right and wrong for *everyone* based on the shifting sands of popular consensus. And if you disagree with that consensus, there will be no pat on the back for following your own heart. You can only follow your own heart if it leads you to the same conclusions about morality as everyone else.

It doesn’t take much to see that secular culture is anything but devoid of moral judgments, despite having no objective basis or authority for making them. Consider, for instance, organizations that exist explicitly to support secularism. These groups aren’t merely bringing irreligious people together for some kind of worldview-neutral community that

gardens together on Saturdays. They nearly always express the importance of promoting specific moral values. As one example, the collegiate Secular Student Alliance (SSA) says it “empowers secular students to proudly express their identity, build welcoming communities, promote secular values, and set a course for lifelong activism.”<sup>6</sup> This statement assumes, of course, that there’s secular agreement on what good values are and that they’re worth fighting for over a lifetime. A quick look over the SSA website reveals that some of the organization’s values include keeping abortion legal, advocating for further political separation of church and state, promoting diverse sexual lifestyles, and planning events to highlight the supremacy of science and reason over faith (a false dichotomy, but we’ll get to that in chapter 4). Clearly, the SSA assumes that if you’re irreligious, you’ll agree that these are the good and important values to hold—even though there’s nothing about a secular worldview that would logically necessitate or even imply moral agreement. It just comes back to whatever is right according to today’s consensus.

As another example, consider the Satanic Temple. While that sounds like its own kind of religion, the Satanic Temple is actually an organization that exists to promote secularism. And like the SSA, they’re far from neutral in their moral judgments. Their tagline is “Empathy. Reason. Advocacy.”<sup>7</sup> And they state that their mission is to “encourage benevolence and empathy, reject tyrannical authority, advocate practical common sense, oppose injustice, and undertake noble pursuits.” The Temple doesn’t leave the definition of these things to the imagination. Their website details the values they fight for, and they closely resemble those of the SSA. Ironically, however, they state, “A unifying attribute of all Satanists is our embrace of our outsider status. Satanists adhere to the principles of individual sovereignty.”<sup>8</sup> Aside from the shock value of their name, there’s little that makes them an outsider to mainstream secular thought. As we’ve seen, the principle of “individual sovereignty” is ultimately what *defines* a secular worldview. The Satanic Temple might think they’re unique, but they’re just one of many organizations promoting the secular moral values upheld by popular consensus. The devil is in the details.

Of course, you don't have to be an organization explicitly dedicated to secularism to promote the values of popular consensus. We're constantly surrounded by the powerful influence of voices informing us of what is culturally acceptable to believe and think. We'll look at that in detail in chapter 3. Suffice it to say for now that the secular moral consensus enjoys both implicit support and proactive promotion from nearly every angle of society.

### **Secularism: The Inescapable Worldview**

The upshot of this analysis is that those with a biblical worldview are not a minority surrounded by a neutral society leaving each to their own, though people often mistakenly think that when they equate the word secular with neutral. As we've seen in this chapter, we're surrounded by *secularism*, which is a worldview unto itself. And it's not just any worldview. It's a worldview that couldn't be at greater odds with Christianity in particular:

- The Bible says that God exists, that He created all people and things, and that He has expressed His will and purposes in Scripture; He's our ultimate authority. Secularism says there may or may not be a god, but if there is one, he's content to leave us to the authority of ourselves.
- The Bible says humankind is uniquely valuable, made for a purpose in the image of God, and accountable to God. Secularism says man is one living product of many that happened to develop through the blind, undirected process of evolution, and we answer to no one but ourselves.
- The Bible says that God is a moral lawgiver, with His character being the objective standard of goodness. Secularism says (or at least functions as though) right and wrong are determined by popular consensus.

The reason these differences create so much pressure on Christians is that we can't simply separate ourselves from secularism like we can

from an individual. *Secularism has become the cultural air in which we live and breathe.* It's literally inescapable. An apt analogy for this tethered relationship is playing a board game.

Imagine sitting down to play a game that some of the players believe was designed to be played in a specific way and for which instructions were given. Those players dutifully begin to read the instructions to understand the rules of the game and plan to play accordingly. Meanwhile, other players believe the game wasn't designed with any purpose in mind and that the so-called instructions are just some interesting ideas people had for how to play. They decide to make up their own rules as they go along and play the game however they want. When they begin playing in ways that don't align with the instructions, the instruction-following players say, "Hey! That's not how you're *supposed* to play!" and point to the instructions. The others just laugh, not believing there are any external constraints on how to use the game. Soon, more and more people join in, all agreeing that game play is a free-for-all. Over time, the instruction-following players are far outnumbered, with hardly anyone caring what the instructions say. The rule-followers are dismissed as annoying bystanders.

In an actual board game, this wouldn't be a big deal. If you're an instruction-follower, you can just get up and leave. But what if you *had* to play the game? What if it were an integral part of your everyday life you couldn't simply sit out, and you had to find ways to play along with people who wanted to make up their own rules? That's essentially the position Christians are in right now, where the game is life in our culture. Every day is a push and pull of competing worldviews in politics, media, entertainment, education, and much more. As secularism becomes the prevailing worldview that Christians encounter at every turn, more and more of us are mixing these mainstream secular ideas with biblical views. We take some ideas from the "instruction" book (the Bible) and some from what secular players come up with on their own. The resulting worldview is often more secular than biblical—a hybrid that's no longer faithful to the Bible, whether we realize it or not.

What makes secularism so compelling that we would allow that to happen (either intentionally or not)? That's our subject for chapter 3.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

1. In your own words, how would you describe the difference in meaning between secular in a political sense and secular in a worldview sense?
2. Given the discussion in this chapter, why do you think a celebrity could thank God for something without much notice, but if they were to talk about their love for *Jesus* or declare their view that the Bible is the Word of God, they would likely be subject to hostile criticism?
3. Why do you think the functioning view of morality in secular culture is *not* one in which literally “everything goes,” but rather, is one in which good and bad are defined by popular consensus and applied to everyone?
4. Has secularism felt like an inescapable worldview in your own life—one that constantly surrounds you? If so, what are the ways in which you most encounter it? If not, why do you think that is?





## CHAPTER 7

# Reclaiming What Rightfully Belongs to the Biblical Worldview

*Under the pressure of the  
secular worldview buffet*

Something interesting I've learned over my years as a writer is that there are certain ways of phrasing things that seem perfectly normal to most people, but that can really trouble others. You don't know what you don't know, so as a writer, you generally learn these things *after* you make the mistake and receive comments and emails from the people you upset.

One example that especially took me by surprise was when someone chastised me for beginning a sentence with these two words: "Atheists believe..." Though I no longer have the exact comment to quote, it was something like this:

I'm an atheist and you don't know what I believe. You don't know what my atheist friends believe. You don't know what any atheist believes! You would have to ask each person. It's not like a religion where we all believe the same thing. Just

because we lack belief in a god doesn't mean you can say *anything* about what atheists (in general) believe.

In one sense, he was right. When we say, for example, that Christians believe something, we're talking about the beliefs generally held by those who call themselves Christians. But that doesn't necessarily mean you can know what any individual Christian believes. As we saw in chapter 5, those who identify as Christians have all kinds of beliefs that aren't consistent with a biblical worldview.

But in another and more important sense, this commenter had a significant misunderstanding about the nature of worldviews. Yes, people can believe whatever they want to believe, and therefore you can never know what any individual holds to be true, but there are certain logical *implications* that flow from a person's fundamental assumptions about reality, whether they accept those implications or not. While I couldn't tell this commenter what he personally believed, I *could* tell him what's *consistent* with a naturalistic worldview.<sup>1</sup> If nothing exists beyond nature, that implies the natural world must be explained solely by natural forces. The universe had to come into existence by chance, the first living cell had to develop from nonliving matter by chance, and all living things must be the eventual product of some blind, undirected process (with evolutionary theory being the prevailing scientific consensus of what that process was). These three claims alone have numerous implications about the nature of reality, as we saw at the end of chapter 4.

In spite of these implications, many atheists have beliefs that aren't logically consistent with their worldview. Nearly everyone in our culture—including atheists—takes for granted the existence, definition, and positive value of things like objective morality, human equality, human rights, freedom, love, and justice. But, as we'll see in this chapter, there's no objective basis for any of them in a naturalistic worldview. And although I've started with the example of atheism, the same holds true for other secular worldviews as well. *Any worldview in which the ultimate authority is the individual will lack an objective basis for defining and defending some of our culture's most cherished values.*

A biblical worldview, on the other hand, provides an objective basis for *all* these things. As Christians, we need to better understand what rightfully belongs to the biblical worldview but is often “borrowed” by secular culture. Why does it matter? Today’s culture often uses concepts that *belong* to a biblical worldview *against* those with a biblical worldview—and then pressures Christians to reject the very worldview that provides a basis for those concepts in the first place!

In the previous three chapters, we focused on what it means to be a worldview minority that *believes* differently than the dominant culture. Understanding what logically flows from those biblical beliefs—and what does *not* logically flow from secularism—is one of three subjects we’ll now explore as we consider how what we *believe* should translate into how we *think*.

### **When Your Worldview Won’t Fit in Its Box**

In her book *Finding Truth: 5 Principles for Unmasking Atheism, Secularism, and Other God Substitutes*, author Nancy Pearcey develops five principles that reveal how almost every non-Christian worldview borrows from Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Her work builds off of Paul’s important words in Romans 1:18-25:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator.

According to this passage, those who reject the Creator will create an idol out of some part of the created order—a false absolute to replace the one true God. But, as Pearcey shows, *idols always lead to a lower view of human life*. She explains:

We can be confident that every idol-based worldview *will* fail. Why? Precisely because it leads to reductionism. If reductionism is like trying to stuff the entire universe into a box, we could say that inevitably something will stick out of the box. A box that deifies a *part* of creation will always be too limited to explain the *whole*. Whatever does not fit into the box will be denigrated, devalued, or dismissed as unreal.<sup>3</sup>

Pearcey points out that in materialism, for example, people are reduced to products of physical forces because nothing immaterial is believed to exist. In postmodernism, people are reduced to products of social forces because humans are viewed as having no power to transcend social and historical conditions. In pantheistic worldviews such as Hinduism and Buddhism, people are (literally) reduced to nothing because the divine and the universe are believed to be one—the self doesn't even *exist*. But when you try to press the fullness of human personhood into a reductionist worldview box, something inevitably sticks out; we intuitively know we're more than that.

Pearcey gives the example of philosopher John Searle, who embraces materialism yet admits humans cannot consistently live by its principles. Searle acknowledges that in his materialistic view, the universe is like a vast machine in which all human action is determined, but he concedes that we nonetheless seem to be capable of making free decisions. He says, "We can *say*, OK, I believe in determinism, but the

conviction of freedom is built into our experiences... We *can't give up* our conviction of our own freedom, even though there's no ground for it."<sup>4</sup> As Pearcey observes, Searle recognizes that "his worldview box is too small to account for reality as *he himself* experiences it. He 'can't give up' his conviction of freedom. He 'can't live with' his own philosophy. Searle is trapped in cognitive dissonance—what his worldview tells him contradicts what he knows from general revelation."<sup>5</sup>

One of the beauties of a biblical worldview is that it doesn't require any reductionist stuffing. It accounts for and affirms the fullness of our unique human identity. Continuing with Pearcey's analogy, we're going to look at how the secular worldview box can never fully contain some of the ideas we value and take for granted most: objective morality, human equality, human rights, and freedom.

## Evaluating the Sources for Some of Our Most Cherished Values

### *Objective Morality: Who or What Defines Good and Evil?*

You'll recall from chapter 2 that the secular view of God and man boils down to the idea that we're free to be who we want to be and do what we want to do because there's no higher-than-human authority who's given us specific information about or moral directives for our lives (either because that authority doesn't exist or because any such authority who *might* exist hasn't revealed those things). While that was a helpful starting point for discussion, we're going to dig more deeply now into the logical implications of a secular worldview for morality—and why objective morality will never fit in the secular worldview box.

In a naturalistic worldview, we are nothing more than our physical parts. We're effectively just molecular machines moving about a machine-like universe. In order for there to be some kind of moral law that would apply to all these molecular machines, there would have to be a moral *lawgiver* with the moral *authority* to define morality for all. That being doesn't exist in a naturalistic worldview, so good and evil can be nothing more than subjective labels any given molecular machine places on an action (and this ignores the question of whether

molecular machines are even capable of the free will necessary to make moral decisions, which we'll get to shortly).

Other secular worldviews suffer from a similar problem, even when they include a belief in a supernatural being or force (for example, the type of worldview held by those who consider themselves "spiritual but not religious"). If a supernatural being or force exists but has no moral will or has not *revealed* a moral will, an individual has no objective basis for telling other individuals what is good or evil—how would that person know better than anyone else?

A secular worldview, therefore, has no place in its box for *objective* morality—moral values and duties that apply to all people—because there's no basis for it. When you hold a worldview in which the authority is the self, you gain the perceived freedom to do what you want but lose the objective basis for telling anyone else what is morally good or evil. To a degree, this is the dream of secular culture! Remember: Feelings are the ultimate guide, happiness is the ultimate goal, judging is the ultimate sin, and God is the ultimate guess. But as we saw in chapter 2, that doesn't mean secular culture has given up on categories of good and evil in order to live consistently within its worldview box. To the contrary, our culture has its own *very* strong ideas of what's right and wrong.

Now, there wouldn't be a logical problem with that if the corresponding secular message was something like, "Hey, we recognize we have no objective basis for claiming what's good or evil because we're each our own authority. But there are a bunch of us who have the same (subjective) opinion about what people should do, so we're going to band together to try to convince others to change *their* opinions. Even so, we recognize that every moral opinion is equally valid. That means there's nothing inherently right about what we think or inherently wrong about what you think. We just hope you'll change your opinion to believe as we do! Have a nice day."

I'm guessing that's a far cry from what you're hearing today. Secular culture doesn't see the popular moral consensus as simply the number of people collectively holding the same *opinion*. Rather, they see the popular moral consensus as objective moral truth for everyone. If you



don't agree with secular views of sexuality, for example, you'll be told that you're *wrong*, not that your view is simply different but equally valid. And that's where the worldview sticks out of the box; it has no basis for making such claims.

There's a lot of confusion about this topic in culture, so let's take time to apply what we just discussed to three common misunderstandings that underlie secular moral criticisms of Christianity.

MISUNDERSTANDING #1: SECULARISM DOESN'T REALLY MAKE CLAIMS OF OBJECTIVE MORALITY—IT JUST FOLLOWS A “DO NO HARM” PRINCIPLE.

Many secularists would insist they *are* fine with what anyone wants to do—as long as it doesn't hurt others. For example, an online course called “Introducing Humanism: Non-religious Approaches to Life” says, “Humanists believe everyone should have the right to hold and manifest whichever religious or non-religious beliefs they want, so long as they do no harm to others, and that should include the right to change one's beliefs.”<sup>6</sup> Do you see the logical inconsistency here? This philosophy attempts to leave everyone to their own authority but smuggles in a moral *exception*: Do whatever you want “so long as” you do no harm to others! The idea that all that matters is you don't harm someone else is just as much an objective moral claim as any other claim in which you're telling people what they should or shouldn't do. If a secular worldview has no basis for objective morality, it has no basis for even *one* objective moral claim. It's going to stick out of the box.

Furthermore, this popular idea raises questions about what constitutes harm in the first place. Secularists often claim, for example, that Christians are “harming” certain groups when they advocate for biblical morality that conflicts with the popular moral consensus. The conversation then quickly turns from “Christians can believe whatever they want” to “Christians are *hurting* others with their views.” It's easy to see that people who say as much believe that what they're saying is *objectively* true—Christians are hurting others regardless of whether they think they are or not. That's where the emotional pressure comes in. No one wants to feel like they're hurting others! But from a biblical

perspective, we have to be mindful that the definition of what is good or harmful for people has an objective basis in who God is and what He wills for us. Secular culture may think Christians are *harming* people by advocating for pro-life policies, for example, but in the context of a biblical worldview—in which every human is inherently valuable and made in the image of God—Christians are actually working for an objective *good*.

**MISUNDERSTANDING #2: CHRISTIANS THINK ONLY THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN GOD (OR IN THE CHRISTIAN GOD SPECIFICALLY) CAN BE MORAL.**

This may be the most common misunderstanding people have today about the nature of morality in a biblical worldview. The following excerpt from a blog post perfectly captures the popular sentiment. Though the blogger wrote this from his perspective as an atheist, the same sentiment is commonly shared by others with a secular worldview:

I have been a believing Christian and I have “de-converted” to atheism. Nowhere along the way did I say to myself “Oh, hey, now I can go out raping and killing people. What a relief that I can finally just let these base urges run rampant.”...If you don’t think people can live moral lives without God, aren’t you really just admitting that you couldn’t live a moral life without God?...If that’s the case, my friend, then I’m thankful there is a religion that is capable of containing the vile and base urges of people like you. I’m thankful for the religion that is putting a stop to the immorality of all those who couldn’t be moral without it. But to assume that everyone is like that is to misunderstand people and morality. I don’t need God to be moral or to understand what morality is.<sup>7</sup>

When this blogger rhetorically said, “If you don’t think people can live moral lives without God,” he betrayed a significant misunderstanding. In all our preceding discussion about objective morality, note that

nothing was said about who is *capable* of acting in accordance with an objective morality rooted in a biblical worldview. Christians should recognize that *anyone* can behave morally because the Bible says that the moral law is written on the human heart and our consciences bear witness to it (Romans 2:15). The question is not whether people of any worldview can behave morally (they can!), it's whether people with a secular worldview have any objective basis for *defining* morality within their own worldview box. This blogger assumes, for example, that we all know raping and killing people are bad things to do. But in his worldview, there's no objective basis for everyone agreeing on even that! He appeals to what people sense to be obviously wrong, but without the existence of a moral lawgiver, there can be no objective moral difference between giving someone a hug and killing them.

Ironically, it's *because* of our biblical worldview that we don't believe non-Christians are one step away from raping and pillaging society or that Christians would be acting on "vile and base urges" but for their religious beliefs. As we saw, the Bible tells us that everyone has a God-given moral compass. People will often choose to do what's right based on that compass, regardless of whether they acknowledge its source or not. But a biblical worldview explains why humans act on vile and base urges as well. The Bible says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23) and that "if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8 esv). Humans are by nature in rebellion against God, so we won't always choose what we know to be right no matter what we hold as a worldview. However, as born-again Christians, we are to "put off [our] old self" (Ephesians 4:22) and yield to the Holy Spirit so we can be conformed to the likeness of Christ (Romans 8:29). We're given a new nature, but that doesn't mean we'll no longer sin.

In short, this blogger was correct in his conclusion ("I don't need God to be moral or to understand what morality is") if he meant he doesn't need to *believe* in God for those things to be true about him. The irony is that he was correct only according to the biblical worldview he attempted to challenge. In his own worldview, he had no objective basis for defining morality at all.

MISUNDERSTANDING #3: PEOPLE WHO DON'T BELIEVE IN GOD ARE MORE MORAL WHEN THEY DO WHAT'S RIGHT BECAUSE THEY AREN'T MOTIVATED BY SPIRITUAL REWARDS OR PUNISHMENT.

It follows from my prior point that Christians don't necessarily behave more morally than anyone else. Anyone can behave morally, and Christians are at varying places in their growth toward sanctification (the process of becoming more like Jesus). But sometimes the opposite claim is made: that nonbelievers are actually *more* moral when they do what's right because they're not motivated by a spiritual reward or punishment.

As an example, a Facebook friend of mine recently shared the following story, to the great enthusiasm of many who responded:

A Master teaches a student that God created everything in the world to be appreciated, since everything is here to teach us a lesson. One clever student asked, "What lesson can we learn from atheists? Why did God create them?"

The Master responded, "God created atheists to teach us the most important lesson of them all—the lesson of true compassion. You see, when an atheist performs an act of charity, visits someone who is sick, helps someone in need, and cares for the world, he is not doing so because of some religious teaching. He does not believe that god [sic] commanded him to perform this act. In fact, he does not believe in God at all, so his acts are based on an inner sense of morality. And look at the kindness he can bestow upon others simply because he feels it to be right.

"This means," the Master continued, "that when someone reaches out to you for help, you should never say, 'I pray that God will help you.' Instead for the moment, you should become an atheist, imagine that there is no God who can help, and say 'I will help you.'"<sup>8</sup>

I hope that in reading this, several things have already jumped out to you based on our earlier discussion. The Master assumes that "true"

compassion depends on whether someone has followed their “inner sense of morality” versus a “religious teaching.” But that’s a false dichotomy. In a secular worldview, as we’ve seen, compassion can have no objective moral value. And if there’s no objective moral value to deem it something anyone *ought* to have, it doesn’t matter *where* it originates from; it’s just one more type of amoral behavior in an amoral universe. Also, in the atheist’s worldview, that “inner sense of morality” would be nothing more than a subjective feeling. The Master is seemingly quite impressed with the atheist who does what’s right, but he never acknowledges how the atheist’s own worldview provides no objective basis for any of this to even matter, nor that the missing relationship with his Creator is of any significance (eternal or otherwise).

In a biblical worldview, however, the inner sense of morality has an objective basis in God Himself. The fact that God has *additionally* revealed who He is and His moral will in the “religious teachings” of Scripture doesn’t make a person who’s being obedient to what He said any less compassionate! In fact, it’s the Bible that makes clear what it means to be compassionate in the first place. Our inner sense of morality (general revelation) goes hand in hand with the teachings of Scripture (special revelation).

Though what I’m about to say is not directly related to our point here, it’s worth mentioning that the story concludes with another false dichotomy: that a person must choose between praying God will help someone and doing something themselves. But the Bible tells us to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17) *and* care for God’s people (Matthew 25:40). There’s no need to pretend you’re an atheist, as the Master suggests, in order to be motivated to help others. In a biblical worldview, loving others flows out of a love for God.

When secular culture cheers on stories like this, the message to Christians is clear: “We don’t need what your religion has to offer. You think you’re more moral than we are, but not only is that not true, we’re actually more moral than *you*!” As we’ve seen, however, this is based on logical inconsistencies within the secular worldview, coupled with misunderstandings of the biblical worldview. It’s also based on the assumption that religions are nothing more than ethical systems. But as we saw



in chapter 5, Christianity is about who Jesus is, what He has done, and how we are to respond—both in belief and behavior.

I've devoted a lot of space here to the topic of morality because it's so often a point of confusion among both Christians and secularists. But much of what we discussed here provides a foundation for our remaining points, so we'll now be able to cover those more briefly.

### *Human Equality: What Makes People Equal?*

We touched on the subject of equality in chapter 2 when we looked at the views of ethicist Peter Singer, who argues that there are morally justifiable circumstances for killing a disabled infant. While that is reprehensible to most people, we saw why his reasoning is consistent with his naturalistic worldview. If humankind is nothing more than the product of the blind, undirected process of evolution, human life can be no more inherently valuable than its physical components. Speaking of equality within that worldview box is like comparing rocks. Rocks can be equal in size, shape, weight, or other physical characteristics, but there can be no comparison of *value* unless there are humans who *give* the rocks value.

Similarly, without a creator of life to give *us* value, there's no such thing as human equality in the sense that every human is inherently equal. For secularists who accept the naturalistic evolutionary view, a more consistent understanding would be that people are very *unequal* because we can only be compared on the basis of our physical traits. If being tall is particularly beneficial to society, for example, those who are taller would be considered more valuable in a practical sense. There would be no objective basis for claiming that shorter people have just as much value simply because they're *human*.

For secularists who believe that a supernatural being exists but hasn't revealed anything specific about him/her/itself outside of nature, there's still no objective basis for claiming that humans were created with equal value. If we know nothing specific about that supernatural being, we have no way of knowing whether he/she/it did, in fact, give every human the same value. What if those with freckles were given



*more* value by this mysterious author of life? That sounds absurd, but the point is, we simply wouldn't know.

Although human equality doesn't fit in the secular worldview box, it's a buzzword often used against those who hold to a biblical view of sexuality. If you search the hashtag #humanequality on social media, for example, you'll see a stream of posts alleging that those who don't agree that gender is fluid or that marriage should be redefined are opposed to "human equality." There are three problems with such claims. First, as we've seen, it's actually a *biblical* worldview—not a secular one—that provides an objective basis for believing that all humans are truly equal. Second, these posts conflate equality and morality. Christians believe every human is equal in value and made in the image of God, but the *morality* of the choices humans make is a separate question. Third, these posts also conflate equality with rights. Again, Christians believe everyone is equal, but that doesn't imply that everyone has an inherent "right" to all the same things in society (we assume, for example, that adults and kids have different rights).

And, as it turns out, the question of human rights is yet another one that hinges on worldview. Let's look at that now.

### *Human Rights: Where Do They Come From?*

Human rights are the rights considered to be inherent to all human beings. The United Nations' Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights puts it this way:

Human rights are rights we have simply because we exist as human beings—they are not granted by any state. These universal rights are inherent to us all, regardless of nationality, sex, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, language, or any other status.<sup>9</sup>

Most people would read this statement and agree that such rights exist and are important to protect. But—and I hope you saw this coming—the secular worldview provides neither an objective basis for claiming inherent human rights exist nor an objective basis for defining what they are.

Once again, consider the implications of secular worldviews that assume naturalistic evolution. A “right” is something to which a person is entitled, but we can’t be entitled to something unless someone entitles us to it. A government can pass laws to create societal rights for its citizens, but those aren’t the kind of universally held rights meant by the term “human rights.” Without a higher-than-human authority to give *all* people rights, universally held rights can’t exist.

Furthermore, the idea of *human* rights assumes there’s something special about humans relative to other living creatures—that we have rights to things like life and liberty, even though no one presumes animals have those same rights in the same sense. *Yet, in naturalistic evolution, humans are just another animal that developed by chance over time.* People care about animal welfare, of course, yet you don’t see activists working to make sure animals don’t kill each other due to their inherent “right” to life. But there’s no reason in such a worldview to assume humans have unique rights that other animals don’t. Some secularists have tried to get around this by suggesting that it’s our cognitive capabilities that make us uniquely entitled to rights, but the possession of certain cognitive capabilities doesn’t change the fundamental worldview problem: There’s still no one to give us those rights in the first place, and there’s no reason to assume that cognitive abilities are a rights-distinguishing biological feature while something like the kangaroo pouch isn’t. Using cognitive abilities as a justification for human rights also implies that humans who *lack* certain abilities are entitled to fewer rights than others.

Moreover, even *if* a secular case could be made that humans have rights because we’re in some sense special, in a secular worldview, there’s no objective basis for defining what those rights would be. One person could claim we have the inherent human right to eat bananas all day, while another could claim we have the inherent human right to take another person’s life whenever we want. *Given that there’s no objective basis for morality in secularism, it can’t even be assumed that the rights we supposedly have are rights we would categorize as being good!*

In a biblical worldview, human rights logically follow from the inherent value and equality of all people. *Given* that all people are

valuable and equal as image bearers of God, we can infer a right to live freely and with dignity. Human equality and human rights fit naturally together in the biblical worldview box, but neither fits in a secular one.

### *Freedom: What Makes It Possible?*

Earlier in this chapter, we saw how philosopher John Searle acknowledged that in a materialistic worldview, there's no ground for freedom of thought to exist. If the universe is just a physical machine, our thoughts are nothing more than physical forces acting within the brain. As evolutionary biologist Jerry Coyne says:

To assert that we can freely choose among alternatives is to claim, then, that we can somehow step outside the physical structure of our brain and change its workings. That is impossible. Like the output of a programmed computer, only one choice is ever physically possible: the one you made.<sup>10</sup>

This is not a small issue. The nature of reality significantly depends on whether we have some degree of free will. For example, if we don't have free will, no one can be held morally accountable for their actions—they only did what they *had* to do according to their biology. In that case, defining what's morally right or wrong is a moot point. We don't even have the *freedom* to do what's right or wrong! Neither do we have the freedom to do any number of other things people just assume to be important in life. We can't, for example, genuinely love others, act justly, or use reason if we're merely puppets of our biology.

According to the biblical worldview, God created us in His image, giving us the freedom to make meaningful choices. He wanted to be in genuine *relationship* with us and gave us the freedom to love Him... or not. The choices we make in this life matter because they're actual choices, not robotic actions prompted by biology. It's ironic, then, that so many people who deconvert from Christianity speak of how "freeing" their new worldview is (see chapter 6). While they're thinking in terms of freedom from the constraints of biblical morality and God's

authority, they're failing to recognize that a worldview without God (or without a God who has revealed anything about who we are) has no basis for assuming *any* kind of freedom. Once again, we see that something humans take for granted—freedom—fits right into the biblical worldview box but sticks out of the secular one.

### **Reclaiming Our Worldview Pieces Is Worth the Effort**

I realize that for many readers the contents of this chapter may be challenging. Yet these concepts are important because they demonstrate the inconsistencies in many people's secular worldview—inconsistencies held while those same people champion their worldview as being *superior* to a biblical one. Unfortunately, this subject is rarely discussed in churches, so thinking about these concepts is new for most people and can take some initiative and effort.

But let's put the value of doing so in a bit of historical perspective.

If you were a new Christian living in Rome around the year AD 200, you would have been required to do three years of schooling with an authorized teacher once a week, outside of the weekly church service, in order to be baptized—a minimum of 144 hours of lectures (granting a month off per year).<sup>11</sup> Students studied the Scriptures in-depth, and the material was heavily apologetic, instructing new believers on how Christian truth stood superior to pagan philosophy and religion. To modern ears, this sounds rather intense. Today, we would fear that such requirements would turn away too many prospective believers. After all, there are barbeques to get to and baseball games to watch. But Christians of that period were a minority surrounded by a pagan culture and faced persecution. They *had* to put in the time to deeply understand their faith if they were going to persevere through great hardships.

In the context of church history, it's eye-opening to think of how similar our situation is becoming today as a worldview minority. The difference in the approach taken by early Christians was rooted in the fact that they didn't have hundreds of years of Christianity-infused culture behind them to blind them to the need for developing a robust intellectual foundation for their faith. For them, the need was obvious.

They understood that in order for new believers to stand strong in a culture dominated by an opposing worldview, they needed more preparation than weekly worship and potlucks. *They needed to understand why Christ was literally worth being persecuted for.*

Today, we're on the other side of Christianity having proliferated, having become the dominant worldview influence in America, and having waned as the mainstream cultural view of reality. Because of that history, there's a significant hangover of Christian values that secular society simply takes for granted. As I said in chapter 1, much of the cultural conflict Christians are experiencing today is the delayed effect of culture throwing out values that have lingered on long after people discarded the corresponding Christian doctrines. But, as we saw in this chapter, there are many other values rooted in a biblical worldview that secular culture continues to cherish without realizing they're borrowing capital from a Christian legacy.

Whereas the early church needed a strong apologetic foundation to *introduce* its worldview to the dominant culture, today's church needs a strong apologetic foundation to reclaim the borrowed parts of its worldview *from* a dominant culture. In doing so, we strengthen our own convictions as we grasp how only a biblical worldview can accommodate all we intuitively know about the nature of humanity in its worldview "box"—a coherence that speaks volumes about the truth of Christianity. But we can also strengthen our case to the secular world when we're able to graciously articulate one of the greatest (and most telling) ironies of our time: *Humans gravitate to the authority of the self, yet intuitively continue to cherish values that depend on the existence and authority of God*—a God who can define morality, imbue humans with equality, entitle humans to rights, and create humans with the free will needed to make genuine choices like loving others, acting justly, and utilizing reason.

As was the case for those in the early church, it takes effort to gain this understanding. But that effort is extraordinarily valuable for loving the Lord with our minds and helping others to open *their* minds to His truth.

### FOR FURTHER READING

- Nancy Pearcey, *Finding Truth: 5 Principles for Unmasking Atheism, Secularism, and Other God Substitutes* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2015).
- Michael Sherrard, *Why You Matter: How Your Quest for Meaning Is Meaningless without God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2021).
- Andy Steiger and Sheri Hiebert, *Reclaimed: How Jesus Restores Our Humanity in a Dehumanized World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020).
- Frank Turek, *Stealing from God: Why Atheists Need God to Make Their Case* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2015).



## **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION**

1. How would you summarize why the concept of objective morality sticks out of the secular worldview “box”? And why does it fit coherently within the biblical one?
2. Based on this chapter’s discussion, how would you respond if a friend said to you, “I don’t need to believe in God in order to know what’s right and wrong”?
3. Why do you think most people believe in human equality even though many of them hold a worldview in which there’s no objective basis for it?
4. What are some ways the church could better train Christians today to be familiar with subjects like the ones presented in this chapter?

