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Secularization: A New Testament Perspective

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Introduction

Traditionally, Africans have had a unified, holistic worldview, with “religion” being integral to every aspect of living. Life was not compartmentalized into “sacred” and “secular.” Rather, the entire universe and all of daily life was infused with spiritual significance. Today one finds in Africa that the influences from secularized nations can present a real danger to Christian thinking.

For many in this day and age, secularization (or even secularism) is an absolute necessity; for others, it is anathema, an affront to Christianity or to whatever religion the person professes. Legislation in France in 1905 clearly separated the state from religious influences. American public schools cannot have prayers or post copies of the Ten Commandments. How should an evangelical Christian react to secularizing influences? One key to a solidly Christian perspective on life would be to explore and embrace what the New Testament teaches about secularization. Does the New Testament (NT) have any light to shed on the issue?

1. Secularization: What It Is

At the outset, we need to make a distinction between “secularization” and “secularism.” The former refers to the *process* of moving from a worldview centered on religious realities to one that denies or ignores religious influence and significance in all aspects of life. The *end result* of the secularization process is known as “secularism,” a state of affairs and a state of mind in which the realities of life are considered to be without spiritual significance. This mindset characterizes much of the Western world. For a cultural element to become “secularized,” then, means that, in the minds of the group being described,¹ the element – whether a thing, an action, or an attitude – no longer has any spiritual or religious significance attached to it. One can speak of secularization as a movement away from a mindset that is Christian (or that is Islamic, or that is from any other religion). In all cases, the emphasis falls on the change taking place in the person’s worldview.

¹ Caveats need to be added, for the group experiencing secularization may not be an entire culture or religion but rather may comprise only a small subset of the larger society. One could also speak of secularization in terms of an individual’s change in outlook over time. On a societal basis, one part of the society may feel comfortable secularizing certain activities formerly considered religious (such as food laws or marriage vows), whereas another group within the society may be shocked by such disregard for what they continue to consider religious. The latter group may inflict social (or other) penalties on those who (in their view) flout God’s laws. The severity, public nature, and significance of such penalties is often to be measured in relation to the relative importance of each group.

This new mindset or worldview which excludes religion as a basis is called “secularism,” or occasionally “humanism,”² for the supernatural no longer has a part.

2. Secularization: What It Is Not

It would be a confusion of categories to equate secularization with the fact of a person’s making necessary accommodations to a secular or non-Christian culture.³ Here I have in mind, for example, a first-century Jew paying his taxes to the Roman government. By that era, the Jews no longer lived under a theocracy; therefore, they had certain obligations to the ruling political authorities. To the extent that those obligations did not compromise their faith in the one true God (such as the practice of personally offering sacrifices to pagan deities or divinized emperors would have done), these actions were not necessarily a secularizing influence.⁴ Otherwise, Jesus (Mk. 12:13-17) and Paul (Rom. 13:6,7) would not have counseled paying taxes to a corrupt government that could misuse that money.⁵ In actual fact, both Jesus and Paul

² Such a use of “humanism” is not, however, technically correct, for the emphasis of humanism is different. “Atheism” is not a good fit either, though a sort of practical atheism is experienced by those involved in secularization.

³ It seems to me that this is where many Christians make a mistake in attempting to impose Christian values (such as prayer in the public schools) on a society that has no pretensions to being Christian or religious in any sense.

⁴ One of the most telling examples of Jewish secularization is recounted in a specifically Jewish document. The books of 1 and 2 Maccabees underscore how far some were willing to go in order to fit into the Hellenistic culture. The story in 1 Maccabees indicates that the first wave of Hellenization preceded the imperial commands, and that in that first group were Jews who voluntarily reversed the very sign of the covenant, namely circumcision, in order to fit into the surrounding culture (1 Macc. 1:11-15). Presumably, the main purpose for such an action as surgically removing the evidence of circumcision was to enable the young men to participate freely in athletic events without being ridiculed by non-Jews, who considered circumcision a mutilation of the body. Since athletic events were carried out in the nude, whether or not the participant was circumcised was obvious. If the sole purpose was the athletic competition, this action on the part of Jewish males would be a prime example of secularization. Since, however, all athletic contests in the Greco-Roman world were dedicated to one deity or another, removing the marks of circumcision could rightfully be seen as renouncing the Jewish religion, which forbade all contact with foreign gods. Cf. Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), vol. I, p. 74. For a perspective that does not find Jewish athletes participating in Hellenistic competition as being disloyal to Judaism, see Jonathon A. Goldstein, “Jewish Acceptance and Rejection of Hellenism,” in E. P. Sanders (ed.), *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, Vol 2: *Aspects of Judaism in the Greco-Roman Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p. 78.

⁵ The text of these two admonitions is as follows: *And they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Him, in order to trap Him in a statement. And they came and said to Him, “Teacher, we know that You are truthful, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any, but teach the way of God in truth. Is it lawful to pay a poll-tax to Caesar,*

helped their audiences understand that all of life, even paying taxes, falls under God's sovereignty.⁶

For the thinking Christian, no action can be divorced from a worldview in which God reigns supreme. Secularization is *not* the mere fact of doing some of the same things that unbelievers do. It is rather the process of leaving one way of envisioning and understanding reality, in which God (and by implication, the supernatural) enters into all of life, and moving to another mindset in which God has no viable part. It is the process of leaving the supernatural as one's frame of reference toward relying solely on the possibilities inherent to the human being, to human society, and to human logic and its extension in what is considered "natural science." Because secularization is a process, it can take decades for an individual to become secularized. For an entire society, whose traditions are passed down from generation to generation, the process of secularization can take much longer.

New Testament Examples

1. Challenges for a New Testament Study

Having established the difference between secularization and secularism and also the difference between necessary accommodations and secularization, we now turn to the NT itself. In doing so, it is pertinent to remark that the very nature of the NT as a document written over a short period of time (50 years) precludes the possibility of noting great changes. The Old Testament, with its millennia of history, offers a far better opportunity to observe and trace such developments in a society. The time period for the NT evidence is simply too short.

Thus what we note in the following paragraphs are not so much "examples" of secularization (though I have labeled them as such) but rather hints or precursors of what might lead down the path of secularization. None of the examples is clear-cut, yet each is suggestive of conditions that could indicate the start of secularization.

or not? "Shall we pay, or shall we not pay?" But He, knowing their hypocrisy, said to them, "Why are you testing Me? Bring Me a denarius to look at." And they brought one. And He said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" And they said to Him, "Caesar's." And Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were amazed at Him (Mark 12:13-17). For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor (Romans 13:6-7). If no other indication is given, biblical texts are quoted from the New American Standard Bible.

⁶ For this reason, Paul can be prescriptive about taxes in Romans 13, stating that the government officials are doing God's will. In verse 4, he terms the government as the "minister" (δῆλονος) of God; in verse 6, the government officials are the "servants" (λειτουργοὶ) of God.

2. The Absence of Secularism as a Worldview

To begin with, we need to underscore the fact that no part of the first-century society, whether Jewish, Christian, or pagan, was actually secularized. With the possible exception of a very few philosophers, no one ever denied the reality of the supernatural. They may sometimes have lived as though the supernatural had, practically speaking, no part in their lives. Yet the concept of supernatural beings and events was an integral part of the first-century mindset. As for the Jews, they believed in the Creator-God who ruled the universe and who had angels as his servants. They believed that fallen angels and Satan opposed God on a cosmic scale. Prayer was efficacious, according to their beliefs, because there was a God who could control events in history. The regulations proposed at Mt Sinai (and later extended by the Pharisees) made the Jews constantly aware that their life was lived in relation to God.

As for the non-Jewish world, the sheer variety of religions in the Roman empire attested to the interest in the supernatural. Every city had its patron divinities, and sacrifices to these divinities and in favor of the emperor(s) were considered a civic duty. Many of the religions even actively propagated their beliefs.

Christians, of course, balked at such sacrifices (as had the Jews before them). But their refusal to offer pagan, civic, or imperial sacrifices of any kind was not based on rejection of the supernatural. Rather, Christians recognized only the one true God (in three Persons) as being worthy of worship.

The presence of Jews, Christians, and other and various forms of local and empire-wide religiosity all demonstrate that, in one sense, the NT is not a document that has examples of secularism, which would be a totally non-religious worldview.⁷

3. Tending toward Secularization: Some NT Examples

Yet, on the other hand, one can find examples of turning toward the attitudes that might *eventually* lead to secularism.⁸ Here I have four examples

⁷ It is possible, however, to look at the metaphorical example of Babylon in Revelation 18 as a picture of a wholly secularized city. The inhabitants seem to have no thoughts for God at all at the moment of judgment. Indeed, the city seems to have eliminated Christian testimony earlier in its history ("And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints ..." Rev. 18:24). The NT does not, however, provide material for understanding the city's path to secularism, for we see only the moment of judgment and not the process leading up to that destruction. By the time of the NT, "Babylon" as such did not exist but had become a code-name among Jews and Christians for that which is evil. It was often equated with Rome (cf. 1 Pet. 5:13).

⁸ Throughout this study, the question of separating overlapping terms and categories comes into view. In the examples that follow, several elements can be said to work alongside each other: secularization, pride, sin, unbelief, backsliding, and self-centeredness among them. In the most general terms, all actions and attitudes that

of varying gravity. The first three examples, which are treated briefly and in the order of their occurrence in the canon and history, involve individuals; the fourth example is that of a church. As mentioned previously, these examples are suggestive rather than definitive.

3.1 *The Rich Young Man (Mark 10:17-31 and parallels)*

And as He was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and *began* asking Him, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments, ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’” And he said to Him, “Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up.” And looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him, and said to him, “One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” But at these words his face fell, and he went away grieved, for he was one who owned much property. (Mark 10:17-22)

The pericope as given in Mark sets forth an enthusiastic young man, ready to lay claim on eternal life, seeking to become a disciple of Jesus. He had already been living in accordance with the prescriptions of Judaism, according to his own testimony, but he sensed a desire for something more.⁹ Yet when Jesus actually called him to discipleship (“Come, follow me”), the young man rejected the offer. His priority in life lay elsewhere, namely, it seems, in material benefits. On his personal scale of values, discipleship and eternal life ranked lower than possessions. His initial enthusiasm cooled quickly as he gave a “worldly” evaluation to what Jesus was demanding of him. Mark says that the young man was grieved (λυπούμενος) and left Jesus, for (γὰρ) he was attached to his many possessions.¹⁰

The Synoptics do not give us a follow-up pericope on the young man, but the implication is that he made no further effort to follow Jesus as a true disciple. His mind was set on other attractions. At least at first glance, we can propose this young man as a candidate who was not so very serious about his commitment to things spiritual and therefore might gradually fall into a way of thinking that would have little reference to God. But the Scriptures do not go that far. They merely give the example as a warning.

deny, ignore, or resist God and his priority are sinful. The attribution of underlying reasons for such sin is subject to discussion. In speaking of secularization in the following examples, I am putting the emphasis on the direction of a lifestyle or mindset if a person or group should choose to persist in wrong choices. Those choices may have other factors, such as pride, unbelief, or self-centeredness at their root.

⁹ Perhaps what he desired was more recognition of his admirable lifestyle, as he perceived it.

¹⁰ Augustine describes the young man as being “trapped in his own earthly desires.” Cf. Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, *Mark* (coll. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, vol. II; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 139.

3.2 *The Apostle Thomas (John 20:24-31)*

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I shall see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." And after eight days again His disciples were inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst, and said, "Peace be with you." Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand, and put it into My side; and be not unbelieving, but believing." Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed." (John 20:24-29)

My second NT example is Thomas, the apostle of Jesus. For three years, he had been following Jesus. In contrast to the rich young man, Thomas had not been afraid to leave behind whatever possessions and inheritance he had. He had lived with Jesus, learned from him, and even acclaimed him with the others on the day of the Triumphal Entry to Jerusalem. He seemingly thought that Jesus was, at the very least, doing God's will and was directed by the Almighty. Yet when "push" came to "shove," Thomas decided that he was not going to trust in anything supernatural. He would not accept the other apostles' declaration that Jesus had risen from the dead. How could he be sure that it was the very same person and not a substitute until he himself had physical verification of what the others had claimed?

Here we see a disciple who has been reduced to a dangerous mindset which, if not corrected, could have been the starting point for a journey toward secularism. Thomas did not deny that Jesus could rise from the dead; he still accepted the possibility of supernatural events. But he wanted to test the reality himself.¹¹

The good news here is that, when confronted with the truth, Thomas recognized his error and acknowledged his true Master, the one whose authority should rule his life. Thus Thomas exclaimed: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

The rich young man of Mark 10 had turned away from the Lord Jesus, but Thomas turned toward his Master. At the critical moment, Thomas resisted the temptation of wanting to control and verify everything by his own means. He made the choice to be a true disciple of Jesus, letting that perspective guide all of his thinking.

¹¹ Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, ed. by Conrad H. Gempf (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), p. 443, note 52: "If we hold a supranaturalist world-view, exemplified in the acceptance of a traditional understanding of resurrection of Jesus, we are immediately in a different ball-game. Within that framework we may still require reasonably rigorous testimony before admitting other miracles, but their possibility may be accepted in principle."

3.3 Demas (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:9-10)

Luke, the beloved physician, sends you his greetings, and also Demas. (Colossians 4:14)

Make every effort to come to me soon; for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. (2 Timothy 4:9-10)

The third NT example comes perhaps 30 years later and involves a Christian by the name of Demas. He is mentioned only twice in the NT. The earlier of the two references, which is found in Colossians, comes during the time of Paul's first imprisonment at Rome and speaks of Demas in positive terms as sending warm greetings to the believers living in Colosse. In that letter, Demas, along with Luke and others, seems to have been a helpful companion to Paul during that difficult period.

By the time of Paul's second Roman imprisonment, perhaps some five years later, Paul's second letter to Timothy gave a different evaluation of Demas. Demas had been in Rome, and Paul had had contact with him. Yet Demas had left (ἐγκατέλιπεν, abandoned) Paul in order to go to (or return to) Thessalonica. That fact in itself was not negative. Others, such as Crescens and Titus, had also left but not been accused of desertion. The problem, however, with Demas lay in his motivation for leaving Paul. According to 2 Tim. 4:9-10, Demas departed "... because he loved this present world" (ἀγαπήσας τὸν νῦν αἰῶνα). Demas' value system had changed; instead of putting Christian charity and spiritual values first, his new priority had become "the current age." He chose the present over the eternal, "this age" instead of "the age to come." His choices were influenced by something beyond his relationship with the Triune God. Thus he was in danger of increasing secularization in his life. Since the NT gives no further information, we are unaware of how far down that path Demas actually went.¹²

3.4 The Church at Ephesus (Acts 18:18-40; ch. 19; 20:17-38; 1&2 Timothy; Rev. 2:1-7)

The fourth and final example which I will cite from the NT is that of the church of Ephesus.¹³ In the first century AD, this city, which was the metropolis

¹² The Church Father Chrysostom, in his sermons on 2 Timothy, gives his own evaluation of Demas' choices: "Demas, having loved his own ease and security away from danger, has chosen to live luxuriously at home, rather than suffer hardships with Paul and share his present dangers. Paul has indeed blamed him, not only in order to confirm us, that we may not sink to self-indulgent weakness in declining toils and dangers, for this would amount to 'having loved this present world.'" Cf. Peter Gorday (ed.), *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (coll. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, vol. IX; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 277.

¹³ On the basis of its Greek name, scholarly literature often refers to the city as "Ephesos," as in the title of the essays edited by Helmut Koester (ed.), *Ephesos*:

(or chief city) of Asia and which ranked fourth in importance in the Roman empire, may have passed the zenith of its glory, but it was still important and wealthy, as evidenced by the numerous public structures built during the two centuries around the birth of Christ.

By tracing the history of this church as given in the NT, we can see a definite change in the basic outlook of the church as a whole. First we will start with the founding of the church and its early days, then its struggles, and finally the severe warning it received from God. We will then finish with a look beyond the NT to see the outcome for this church.

3.4.1 The Good News Comes to Ephesus

When Paul first landed in Ephesus (Acts 18), he was unwilling to spend a lot of time there, but he evaluated the situation as a promising one from the point of view of Jewish interest in the gospel. Paul's deputies, Aquila and Priscilla, remained behind in Ephesus to act as conduits for the Good News. Here were people eager to understand the truth. Together with Apollos from Alexandria, this Jewish-Christian couple taught the people and had a good response.

3.4.2 Initial Impact of the Good News in Ephesus

And this became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified. Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices. And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of all; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing. (Acts 19:17-20)

At his return to Ephesus, during the so-called Third Missionary Journey, Paul also encountered openness to the gospel message. Some who had known only of John the Baptist's ministry were introduced to the full story of salvation in Jesus Christ; and Paul, for a time, had easy access to the synagogue as a teaching base. When forced to leave there, he found other quarters for continuing his teaching. Luke says that he had his disciples (τοὺς μαθητὰς, Acts 19:9; cf. 19:30) with him. The presence of disciples indicates the strength of the ministry among the Ephesians.

Indeed, the response in the city of Ephesus was generally spectacular. Some non-Christians observed Paul and were so impressed that they tried to imitate his miracles of exorcism (Acts 19:13-16). Others believed in Jesus and openly confessed their sins (Acts 19:18). Those involved in sorcery were compelled by God's Spirit to burn, in public, their magical scrolls (Acts 19:19),

a value of 50,000 drachmas, or the equivalent of 135 years' worth of work at the rate paid to a day laborer or a soldier.¹⁴

Luke gives two summary statements relative to the impact of the gospel in Ephesus. First, with respect to the general population, the author of Acts affirms that the effectiveness of the Christian ministry became known to the "Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified" (Acts 19:17). Second, with regard to the Christian conversions, Luke says: "So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing" (Acts 19:20).

Thus, there was a strong, vibrant, and testifying church in the city of Ephesus. Its impact was significant enough that the silversmiths feared that their trade in pagan idols of Artemis would be damaged.¹⁵ They knew what Paul and the Christians felt about the situation. Demetrius, the leader of a revolt, exclaimed: "... not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people, saying that gods made with hands are no gods at all" (Acts 19:26).

The disturbance was such that the town clerk finally had to remind the population that the Roman government would not tolerate anything that resembled a breach of the peace (Acts 19:35-41). But prior to that climax, Luke gives his readers a further insight into just how influential these Christians were in Ephesus. Paul was protected not only by his own disciples but also by some of his highly placed government friends, Asiarchs (τινὲς δὲ καὶ τῶν Ἀσιαρχῶν, Acts 19:31).

Here, then, was a church which was strong and influential, with trained local leadership (cf. Acts 20:17, 28), a church which Paul had faithfully nurtured on the individual level as well as in a larger group (Acts 20:20, 27,

¹⁴ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 582: "The great difference in our account [from those detailing Augustus' burning of banned books] is that the owners here are voluntarily burning their books - these books were not seized. Inasmuch as the books were very expensive, and in view of the stress Luke places on the worth of these books, ... we are presumably meant to think that those undertaking this act were of some social means. Perhaps v.18 [of Acts 19] refers to the actions of the lower-status and poorer Christians, and v.19 to the actions of the higher-status and more wealthy Christians."

¹⁵ Artemis (Diana) was the major deity worshiped in Ephesus, but many other temples and altars have been identified, including the Egyptian divinities Sarapis and Isis. C. E. Arnold, "Ephesus," in G. F. Hawthorne and R. P. Martin (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), p. 250, lists many others as well: "... Agathe Tyche, Aphrodite, Apollo, Asclepius, Athena, the Cabiri, Concord, Cybele (the Mother Goddess), Demeter, Dionysus, Eneida, Hecate, Hephaestus, Heracles, Hestia Boulaia, Kore, Nemesis, Pan, Pion (a mountain god), Pluto, Poseidon, Theos Hypsistos, Tyche Soteira, Zeus and several other deities."

31). Although he counseled vigilance against dangerous teachers whom he termed “wolves” (Acts 20:29-30), he was assured that God’s grace would be sufficient for their situation (Acts 20:32).

3.4.3 The Comfortably Established Church

Ten years later, the church at Ephesus continued to function. Nevertheless, the indications in Ephesians¹⁶ and 1 Timothy are that, instead of influencing its environment and having a positive testimony, the church was being assailed by problems. The Ephesian church was alive and had a variety of members¹⁷ — rich, poor, those from a Jewish background, those from a pagan background, parents, children, masters, slaves, young men, young women, older men, and older women. They represented a cross-section of society. On the positive side, Paul expressed concern that the leaders not be new converts (1 Tim. 3:6), which indicates that the church continued to attract people to Christ.¹⁸ Paul also mentioned the need for a good witness, a good reputation in the larger community (1 Tim. 3:7). The fact that the non-Christian community is called “the outsiders” (τῶν ἕξωθεν) indicates that the church had solidified into an identifiable group which saw itself as distinct from those not belonging to the church.

Thus at this stage, the church was firmly established, but it was also facing challenges. In particular, they had to confront false teachers (1 Tim. 1:3ff; 4:1ff) and internal divisions (rich/poor - 1 Tim. 6:17-19; Jew/Gentile - Eph. 2:11-22). Although persecution does not enter into Paul’s discussion, the problems of false teaching and internal tensions indicate a church that which was no longer at the height of its positive influence in the community. It had begun to be focused inwardly, on itself.

This picture is confirmed a few years further on by Paul’s second letter to Timothy, in which the apostle laid a strong accent on the purity of the teaching and the need to guard against false doctrines. He warned against future problems and those who would deem the *kerygma* passé and would seek something new to which to listen, something which (inevitably) would not be

¹⁶ The NT letter which is commonly known as “Ephesians” was probably not directed exclusively toward that church. More probably, it was a circular letter to a group of Asian churches (including the church at Ephesus). The problems highlighted in the letter can, however, by implication, be applied to the situation of the Ephesian church.

¹⁷ Note the remarks by Koester concerning this variety in Helmut Koester, “Ephesos in Early Christian Literature,” in Koester, *Ephesos*, pp. 123-124, though the basis of his conclusions is faulty, since he claims that Rom. 16 is part of a letter addressed, not to Rome but to Ephesus. Thus he uses the names given there as indicative of the members of the Ephesian church. My remarks concerning the composition of the church are based, rather, on the contents of Paul’s letter normally cited as “Ephesians.”

¹⁸ These may be, as Koester suggests in *Ephesos*, p.129, second-generation Christians. Nevertheless, his basis for such a statement is again untrustworthy, for he assumes the date for the writing of Acts to be about AD 100, whereas I put it prior to Paul’s death in the AD 60’s.

the truth of the gospel: "... wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths" (2 Tim. 4:3-4). Their desire to have "interesting" teachers had not yet, it appears, caused them to renounce the church at Ephesus. Instead, they wanted such (false) teachers to come and spread their so-called "enlightened" message in the church.

3.4.4 The Ephesian Church in Danger

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: "I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place — unless you repent. Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God." (Rev. 2:1-7)

The final picture of the Ephesus church given in Scripture comes from John's writings, Rev. 2:1-7. In the letter to the angel/messenger (ἀγγέλω) of the church at Ephesus, the positive characteristics of the church were noted as its work for the Lord and its perseverance (Rev. 2:2). The "work" is defined as opposition to the assaults launched against the truth,¹⁹ including opposition to the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:6).²⁰ The mention of perseverance seems to indicate sufferings caused by external forces, whether religiously stimulated (Jews or pagans) or government-incited (civic or imperial cults).

The negative side of the ledger has this condemnation: "You have left your first love" (Rev. 2:4). The initial enthusiasm which had characterized the church as its founding, when Christians had voluntarily burned expensive manuscripts in order to make it clear that they were following Jesus wholeheartedly (Acts 19:18-19), had been lost along the way. The church

¹⁹ First John's concern with false teaching may mirror the conditions found in Ephesus, where the disciples John (to be equated with the Elder and with the Apostle) was said to live out his final years, overseeing the Asian churches, according to Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1: "Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia." [Quotation taken from Schaff's edition of the Fathers]

²⁰ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (coll. NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 233 ff. and 248-251, on idolatry.

continued to exist, but its fervor was gone.²¹ The church became, seemingly, more institutionalized and less a living and vibrant entity. Instead of positively influencing their community, the Christians had turned inward as a group and forgotten that the main point was their relationship, intimate and all-pervasive, with Jesus Christ.

The letter in Revelation 2 which is addressed to the church at Ephesus contains direct instructions which could be thus paraphrased: “Remember your origins, repent, go back to doing what you did at the beginning.” Complacency and a diminished love for God and for his people, including those not yet in the fold, demanded their repentance. Repentance would take the Ephesian church back to its starting place: a vibrant love for the Lord. The letter continues by explaining the consequences of a failure to apply the instructions given. Simply put, the church at Ephesus would disappear²² (Rev. 2:5).

3.4.5 Ephesus Beyond the New Testament

I have learned that some people have passed through on their way from there with an evil teaching. But you did not permit them to sow any seeds among you, plugging your ears so as not to receive anything sown by them. You are stones of the Father's temple, prepared for the building of God the Father. You are being carried up to the heights by the crane of Jesus Christ, which is the cross, using as a cable the Holy Spirit; and for faith is your hoist, and love is the path that carries you up to God. And so you are all traveling companions bearing God, bearing the temple, bearing Christ, and bearing the holy things, adorned in every way with the commandments of Jesus Christ. I exult in you, since I have been deemed worthy through the things that I write to speak with you and to rejoice together with you; for you love nothing in human life but God alone. (Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Ephesians* 9:1-2)²³

The city of Ephesus, which had been the focal point of all Asia Minor, a commercial hub and governmental seat,²⁴ attracted to itself some of the

²¹ This fervor has been variously defined by commentators as brotherly love within the Christian community, love for Jesus Christ, love for God, or zeal for witnessing to unbelievers. Cf. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 230 f.

²² The disappearance of the Ephesian church could be either with respect to that particular locale [the position favored by William Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, updated edition edited by Mark W. Wilson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), p. 177], or a permanent dissolution of the church [the interpretation favored by George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 39 f.] This verse has been the subject of dispute for many centuries as to the exact meaning of the verb κινήσω. The major choices put forward for understanding the verse are to translate the verb as “move,” with the implication of a change of location, or “remove,” with the implication of a cessation. Cf. BDAG, κινέω.

²³ The letters of Ignatius have been edited and translated by Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol. 1 (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 229.

²⁴ Note the comments of E.M. Blaiklock, “Ephesus,” in Merrill Tenney (ed.), *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), vol. 2, p. 330.

ecclesiastical administration as well. As well as serving as the home for the bishop, Ephesus hosted church councils into the fifth century AD. The church may have been moribund in some respects, but at least externally it functioned.

Ignatius of Antioch, in fact, wrote positively of the church in the second century AD. Whether the church was as free from problems as Ignatius seems to indicate is not otherwise known.²⁵ But if so, it would indicate that the church must have taken seriously the warning found in the book of Revelation and had a period of strength once again. The secularization process is not necessarily irreversible, and the Ephesian church may well have changed the direction in which it had been heading, just as Thomas had done in his life.

Two sorts of crises, natural and human, brought to an end both the city and the church of Ephesus. The initial crisis was sparked by two natural phenomena: First, the delta of the river mouth silted over, forming a swamp infested by malarial mosquitoes. Without the river traffic to which Ephesus had been accustomed, commerce and tourism became more difficult, and the city dwindled in importance. Second, the area was subject to many earthquakes, which destroyed many of the stately and beautiful structures in the city.

In later centuries, a human-initiated crisis rang the death knell for the city and church of Ephesus when the Ottoman Turks overran the area, leaving destruction in their path. Today, Ephesus is completely abandoned as a habitation but has become an active site for many archeological digs, adding to our knowledge of those distant times of the early centuries of our era. Nevertheless, as far as the Ephesian church is concerned, it died out. Nothing indicates that it moved elsewhere; it simply died. And thus was fulfilled John's prophecy: Repent or I will remove your "candlestick" (Rev. 2:5).

The rich young man, the apostle Thomas, Demas and the church at Ephesus - four examples of varying intensity. They illustrate the fact that even in ancient times the danger of secularizing influences was present. Secularism was not yet a reality in the first-century world, but avoiding the secularizing process necessitated constant vigilance. How then did the writers of the New Testament attempt to help their readers deal with the challenge that secularization presented?

New Testament Advice

The first thing that can be noted is that the various writers of the NT included examples which were deemed negative. The rich young man of the Synoptics missed out on the blessing of a close association with Jesus, the

²⁵ Note the comments of Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (coll. JSNT Supp Series 11; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), p. 54: "[Ignatius] sees the energy and devotion of this church but not the seeds of decline which a closer knowledge might have revealed."

Master, when he decided to turn away from discipleship. The apostle Thomas did not experience the benediction Jesus announced: "Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed" (John 20:29). Demas, by deserting Paul, lost an opportunity to serve and to learn from the great apostle. The entire Ephesian church was in danger of heresy and of losing their "candlestick." These negative examples were a warning to the readers.

But beyond those examples, there are some words of advice to help believers maintain a mindset in which God is central and involved in every aspect of life. In the paragraphs that follow, we will briefly note some advice given by Jesus and by the apostle Paul.

1. The Advice of Jesus

Early in his ministry, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explained to his disciples that worry was useless because everything in life falls under God's sovereignty and providence.

For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single cubit to his life's span? And why are you anxious about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these. But if God so arrays the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more do so for you, O men of little faith? Do not be anxious then, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "With what shall we clothe ourselves?" For all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you. (Mt. 6:25-33)

The antidote to worry was to focus on God's priorities and let him provide: "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you" (Mt. 6:33). Some years later, during a difficult period for the disciples, Jesus reminded them again of that truth, using different words: "Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me" (John 14:1).

The advice given by Jesus was that of keeping God in view at all times, not allowing the cares of the world around to mold one's thinking. God in his sovereignty would care for the believer.

2. The Advice of the Apostle Paul

Paul also gave advice that would help the Christians avoid secularizing influences. He encouraged the believers in Asia Minor with these words:

Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. (Eph. 5:15-17).

Paul's value judgment, namely, that "the days are evil," gave the Christians a reference point. The days are "evil" (πονηραί) because they present temptations to ignore the supernatural (that is, to ignore God) and consider that he has no part in moment-by-moment living. Nothing is neutral; all is to be evaluated according to how God himself would examine the matter: Is it wise or unwise? Is it the will of the Lord, or is it evil?

Paul also underlined the concept of right-thinking when he addressed the problematic congregation in the city of Corinth:

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ ... (2 Cor. 10:3-5).

Paul's worldview is obviously organized around the religious dimension and his relationship to God through Jesus Christ. "Taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" indicates that Christians might be tempted toward a non- or even anti-religious worldview. Their part as individual believers was to make a conscious choice to see the world as God sees it, with no part of life being unimportant or outside of God's care. The situations in which believers find themselves are ones in which very real enemies, namely: Satan and his agents (both human and celestial), attempt to sidetrack Christians, to secularize them.

For this reason, Paul outlined for the Ephesians the necessity of using spiritual weapons: truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the word of God, and prayer (Eph. 6:14-18). All these weapons would help the Christian keep his/her mind centered on "obedience to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5).

Conclusion

Although the NT does not directly address the subject of secularization, the issue is already in view. We have seen some examples of secularization - that is, moving away from a religious worldview - and some strategies suggested by Jesus and Paul for avoiding that very real temptation.

At least two of the examples given above indicate that repentance and a change of direction - a return to a worldview centered on God - are indeed possible. Thomas changed his perspective immediately and for the long term.²⁶ The fact that the church at Ephesus apparently improved²⁷ for a period after the warning given in Revelation 2 should similarly encourage Christians of our day that we have the possibility of returning to the Lord in repentance so as to be renewed by him.

²⁶ Church history tells us that Thomas became the first Christian missionary to India.

²⁷ Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, p. 177: "Surely in this milder denunciation [of Rev. 2] we may see a proof that the evil in Ephesus was curable ... The failing can be corrected, the enthusiasm may be revived ... "

We as believers have the same “weapons” as Paul himself had at his disposal and recommended to others. A lifestyle founded on the Word of God and prayer and lived in faith will be an integrated life. That person will be able, by God’s grace, to withstand the assaults of a secular society and any temptations to secularize his or her own way of thinking and acting.

We have spoken here of the individual Christian. The way in which a church reacts to secularizing influences must be by working with individuals within the congregation. By unceasingly presenting God’s truth, the church as a whole will be equipped to be a positive influence in the community and not be overwhelmed by the secularism that surrounds it.

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