

Current Thoughts

from Dwight's corner

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This is Part III of the essay on our mission context inspired by the GRR Mission Conference (e-Current 060125 was Part I, e-Current 060221 was Part II). In Part I five characteristics of our changing mission context were introduced, and special attention was given to Post-Colonialism and Post-Denominationalism. Part II addressed the impact of Immigration. In this essay I will address Secular USA.

Secular USA. While I doubt the USA ever really was a “Christian nation” in any meaningful sense, it is evident that we were never culturally Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, etc. The moniker “Christian” was as much a confession of our Western European roots and Christian heritage as anything. (Part I of this series.)

The growing plurality of religious traditions in America poses its own challenge to Christian mission. Much of that plurality (but not all of it) can be traced to immigration, especially the significant changes in cultures of origin for growing numbers of immigrants. (Part II of this series.)

But there is more to our present situation than waning Christian culturalism and waxing religious pluralism. A large proportion of the U.S.A. is secular—regardless of what religious preference (if any) individuals may claim.

“Secular” derives from the Latin word *saeculum*, meaning “of this age.” However, its English usage is hard to define and is complicated by related words like “secularism” and “secularization” which some writers want to use in very technical ways. “Secularism” was first used by George Holyoake in 1846. For him it described a desirable way of life that was built entirely on materialism and science. Charles Bradlaugh (same era) identified secularism as the true home of rational freethinking.

(check out <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13676a.htm> or <http://www.infidels.org/>)

On the other hand, some Christian thinkers have advocated something more positive in the root word. For example, Harvey Cox used the word “secularization” to talk about worldly engagement in his 1960’s classic **The Secular City**. For Cox secularization was a process (not an ideology like secular-ism) that implied that people of faith “need not flee from the allegedly godless contemporary world” because God is already there as the God of History (the doctrine of the incarnation). It also implied that everything that is called “spiritual” is not good for the spirit. Cox argued that the rise of urbanization and the “collapse of traditional religion” are closely related. He was critical of “religion” in general building on Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s idea of “religionless Christianity” as the goal of every mature Christian.

(check out <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=206>
and <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=1572&C=1513>)

I am using “secular” as opposed to “sacred” or “spiritual” in a generic sense. By this I mean that a significant (and growing) portion of our population is functionally agnostic if not atheistic. While some persons may claim a religious heritage or identity (even Christian!), there is little or no meaningful connection with “god” (regardless of definition) nor subsequent impact on their lives. Others may have a meaningful connection with an “other,” but they have so privatized the relationship that there is no evidence in their behaviors, goals or attitudes.

It has taken a long time to get to the point, but here it is: American churches have grown complacent because we presumed that we lived in a “Christian nation,” and mission to non-believers should be directed to someone “over there.” Today we are surrounded not only by a growing variety of “competing” faiths, we have persons living within the shadow of our church buildings (if not inside!) for whom spirituality, if present at all, is a withered twig.

I believe the spiritual urge within us is God-given. When we suppress or deny it, we try to satisfy that urge with something else. Consequently we are driven by success, greed, status, family, narcissism, “living large,” the pursuit of happiness, etc., etc. The irony is that the American Dream is easily perverted and distorted into a bland substitute for a spiritual life in fellowship with God and others that can never satisfy. We are captive to it not only as individuals but also as churches. There are persons nearby who need to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ and the call to conversion.

One of the products of this way of life is blindness to the down and out and forgot about. To feed our spiritual longings we attend increasingly to ourselves in futility. Christians and churches must wake up not only to the spiritual death around us, we must also respond to the “collateral damage” that accompanies our godless lives. In the aftermath of the devastating earthquakes in Afghanistan last year, I heard a person appropriately asking for generosity to care for the beleaguered children there. As part of their plea this good person said, “children in this country do not go without shoes and blankets.” What an arrogant, misinformed claim! It is not a matter of caring mission over there OR caring mission here. We are called to caring mission in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. The Great Commission is not a multiple choice test.

America is the third largest mission field in the world. (And it is growing!)

