



# The challenge of secularism to religion: A South African Christian perspective

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## Abstract

Secularism worldwide poses great challenges to religion. It is as if the gates are open to reject religion. Secularism in many ways challenges the truth, morality, political power and social value provided by religions in general terms. Secularism also tends to promote a society where religion has no role to play in education or state affairs. In some cases it additionally argues for the separation of Church and state and this importantly tends to limit the vital influence of a religion on pressing social and moral issues. The most important challenge however, comes from some scientists who reject a religious understanding of the world. Evolution is regarded as a proven scientific explanation of the present world. Furthermore, religious books such as the Holy Bible are rejected because of the so-called discrepancies and evil descriptions even of God. How should religions react to these challenges? The purpose of this paper is to explain the main implications of secularism. In South Africa, the religious beliefs of many are rejected. Authors of novels, many influential people, and even some theologians who turned away from faith explain that secularism should be embraced. The purpose was to engage these views and explain how religions should react. The method followed in this paper was to conduct a literature study of the main views on secularism from a selection of novelists and ex-theologians and to engage with these from a literature study of exponents who, largely from a Christian viewpoint, discuss their responses to these views. The paper then evaluated these ideas and views. The implications are that the purpose of religious beliefs is again made clear and that the value of faith in the present world of secularism is established. Although the answers are not acceptable to all, it is essential to engage secularism in detail.

**Keywords:** Secularism, evolution, challenges, beliefs.

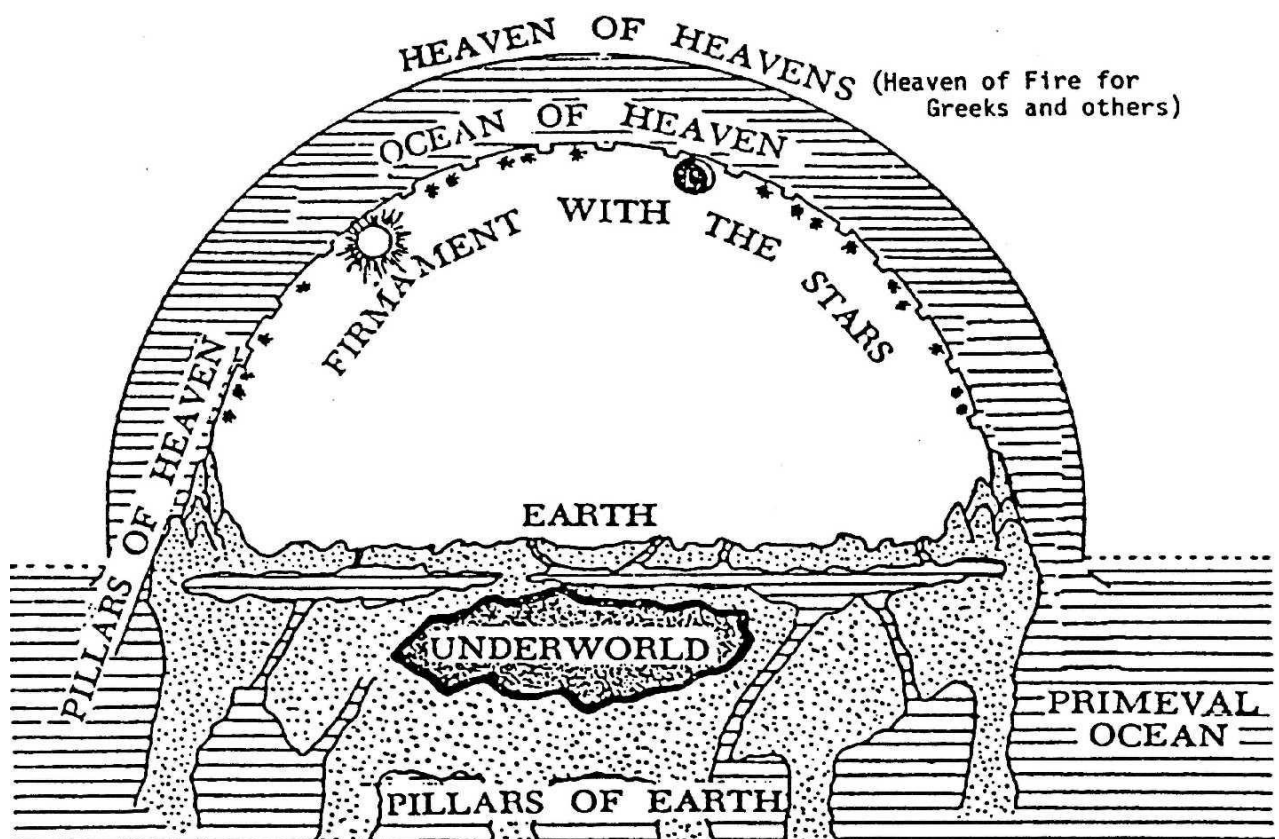
## Introduction

Secularism poses great challenges to religion. It is clear that secularism has a great impact in the Western world. We must understand that this is not a worldwide phenomenon and that in many countries of the world, there is still a strong view of religion and allegiance to religion. We should also consider that secularism challenges religion at the heart of belief systems, because modern science has a new world view and cosmology. To engage secularism, a clear biblical view of the revelation of God is necessary. Humbly, we should discuss the challenges of secularism from the literature and give a Christian response. To engage secularism seriously, we should take into account the premises from which it takes its views. We should thus also examine cosmologies and understand how these have influenced the different world views. Although secularism is a general global view, we also have to take into account that, in the Western world, where Christianity was and still is prevalent, secularism soared considerably. In the Western world, we have to engage secularism from a biblical perspective. It is necessary to take into account the different views concerning these aspects. In the modern

world, cosmologies differ greatly from those in the past. The three-story world view of the past has been changed to a world view in which scientific knowledge greatly expanded. This must be considered when engaging secularism. It is also necessary to consider the views of ex-theologians and authors concerning their views on secularism in South Africa. It is clear that some of them have new views concerning secularism. From a biblical perspective, it is possible to proclaim the glory of God, even in a secularist society. It is thus necessary to engage these views in detail.

## Cosmologies

Classical cosmology regarded the universe as the earth on which we live, and above the earth the heavens, and under the earth the waters and the underworld or Sheol, the world underneath. It was considered that the gods lived in the heavens and that the gods influenced the people of the world from the heavens.

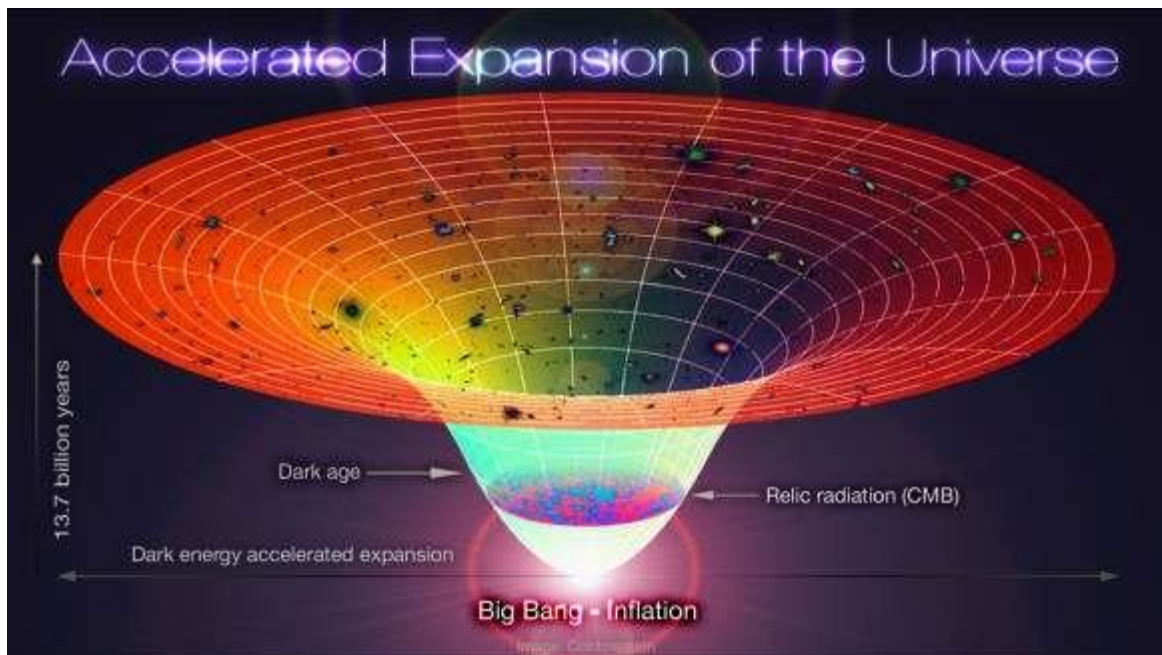


The three-story universe (Gier 1987: Chapter 13)

A classical world view of antiquity was the influence of the gods on the earth. The gods living in the heavens influence people's lives and how they regard their living. Concerning this world view, it is clear that people feared the gods, revered the gods, understood that the gods are all-powerful, and worshipped the gods. In Biblical times, many people adhered to this kind of world view from an understanding of the world. The Bible, however, regarded God as personal, all-powerful, and glorious. The question is: With the enlightenment, and with people understanding the world in a new way, especially in the modern world, with the understanding of the development of the world through evolution, did it make God's existence superfluous? Secularism poses this new challenge.

The question is then: Are there any gods? If we understand that heaven above is not the realm of the gods because we understand that there are millions and millions of galaxies, we also understand that the earth is round, circling the sun, and that we are part of a massive galaxy. Then the question is: Can we still believe in gods, and the influence of the gods on earth? Another question is then also: Should we then not also realise that, in some religions, the biblical view of the world should be changed and we should understand that the gods above and, for that matter, God himself living in heavenly realms, should not be understood as one up there with influence on the world?

This is a very serious challenge to religion when we view the present world and understand how we recognise the differences in the world view of the people of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment has definitely changed the understanding of the world around us.



<https://phys.org/news/2015-12-big-theory.html>. [15 March 2024]

Modern cosmologies and world views regard the universe as so self-intensive that God is not necessary. We are part of the extreme universe and do not need a god.

## Religion

Igboin (2022:6) regards religion as the development of consciousness: “Religion started as soon as a people were conscious of the existence of the supernatural, which they wanted to establish a relationship with.” However, Reformed Christians view religion as the revelation of God. Christians view that God revealed Godself. In his *Institutes* (1,1, 2-5), Calvin explains that religion is viewed as the *semen religionis* and the sense of the Divinity, namely the *sensus Divinitatis*. The belief is that God made Godself known to all. The heart of the human is either aimed at God or against God.

Nelson (2015:284) has a new view of religion: “The justification for introducing the concept of religion (a term that only came into wide use a few hundred years ago) was to recognize that there were fundamental commonalities among Judaism and Christianity and many other belief systems around the world (including some forms of Buddhism that do not have any belief in a supernatural God).”



Cliquet and Avramov (2021:67) understand the development of religion as such differently:

The early appearance of religious rituals among the later hominines, the universality of religiosity in *Homo sapiens*, and the involvement of genetic and neurological factors in various forms and degrees of spiritual and religious behavior all lead to the key conclusion: in the course of the hominization process, natural selection must have favored the introduction and spreading of genes that made the human brain receptive to spiritual and religious phenomena, facilitating the experience and enjoyment of spiritual and religious activities. In the evolutionary perspective, the human brain was selected, either as an adaptation or as an exaptation, to be sensitive and receptive for spiritual and religious phenomena.

We must see religion from the perspective of revelation.

### Secularism

First, we have to engage the concept of secularism. There are many different definitions of secularism. Although, for Christians, *saeculum* originally had a positive implication regarding time, it became a theme of dechristianisation (Grey & Dürr, 2023:7).

Langerak (2022:1) explains:

Deriving from the Latin word *saecularis*, meaning 'of an age', the word 'secular' meant to Christian medieval minds the realm of the worldly, which is temporal as opposed to the eternal matters that chiefly concerned the religious institutions. Religious people, of course, lived in the world, so there was no inherent conflict between the secular and the religious, though believers were warned to keep their priorities in proper order (in but not of the world).

However, the concept of the coming of age of the human being is central. With modernism and the acceptance of concepts of the Enlightenment, the human being became the centre of the world. The gods were only accepted as past beliefs. Especially the political life and the state must be free from religious influence. The influence of modernism in the development of secularism is huge.

Musiewicz (2023:2) explains the following crucial ideas of (Western) Modernity:

Individualization (the individual becomes as or more important than the community), sovereignty of the people (as opposed to the monarch), democratization, rationalization (looking for rational rather than religious explanations of phenomena), autonomy of science from religion, a plurality of worldviews, and a focus on individual economic development.

The religious explanation of the world in which we live is rejected. The gods are not involved. Religion, faith, and the church are not relevant (Gózdź, 2022:359). Secularism also has wider implications: Four principles of secularism are balanced: (1) the moral equality of persons; (2) freedom of conscience and religion; (3) the separation of Church and State; and (4) state neutrality in respect of religious and deep-seated secular convictions. (Modood & Sealy, 2021:2).

It is, however, important to realise that some regard the belief in the transcendent as optional. Harries (2016:101), following Taylor, opines that some forms of secularism regard religion as a possibility, as long as it does not influence science. Therefore, not all regard secularism as



a total rejection of religion. (Kaltsas, 2019:1) explains that Habermas, for instance, mentioned that change came in contemporary Western society, which he viewed as post-secular. Religion can, therefore, not be marginalised totally when we engage contemporary society. Kratt (2023:14) explains that the “common denominator is the rejection of explicit Theism”.

Secularism is not *per se* atheism, although it has a clear link to it. Stenmark (2022:251) explains that there are two options available to atheists: “The two options that I explore and distinguish are scientism and secular humanism.” Josephson-Storm (2018:14) writes:

First, I would like to emphasize that the secular is not primarily a subtraction of religion. Put in Hegelian terms, the secular results from an ongoing ‘sublation’ (Aufhebung) of religion, which it simultaneously encapsulates, transforms and opposes.” Crosson (2018:48) asks the question whether it is possible to engage religion in a new way by having religion freed from “colonial baggage and its exclusionary tendencies.

Vorster (2012:1) explains that, although secularism is not always the same, it influences many, especially where Christianity was the accepted world view.

### **Secularism and Evolution**

What are the general premises of evolution?

When we examine evolution, it is clear that it understands the world as imminent, the world developed within itself. Certain aspects of this development come from how the world developed itself. A religious understanding of the world is then rejected. Evolutionists believe this world comes about from within itself, and the world changes from within itself. This is not because of the influence of God, as the evolutionists and the new Darwinists explain, but it is because of the development of the world from within itself. Therefore, we must understand that to still believe in God up there is a world view of antiquity, and should, therefore, not be accepted.

Pretorius and Lioy (2021:4) refer to the central views of evolution, namely hyper productivity or super-fecundity, variability, and natural selection. Some of the premises of evolution are no longer accepted. Aspects such as the survival of the fittest and logical development are no longer regarded as correct. According to the new Darwinists, development did take place but often in a chaotic way.

### **Secularism and the person of God**

Some, such as Dawkins say, that religious books such as the Bible should not be accepted because we should understand that there are so many instances in the Bible where terrible things are explained and even related to God himself, and that we should also see that differently. Dawkins (2006:137) challenges how we regard the Bible and mentions that it is one of the most terrible stories ever told about a person. In his view, God is explained in such a terrible way in the Bible that he should be rejected. The Biblical God is, according to him, the most unpleasant character in all literature (Dawkins, 2006:51). He is also of the opinion that there are many discrepancies and different views in the Bible and that we should understand that these views should be rejected because of the new way in which we understand the world (Dawkins, 2006:268) Therefore, his view is that there is probably no God, and we should not fear God and live our lives as we want to.



## Secularism in South Africa

In South Africa, a new wave of secularism is presently realized, as noted, in many instances, in the way in which people react to Christian views, Christian books, and Christian blogs. Many people react by rejecting Christianity, rejecting God, and how God is also understood. An ex-theologian of the Dutch Reformed Church, Ben du Toit (2020) recently published a book on post-theism in which he mentions that he has now left behind the faith in God and is now a post-theist. He explains that, in this sense, post-theism means that we no longer have regard for how God rules the world (Du Toit, 2020:168).

For him, it is the experience of freedom to no longer fear a transcendent, metaphysical godhead, power, or energy (Du Toit, 2020:168). He does not want to be regarded as an atheist but as a post-theist, although religion had a profound influence on him in his life. He understands that the huge developments in science make it impossible for him to still believe in God. God is no longer a reality after these scientific developments. There is no good and bad religion; all religions lead to dysfunctionality (Du Toit, 2020:177) The world is immanent, the world is from itself, the world should be understood during its development from within itself, its millions of years old, and the development came without the influence of God. We should, therefore, also reject the old antiquity world view and understand the world from within itself. Therefore, it is very important to understand that Du Toit has a totally new way of viewing the world from a new perspective and not from the perspective of the Bible. He also mentions that we cannot link ourselves to the biblical stories, because these stories are from Antiquity.

Certain novelists in South Africa challenge the world view of the past. In one of the most recent books, *Gebeente*, or *Bones*, well-known author Etienne van Heerden, explains how the religious person has a way of living that is not acceptable.

In the small Klipkaroo town Gebeente, or *Bones*, two people are called before justice because of the alleged murder, slander of God, the propagating of a wrong gospel, and the stealing of the Milky Way. One is called Jisses Losper, the illegitimate son of Altydoopvygie. At the beginning of the novel, his father is unknown. His friend Wolraad Woltemade is also brought to justice. Magistrate Imker Goedeman and the prosecutor Div de Villiers are from the Cape and will proceed with the case. The magistrate and the prosecutor are also very strange people. The magistrate comes from the background of the struggle in South Africa. The prosecutor from the other side. He is also somewhat of a cowboy. Jisses Losper was taken by a social worker from his mother's home at an early age, 33 years ago. His mother was chased from the home of a farmer who was later revealed as his father. The magistrate struggles with the applicability of Roman-Dutch laws in this case and thinks that there should be a new law for the situation in Africa. The story is a parody of the story of Jesus in the Bible and has religious implications (Burger, 2023; Van Heerden, 2023).

An important character is introduced, namely Christoffel de Geest. Burger (2023) explains that magical realism, where dead people are living among the living, has implications for the realisation of the novel. De Geest came in 1883 with a telescope to Gebeente, or *Bones*, and wanted to understand what happens when Venus goes past the sun. Although he is De Geest, "The Spirit", he has implications for the understanding of the novel. The reason is that the past is not completed. Many aspects of the past of European colonisation and other aspects of Christian involvement in the lives of people in Africa should be considered. The problem, however, in Van Heerden's novel is that not only rationalism, but also post-modernism is rejected in a certain sense, namely the fact that in post-modernist thought we cannot criticise. This means that a new understanding is necessary. The novel, however, explains that in this world a new understanding of the influence of God is necessary. Therefore, we have to regard how people were involved in the past with the world, from the perspective of the gods and it should be revisited, especially colonisation. The dangers of the Western view and of the



Western God should be challenged. This brought the end of the Bushman guide. New understanding of the old folklore is necessary.

In this book, Van der Merwe (2023) opines that Christoffel de Geest is the representative of Western-like Christendom. As a scientist, he has great regard for astronomy. It is positive but he does not realise his limitations. When his telescope explodes, he realises the challenges. As a representative of the Christian West, he also let his San (Bushman) guide die; according to some, he shot him. The religiosity of the Bushman could have helped him. His rationality stands in the way. Van Heerden judges Western Christianity. This person deals with others in such a way that it should be rejected. The religious person, the religious example in this book, is an example of a man who sets himself up against the truth of the world and humanism.

When we do understand secularism in this way, we understand that many people turn their back on religion, stating that we can become people within our rights. Dawkins (2006:264-267), for instance, mentions that it is possible to be an atheist and live a good life and have good understanding without understanding that God influences the world. In this sense, atheists are very important to him in the sense that they are the true people and humanists, they understand the world in the best way, and they can understand how to react to the world in the best way. We have to evaluate these ideas, to come to a better understanding and to understand how they should be regarded.

### **Engaging Secularism**

First, we should engage the question of world views and cosmologies. Should we reject the world view of antiquity, and the understanding of God's influence on the world? Should we say that, because there is now a different cosmology, we should reject the existence of God?

The thesis that I want to put forward is that it is not necessary to do that. We cannot say that, because we do not have a cosmology where we understand that gods live like Zeus on Mount Olympus, we must therefore reject God. Even the new world view makes it possible to understand God more radically and wonderfully. We have to understand that God is the wonderful God working in the world. God is much more than living on a mountaintop in Old Greece. God is the wonderful God that is more than God's whole creation, and we should not reject God because there is a new world view, and we have an understanding of this new world view. We still have to understand and evaluate God's influence on the world.

According to Stenmark (2022:261),

[w]e could perhaps say that secular humanism is the atheistic worldview that rejects theism and supernaturalism, which is informed by science but rejects its hegemony and which emphasizes instead the importance of the humanities in understanding human life and its significance, and which — because of that humanistic understanding — is guided by a belief in human freedom and dignity.

Against this view, we may postulate the wonder of a holy God, because of revelation.

Secondly, must we accept post-theism? This views the world in a new way and rejects views of the past that God influenced us. Many people still believe that God influences the world, that God influences our lives, and that God can engage us in this world. Many people accept that God has done wonderful things in their lives and that God is a wonderful God; He is the creator of heaven and earth and we accept him for that. Many people believe that they even experience the miracles of God's work in their lives. Harries (2016:101) states that we have to



admit that good morals must come from a different source, if not from God. What is that source?

At this point, perhaps one of the major observations that should warrant space and analysis here is a sense of disorder and incoherence that have replaced proverbial order and coherence as viewed from the traditional African societies equally reflective of African Traditional Religions as a way of life. (Mmassi, 2013:236).

This means that the need for morals from God is necessary.

Then there is the question of evolution. We must understand that many aspects of evolution should be accepted. This world is not a young earth of 6,000 years as some people of the young earth's intelligent design want to explain. We should understand that the world is an old earth and that there is still development, which we should regard as very important. Developments have occurred throughout the years, and these developments should be considered. On the other hand, we cannot say that everything in this world came about accidentally. Many questions regarding evolution need to be answered. Is it possible that every time there are different developments, accidentally, we cannot accept that God is influential in these aspects? The old Romans had an idea of the falling of atoms and suddenly one of these atoms changed direction and collided with another one, thus forming the world. The question remains: Why did one of those atoms change direction? Why did the atom in its falling and raining down change direction? What about the Big Bang Theory. Why did that come about and why was that a new situation? We should also take cognisance of the fact that some novelists and writers take a different view and mention that God is present in the world, and that we must accept him in this regard. It is also interesting to note that, in many instances in Africa, the Word of God is also regarded as very important. In the African world view, the influence of the gods remains crucial. We should accept not only a Western world view, but we should also consider how God rules over the world. Novelists also link themselves to God, especially when they write majestic poems and other aspects explaining this. Van den Brink and Cook (2021:291) show how reformed theology has, over the years, changed views concerning evolution. From Kuyper's critical view to Berkhof's incorporation, Warfield's more favourable view than Hodge and Kuyper.

Thirdly, it is possible to see the fingerprints of God in the lives of people. Wonderful things can be seen in the lives of some genius people. It is possible to see the hand of God in their lives. Even though they may reject God or do not accept him, we can see the fingerprints of God in their wonderful artistic potential. We think, in this instance, of Beethoven and the wonderful choir fantasy. We hear his wonderful symphonies. We hear the amazing piano concerts of Mozart. We see how the fingerprints of God can be seen in the lives of great artists such as Rembrandt and Monet. We see the wonders of God in poems and dramas, even in the old Greek antiquity dramas of Sophocles and Euripides, but also in the dramas of Shakespeare and even in modern times. We see the fingerprints of God in the lives of people which brings us to understand that God has an influence on the world. But then we must also consider that faith is not a jump into the dark. Faith has a definite link to the living God and understanding of God and how this is possible. This is possible from a Christian South African perspective if we consider how, throughout the years, many people were brought to believe in Christ and in life with Christ. Many missionaries proclaimed the Gospel and people came to Christ and still frequent churches and establish a relationship with the living God! Therefore, we can say that it is possible that, even in the darkest moments of life, God is there and can be recognised.

Lumintang *et al.* (2022:256) write: "Theologians and scientists could play a crucial role in exerting a greater influence on the transformation of individuals, communities, nations, and the world towards a better direction."





Vorster (2012:7) concludes:

My conclusion is that Christian ethics can indeed do so when it is practiced as a religious ethics, founded in the revelation of God as this revelation is given to humans in the book of nature, the written word and the incarnate Word. Christian ethics departs from a position of faith (just as all other ideologies), but provides a corpus of ethical principle.

Finally, the question of the love of God in a world of absolute trouble and danger is considered. We must understand that God is the God of love. The only way in which we can understand that, in light of the terrible wars and destruction in the world of evil, of what is happening in the world today, is by the cross of Jesus Christ and his sacrificial offering for humanity on Golgotha. We need to better comprehend that the love of God, from a Christian perspective, is from the cross of Jesus Christ where he gave himself up for the life of others. The love is so great that in Romans 5:6-11 we read:

6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.  
7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. 10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. 11 More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Romans 5:6-11)

Therefore, against secular and the challenge of secularism in religion is that religion can be understood, from a Christian perspective, as being beneficial to people, because it explains the love of God and the fullness of the love of God so that people can live in their unique personal relationship with the living God. This is possible because God makes it possible. Because God is the living God, secularism can, therefore, not reject the view that God is also present in the world, and we should not be disconnected from the living God.

## Conclusion

Engaging secularism means that we should take its premises seriously. Although not all the exponents of secularism are radical atheists, it is necessary to explain that the challenge to the faith in God is central to secularism. From the perspective of revelation, it is possible to confess that God is still totally a reality. Confession is not anti-scientific but humbly regards faith in God as relevant. This article concludes that it is still necessary to engage secularism. On the other hand, it is clear that to believe in God, especially in Christ, is very relevant. We must proclaim that Christ is Lord, and that He is still Lord in this present world. We must also proclaim the glory of Christ in a secularist world. Secularism should not have the final word in terms of how we engage the different world views.

Faith in Christ is a reality. We can believe in Christ without being unscientific or radically against the present cosmologies. It is possible to proclaim the love of God and the fact that God is the Creator of heaven and earth in engaging secularism. This premise that God is the Creator and that He is the God of love must be proclaimed. It is, therefore, also essential to engage in different aspects of secularism. It is necessary to confess and proclaim our faith in this regard. Faith is a profound confession of a relation with the living God and, in that sense, it comes from the revelation of God in the world. To conclude, in a secularist world, the Christian faith has a wonderful message of the glory of God in this world.



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