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Chapter 1

The Secularist Renewal Myth

Presence and Progress on the Road to Renewal

THE CRUDE, STREET-LEVEL SECULAR MYTH

A growing sense of worry haunts the Western church. The rise of a post-Christian society, alongside declining numbers of those who practice biblical faith, combined with a corresponding weakening of Christian influence, has created an anxious mood. This mood can range from a sense of defeat to a feeling of deep vulnerability to a desire to retreat into a religious refuge.

This mood of worry seems justified by the evidence of decline on the ground. However, upon closer examination, this concern is also bolstered by the internalizing of a kind of crude concept of secularism. Ted Turnau notes that most people are not driven by well-understood and articulated philosophical worldviews: “More typically, people express their life philosophy in what we could call a *street philosophy*,” which is held intuitively, unexamined, but that powerfully “captures the gist of one’s perspective on reality.”¹ We see this dynamic at play in popular understandings of secularism. There is a whole field devoted

to the study of secularism, yet this body of knowledge rarely trickles down to the average person on the street.

The average Westerner processes religion through a crude, street-level model of secularism that is assumed but rarely analyzed.

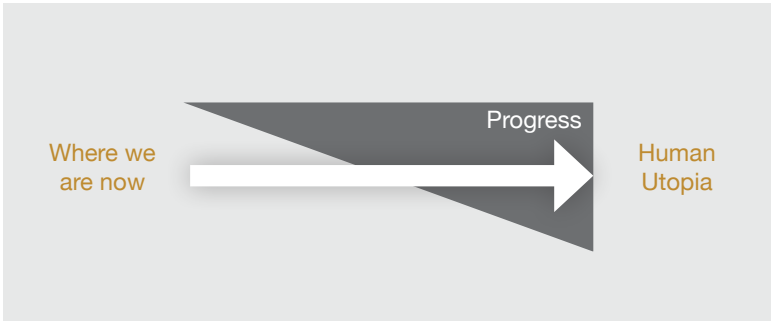
This secularist myth centers on the idea that at some undetermined high point of church influence, the West was thoroughly Christian. It is imagined that at this high point, churches were filled with devoted believers and society was filled with Christian values and institutions. This period of strength is usually envisioned as occurring during the Middle Ages, a pinnacle from which the Christian faith has since experienced a decline. If we were to plot such a crude model of secularism on a graph, it would look something like this.



This concept could be described as a kind of street-level myth of secularism, founded on the belief that as we progress in time, we will also advance scientifically, technologically, politically, and morally.

This model presumes that with the right conditions and influences, humans are perfectible and that a kind of human utopia is possible.

All we need is to be educated, informed, and encouraged to progress toward a kind of utopia.



LEFT AND RIGHT ARE BOTH ADDICTED TO PROGRESS

Contemporary culture has become a battleground between left and right. This argument flows into our understanding of faith. The crude secular myth helps us understand the two great political tribes of the West—progressives and conservatives, who both assume its truth.

Progressives are aligned with what is imagined as the inevitable progression toward social utopia and human perfectibility. Conservatives wish to cautiously apply a foot on the brake, conserving the fruits of Western culture while still moving forward. While progressives believe that more government intervention will improve our society, and conservatives believe that the free market will lead us to utopia, they both assume that specific policies can lead us to a free, fair, and prosperous future. Sure, they may squabble over what utopia will look like, but both left and right assume the progress model. Their argument is over the speed at which we should be progressing.

“spiritual knowledge” as personal and privatized “values.”²

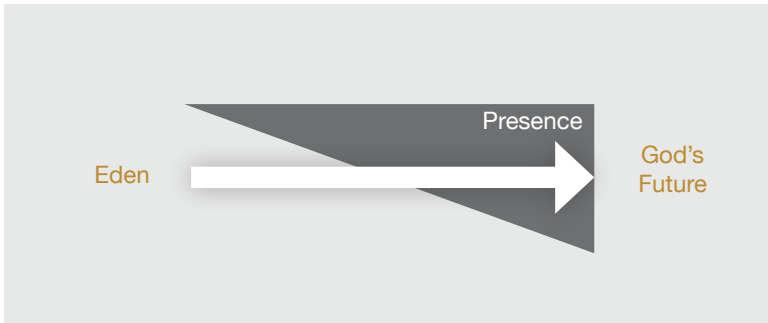
With such thinking dominant among those who control organs of influence in the West, many religious believers assume defeat, seeing religion’s only option for survival in submitting to the authority of the secularist script, believing that the only hope for renewal lies in reinterpreting faith around progressive beliefs.

THE CHRISTIAN ORIGINS OF PROGRESS

Like all great myths, the crude secularist myth contains elements of truth. Throughout history, civilizations have made leaps of progress, rapidly advancing as their arts, commerce, philosophy, and influence flourish. Yet such rises are inevitably accompanied by future declines.

What marks the Western secularist-progressive myth is a religious-like belief that human perfectibility and social progression will continue until we reach utopia.

The secularist-progressive myth asserts that while setbacks occur, eventually there will be an inevitable triumph. Here, the Christian roots of our secularist-progressive myth come into view. This myth mirrors the basic Christian map of reality, with some key differences. The great traditions of the East view history and the world as moving in repeating cycles. In contrast, the Christian view of history sees a linear progression, moving toward a future point of redemption. The West imbibed this linear view. While humans fell in the garden, causing the divine presence to withdraw and bringing sin and destruction into the world, God will triumph at the end of the age with the reconciliation of heaven and earth. His presence will again fill the world.



PROGRESS REPLACES GOD'S PRESENCE AS THE ENGINE OF HISTORY

We can see the similarities between the secularist-progressive myth and the Christian understanding of history. The New Jerusalem at the end of the age is substituted for a human utopia. The salvation of humanity by God is supplanted by humans gaining redemption and bliss through their own effort. The historian Christopher Dawson notes that “what is known as the belief in Progress would often be more correctly described as the belief in human perfectibility.”³ Hence, driven by the belief that we can attain perfection without the divine, faith in God gives over to faith in ourselves. Thus the secularist-progressive myth seeks to gain the fruit of God’s kingdom—such as justice, peace, prosperity, and redemption—but without the King. Here we arrive at a critical insight that we must grasp as we examine our culture through biblical lenses.

In the post-Christian vision, progress replaces God’s presence as the engine of history.

As we will discover, this insight is critical, explaining why so many of our plans as a culture fail. It also sharpens our understanding of why so many of our personal plans also flounder. Looking deeper will also discover that there is another Christian dimension underpinning our secularist-progressive creed.

THE REVIVALIST DYNAMIC

Noting how human culture seemed to progress in bursts and spurts after periods of stagnation, the Scottish minister James Burns observed:

Progress, we see, occurs through revival. Any progress is like the incoming tide. Each wave is a revival, going forward, receding, and being followed by another. To the onlooker, it seems as if nothing is gained, but the force behind the ebb and flow is the power of the tide. So it is with nations. One will rise and carry human progress to a zenith. Having done so, it falls back, and another replaces it. Thus, the progress of humanity is continued through successive revivals.⁴

Burns saw this dynamic occurring throughout human history. He located its origins in God's writing into the fabric of existence a renewal phenomenon, arguing that the revivals that happened in the realm of human culture were mirrors of a spiritual dynamic, in which individuals, communities, and cultures were renewed by the hand of God.

KEY RENEWAL PRINCIPLE

God has written a dynamic of renewal into the pattern of history.

We see this dynamic throughout the history of the church, where small groups of individuals find the church of their age fallen into decline and stagnation, infected by the spirit of the era, heresy, or religiosity. This remnant then seeks to recapture the original dynamism and purity of the apostles' faith. Eventually, this fire catches as God acts with power, reshaping individuals, churches, movements, and whole geographic regions.

WESTERN CULTURE AND THOUGHT IS FILLED WITH REVIVALIST CONCEPTS

We see this revival pattern in the secularist-progressive myth, but it's a kind of Christian revivalism inverted. Enlightenment thinkers, such as Edward Gibbon, looked back to the pre-Christian pagan culture of Rome and Greece in the way that Christian revivalists look back to the witness of the early church, seeing a vibrancy that needed to be recaptured. Many of the philosophical leaders of the Enlightenment saw the West as having fallen into stagnation and decay, not through its embrace of worldliness or heresy, but through its embrace of Christianity.

In the imagination of the Enlightenment, Christianity was the heresy that had caused Western culture's decline.

RENAISSANCE IS JUST ANOTHER WORD FOR REVIVAL

Historian Peter Gay describes the Enlightenment thinkers who shaped our contemporary world as revivalists of the ancient pagan world.⁵ Stephen Greenblatt's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Swerve*, sees the origins of our modern, secular, atheistic, and progressive world in the rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman philosophical texts ignored by Christianity. For the secular revivalists, these texts operate like the New Testament. The rediscovery of these texts created the period of history we call the Renaissance, an Old French term for rebirth or revival.

The nineteenth-century historian Jacob Burckhardt, who popularized the concept of the renaissance, nostalgically looked back to the period, imagining it as the birthplace of a kind of secular golden age that could be rebirthed to operate as a "personal antidote to the violence and discontent of the modern world."⁶ Ditching his faith, he reimagined Western history through a kind of

secular revivalist framework, a reimagining that influences how we view our story today.

REVIVING THE PERFECT STATE

For key Western thinkers, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Thomas Paine, the golden period to return to was not the ancient world of Greece and Rome, but an even earlier period. These thinkers believed that before human society, a pure “natural” state existed—a state in which humans were free of oppression and hierarchy. Paine advocated for “revolutions” that would return us to this pure, primal state of nature, labeling the French and American revolutions as “a renovation of the natural order of things,”⁷ illustrating how even the primary political language of the West contains revivalist concepts.

So, to recap: The West’s crude secularist-progressive map contains a post-Christian revivalist framework, one in which Christianity itself is the heresy needing to be jettisoned before we can be revived as individuals and as a culture. This map contains a healthy dose of faith, built around the belief that history will end with a human-powered social utopia and the potential of human perfectibility.

Yet this post-Christian revivalist belief is having its own moment of doubt.

DOUBTING THE SECULARIST MYTH

The world that we were promised has not arrived. Well, some of it has appeared. We are more affluent, more technologically connected than ever before in human history. Our technological and scientific knowledge has increased. But have we progressed morally? Thinkers such as scientist Steven Pinker argue we have, that the liberal democratic West is the fairest, most equal, peaceful, and moral sphere to ever exist in human history. Yet at the same time, we see a return of tribalism, a growth in economic inequality, and social divisions

expanding. Some speculate that our age will be referred to as the age of genocide. The toxic behaviors of humanity—hatred, bigotry, violence, and selfishness—remain remarkably resilient in individuals, cultures, groups, and nations.

Post-Christianity is experiencing a crisis of doubt over the prospects of its own program of revival.

MIGRATION IS SHORT-CIRCUITING THE SECULARIST MYTH

Human migration and the reality of a globalized world is also short-circuiting the secularist myth. Religion may be declining in pockets of the West, but it is booming globally, growing in Africa, South America, Oceania, and Asia. Declining birth rates in the West are generating policies of large-scale immigration, which brings migrants into the West, who arrive with their cultures and also their religious faiths.

Migration is reintroducing faith into the secular bloodstream.

Studying the unexpected return of religion, journalists John Micklethwait and Adrian Woolridge note a sense of exasperation among believers in the eventual triumph of secularism, especially around demography and birth rates: “From Salt Lake City to Jerusalem, religious people marry younger and reproduce more prodigiously than nonreligious ones.”⁸ For a while, this worry was softened by the belief that eventually, these migrants would secularize as they became immersed in Western culture, and for some that is true. Yet the power of our globally connected world means that migrating to another country is not what it used to be; the internet means one can stay in touch with home, not just socially, but culturally and religiously.

OVERSEAS-BORN YOUNG ADULTS AND FAITH

Research around the values and lifestyles of emerging generations, such as millennials, often used to point toward a more progressive, atheistic future. Yet what is missed is that this is usually only true of Western-born young adults. Evidence of this can be found in my own country of Australia,⁹ which has embraced a vigorous policy of multiculturalism and significant large-scale immigration. Indian and Chinese born millennials, two of our current largest migrant groups, are significantly better educated, better savers, more religious, more socially and politically conservative, marry younger, and have more children than locally born millennials. One doesn't need to be a sociologist to predict where this trend will lead.

This helps us understand why political parties on the right, and increasingly on the left, across the West are becoming skeptical about immigration. Concerned that the high fertility rates of migrants, when compared to the disastrously low fertility rates of Westerners, will lead to a future where the secular gains of the West could be lost. Yet it is not just the dynamic between religion and immigration that is causing many to doubt their faith in the progressive-secularist creed.

ROLLING CRISES

The rapid change in the political and social landscape in the last two years across the world has shaken many. A series of rolling crises are exposing human dysfunction, brokenness, and corruption in multiple fields such as Hollywood, the financial sector, Silicon Valley, militaries, big business, politics, sports, and even the church. These crises have naturally created a response, the search for new frameworks of morality. Thus, new programs of progressive morality are being imposed on Western culture, which has for almost a century run from programs of morality. The proponents of this new morality, however, are discovering the same difficulty that religious conservatives in past eras have been confronted by.

Whether it's from the pulpit or the platform of social media, people resent being lectured to. This dynamic creates an expanding and continual culture war, contributing to greater social instability and cultural polarization.

With the rise of powerful nondemocratic leaders in many countries, liberal democracy appears more fragile than a decade ago. A new threat matrix hovers above the international order.

These crises give us a sense that our progression has stalled, in the face of remarkably persistent human failings.

PERSONAL CRISIS

It is not just at the macro level that the secular myth of progress is being challenged. Our private worlds are in crisis too. We see the rise of anxiety and mental health disorders, falling IQ levels, epidemic loneliness and social disconnection, widespread online bullying, and the persistence of discrimination, bigotry, and hatred. Addictions to drugs, food, technology, sex, gambling, and relationships are widespread. Obesity is rising, becoming a full-blown health issue. In the West, poor mental health is now normative among emerging generations. Life expectancy in the West's two most powerful nations, the United States and the United Kingdom, has fallen for the last three years running.¹⁰ With all these factors in play, we can see how many are having their moment of doubt, for the post-Christian revival seems to be running aground.