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Secularism in the Modern World

Melbourne Conference | Saturday, 31 October 2015

Guest Speaker

Paul Tonson

Conceptions of the Secular From a Progressive Christian Viewpoint

Dr Paul Tonson – *Administrator of [Pathways for Diversity Education in Schools Inc.](#)*

Paul Tonson is a member of the Uniting Church and of the Humanist Society of Victoria. From a progressive Christian viewpoint he practices attentive listening with genuine curiosity. He shared in developing the manifesto *Reclaiming a Secular Australia* – for an end to religious bias and privilege. His PhD (Deakin) explored the tension between inclusive and exclusive viewpoints in the Hebrew Bible and motivated him towards dialogue with Jews and Muslims and other faiths. Government funding for presentations about both faith and freethought worldviews prompted Paul to initiate [PathWays for Diversity Education Inc.](#) (2015), through which young adults engage in conversations with year 10 students to encourage them to explore a range of worldviews. Paul will speak about his Christian faith and spirituality in context to a secular pluralist society.

An outline of my conceptions of the secular, from a progressive Christian viewpoint

I am a faith person in a relational way, not in a dogmatic way; in terms of my stance toward and response to the privilege of life, rather in terms of a set of beliefs. I am a deeply agnostic person in many ways at the same time passionately committed to worldly projects. I am a Christian as a follower of Jesus (or Buddha) not in terms of metaphysical beliefs about Christ or the church or the supernatural.

The language of the secular

Dictionary references indicate that **secular** derives from Latin *saeculum* an age, the times, the world. Secular = worldly - pertaining to this present world or to things not spiritual or sacred eg secular clergy were priests who were free from monastic vows.

However, I wish to articulate a conception that acknowledges the worldly, timely aspect but that does not oppose the secular to the spiritual or sacred. Similarly I do not think of Secularism as 'a worldview that rejects all forms of faith.' The ideological element of secularism to me is the acceptance of a pluralist order, in which the religious element may be present but not given undue power. In short, freedom from religion and freedom of religion.

The secular within Christian scholarship

Christianity did not depend on external critics for an understanding of secularization. Dutch theologian C. V. van Peursen wrote: '(Secularisation is) the deliverance of man, first from religious and then from metaphysical control over his reason and his language. It is the dispelling of all closed worldviews, the breaking of all supernatural myths and sacred symbols. It represents the ..the discovery by man that he has been left with the world on his hands, that he can no longer blame fortune or furies for what he does with it.' Harvey Cox built on this notion in his 'The Secular City: Secularisation and Urbanisation - A Theological Perspective. (1966, Pelican Books).

Cox explores how secular man departmentalises his life in order to survive at work, at play and at home: "The anonymity of city living has helped preserve the privacy essential to human life....urban man...wants to maintain a clear distinction between private and public."

Regarding religious bodies, Cox anticipatestheir removal from all things capable of being dealt with by the state. their true mission "to perform the supportive role of the good things that are happening, and the critical voice against things that are damaging to human life in society, a prophetic voice." He says that: "Jesus did not try to assume worldly power, secular power at all, but confronted the corrupt powers, both religious and secular of his time, from a position, a freed position, of non-violence and uninvolvedness in the running of the society."

Cox's holds that: "The sociological problem of speaking about God is that the role of the people who try to do so places them immediately in a perceptual context where what they say can be safely ignored."

My own conception of faith within a secularized world

The faith framework of thought that I bring to the agenda of this conference affirms freedom of thought, and places an a priori value on difference and pluralism as one of the greatest assets of humanity that we must allow to bear fruit for the good of all. I note two elements of secularity in our world – the political and the intellectual.

The political/power aspect of a secular framework:

In recent centuries the world of Christendom, emerging from Constantine and maintained by both Catholicism and Protestant reformers, has given way to the modern paradigm of a pluralist society. Politically the role of the church has forever changed.

The intellectual aspect of a secular framework:

We take for granted the secularization of knowledge and education. Whereas Theology and Philosophy were once queens of the academy, under which all other learning subsisted, these subjects now take their place alongside others.

The enduring (residual) function of faith:

Given political and intellectual plurality, there remains in my view , a valid place for a faith stance towards the world, and an agenda of faith, namely to discern the unity of knowledge in terms of lived human experience, and to explore and to attend to what is enduring and universal in worldly life.

This agenda for faith was formerly taken for granted in Christendom and led to the construction of creeds and traditions predicated on dogmatic Christian theology from the fourth century CE. In the secularized, pluralist world of today, it is up to faith adherents to develop a unifying worldview in terms of contemporary categories, not to prove anything perhaps, but at least to make sense enough for such a view to be cogently debated.

I identify two characteristics of faith in a secular world.

1) A world-affirming, embodied faith

My conception of faith for a secular pluralist society is first world affirming. To illustrate this I have written a short paper entitled The Urge to Merge – sexuality and spirituality for lovers. The central quality treated in this paper is connectedness. I choose this word as an existential concept, unencumbered by metaphysical conceptions or religious sensitivities. A key assumption of this paper is that faith conceptions of human life, and ultimate values treated by faith, must be embodied. There is no place for a dichotomy between so called natural and supernatural.

The idea of secular is for me not about everything except faith or except the spiritual but about affirming the worldly, the natural in which connectedness and ultimate values and meaning exists and may be known.

2) The release of truth from dogma.

I expect a cogent worldview incorporating a faith stance will articulate truth in terms of metaphor and what is meaningful, motivating and empowering in human existence, rather than in terms of the metaphysical. For example this worldview might be articulated in Jungian terms involving archetypes.

I acknowledge that a conception of truth released from dogma runs contrary to the Catholic idea of magisterium as a teaching authority, and to evangelical Christianity which perpetuates the same notion of a guaranteed, revealed truth that has transforming power for those who buy into it.

In recent decades, this propositional conception of truth has been under scrutiny within progressive sections of Christianity. A renewed interest in the Jewishness of Jesus has offered a constructive approach to this scrutiny.

From my own studies of Hebrew Bible texts I believe the Jewish roots of Christianity can free us from the oppression of dogmatic theology for two reasons.

- (i) Judaism advances a life of faith based on observing the Torah – the ethical, relational element rather than a creedal foundation;
- (ii) The fundamental story of Judaism as Exodus focuses upon the journey of lived human experience as the realm of faith.

The alternative to truth as dogma relating to a supernatural realm is truth known in the experience of journey in relation to the other.

Lived human experience and reflection on the ethical element of our relationships, the I-Thou between people and between people and nature, are the common and universal elements of life that can be explicated only in secular, worldly, embodied terms.

Beyond the limitations of our conventional paradigms

Donella Meadows : Thinking in Systems: A Primer (Chelsea Green Publishing, White River Junctn, Vermont. 2008) is an expert in transformational leadership studies. She presents a list of ten strategies to effect change in the world, such as conversation, teaching, advocacy, direct action. Of ten strategies, she argues the most effective is to transcend one's own paradigm and to encourage others to do so. In part this is a journey in personal identity from particularity towards the universal.

Perhaps the development expressed by Harvey Cox is an example of transcending a conventional paradigm I have followed a similar journey. One might say also that Jesus and Paul and the disciples did so, even if the early church moved in an opposite direction.

Question: on your own journey of intellectual enquiry and cooperative action, are there points at which new perspectives led you to transcend your prior worldview?

Paul Tonson is open to constructive email conversation on these issues via:

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