

# IS REALITY SECULAR?

## TESTING THE ASSUMPTIONS OF FOUR GLOBAL WORLDVIEWS



MARY POPLIN

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## FOREWORD

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**I** am glad to call attention to this book by Mary Poplin of Claremont Graduate University. *Is Reality Secular?* is a challenge, by an insider, to the secularism that is now assumed, with no significant evaluation, to be the height of intellectual respectability and that dominates the most elevated and most inclusive levels of higher education. From there it pervades professional, social and official life in our world, with effects that severely diminish human aspirations of the type that have traditionally been upheld for humanity by education in the Western world.

Mary is a person of excellent standing in her own professional field, but also one with an established voice in the discussions of Christ and culture now going on in America. She is a powerful (and much used) speaker who is already well published. The line of argument she develops in this book is vital for the future of education today and tomorrow, both for secularists and for Christians. For secularists, because just being secular does not provide positive guidance in learning or in learning how to live. It is, fundamentally, a negative stance. For Christians, because they have largely been publicly defined out of the "knowledge" business into the "faith" business. Even in their own view, they do not see their beliefs and practices as contributing to the human need for publicly available knowledge necessary for human existence. Thus they do not compete head on, as they should, with what is conveyed by the academy.

Mary breaks the impasse between secularists and Christians by intelligently reframing the questions that must be asked and answered for thoughtful and honest living today.

Dallas Willard

## Part 1

# IS REALITY SECULAR?

*Is reality secular?*

*Is adequate knowledge secular?  
And is that something that has been established  
as a fact by thorough and unbiased inquiry? Is this  
something that today's secular universities  
thoroughly and freely discuss in  
a disciplined way?*

DALLAS WILLARD,  
*KNOWING CHRIST TODAY*

## TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

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*Don't you believe that there is in man  
a deep so profound as to be hidden  
even to him in whom it is?*

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

*It can be very dangerous to see things  
from somebody else's point of view  
without the proper training.*

Douglas Adams,

*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

In a seminar one evening in 2012 the class was discussing texts on secularism, the doctrine that rejects all religious principles in civic life.<sup>1</sup> I had posed the questions, Is reality secular? Is it true? One of the seventeen PhD students began a defense of secularism by saying, "Well, setting aside the idea of truth . . ." I venture to guess that there may have been only a couple of other people in the room that realized the gravity of what had just been said.

Though I said nothing at the time, this comment revealed in an instant how secularism has taken hold, how far it has gone and what have been its consequences. Truth has become an idea rather than a de-

scription of reality, and it can be set aside even though seeking truth is or once was the sole reason for the university. Not so many years before, this same phrase might have come from my own lips as I indoctrinated my students into these same *ideos*.

Historian Charles Taylor claims that secularism has been the hegemonic master narrative for the last several hundred years in the West.<sup>2</sup> Unpacking this popular academic phrase, the term *master narrative* or *metanarrative* means the “grand story” around which we build our lives, individually and culturally. These stories may differ by culture, language and individual as well as across time. In the last few decades, metanarratives are believed to be social constructions made by human beings rather than truths to be discovered and believed. Taylor explains that the metanarrative that shaped the West in its ascendancy was the Judeo-Christian story of God, man and nature, but that story has been replaced with the “metanarrative of secularism.” It is hegemonic because we are all forced to submit to this reality in public life, whether or not we believe it, and regardless of the fact that it may not be true or in our best interest.<sup>3</sup>

In place of the Judeo-Christian story, the current metanarrative promulgated largely by the Western academy and media goes something like the following. After the Enlightenment, and particularly in the twentieth century, we humans finally matured and no longer needed to socially construct God or gods or any supernatural entities to understand our lives or guide our behaviors. We have now evolved enough to go it on our own, armed only with human reason and scientific evidence to steer the course of progress and break away from limiting rules and regulations.

To hold secular worldviews is considered normal, more “progressive” and “safer” because such worldviews transcend specific faith commitments. These are superior to “religious” worldviews—which are “scientific” or “pre-political” justifications based on faith.<sup>4</sup> Robert Bellah, the late respected sociologist of religion, explains the phenomenon: “The meta-narrative that is really the only one intelligible to all well-educated people everywhere in the world is the meta-narrative of evolution.”<sup>5</sup> He uses the term *evolution* in the broad sense of the evolution of ideas, cultures and religious beliefs.

Secularists have a number of reasonable arguments for avoiding religious worldviews. For example, religious worldview holders believe in a spiritual world not verified by science; they often disagree with one another; they hold to particular universal unchanging moral codes; and they do not limit their understandings of reality to important but insufficient scientific facts about the natural world. Secularism is believed to be the necessary foundation on which to build a peaceful one-world global order—a world that will be run solely on the lessons of science and human reason.

David Bentley Hart articulates the original hope of our secular “faith:

Part of the enthralling promise of an age of reason was, at least at first, the prospect of a genuinely rational ethics, not bound to the local or tribal customs of this people or that, not limited to the moral precepts of any particular creed, but available to all reasoning minds regardless of culture and—when recognized—immediately compelling to the rational will.<sup>6</sup>

Regardless of elite Western culture’s contemporary aversion to faith, all four global worldviews (**material naturalism**,<sup>7</sup> **secular humanism**,<sup>8</sup> **pantheism** and **monotheism**) begin with a faith commitment—a belief outside the reach of scientific verifiability. They are simply different faiths. A naturalist’s faith is that all things ultimately can be reduced to material phenomena, including, for example, religious beliefs, the mind, the soul and consciousness. Secular humanists place their faith solely in human reason as the bedrock upon which to build “progressive” consensus social, moral, cultural and intellectual foundations. Pantheist faith lies in an ultimate spiritual reality (e.g., Brahman or Nirvana) that is the substance of all phenomena embedded in an ever-evolving cycle of rebirths or levels of consciousness.

In the same seminar a few weeks later we had read both the “new atheists” and some form of Christian apologetic. A student exclaimed in a worried tone, “You aren’t going to suggest that Christianity is true, are you? What about Hinduism?” The only honest answer to that question is, if Hinduism is true, we should all become Hindu.

This exclamation perfectly reveals the second part of the new Western metanarrative, which addresses religious worldviews directly, both pan-

theism and monotheism. This new narrative contends that if for some reason individuals want or need some other support system for their lives (outside of secular descriptions of reality), they are relatively free to choose privately from among the various existing religions or construct their own understandings of the "spiritual" outside of specific religious commitments, that is, become spiritual and not religious. These various spiritual options are basically similar; they lead more or less to the same place. More important, these are personal choices for our private lives, not to be raised in contemporary public spaces such as government, law, business, education, arts and entertainment, or public media; nor are they to be entertained when running our businesses and going about our public work. They are optional embellishments that may be important to particular individuals, or historically or sociologically interesting, but they are not candidates for knowledge or truth.

On the other hand, the grand story or metanarrative of the West from the early Middle Ages well into the Enlightenment is the Judeo-Christian story, which was believed to be universally true (and still is for approximately one-third of the world). It is the story of God and "man," who was specially made in the image of God—"male and female" (Genesis 1:27). It was from this place that Western culture began to flourish—intellectually, socially, economically, technologically and morally. It was here that the great traditions of science, literature, art, music and architecture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance Europe were born. The narrative of this grand story was introduced by the Jews to the world around 1500 B.C. (the time of Moses). The revelations were transmitted orally for many generations before being written as the books of Moses—the Torah, known to Christians as the first five books of the Bible. The biblical revelations depict God's character as living and active, inviting us to know him and to know ourselves through him. Also in this central narrative are revelations about the natural world, early human history, the uniqueness of human beings (triumphant and fallen), and God's special provision to redeem humanity and the earth through Christ. Because of the emphasis in Christianity on knowing God, man and nature, monasteries established schools, universities and hospitals<sup>9</sup> to understand and apply the true principles around

which the universe operates (natural, human and spiritual) and work alongside God to tend the earth and its inhabitants—to become our brothers' and sisters' keepers.

Rather than being one another's keeper, the tenor of the twenty-first century often feels to many like one of great strife, confusion and contestation. Well-meaning people all over the globe are deeply concerned about our many contentious disagreements and our inability to find common ground, but few understand the differences in worldviews that undergird these clashes in civilizations and families. Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington, in his popular book *The Clash of Civilizations*, writes that "the twentieth-century conflict between liberal democracy and Marxist-Leninism is only a fleeting and superficial historical phenomenon compared to the continuing and deeply conflictual relation between Islam and Christianity."<sup>10</sup> The new metanarrative about religion, especially prominent since 9/11, is that religion is the primary source of violence in today's world. Theologian William Cavanaugh challenges this:

The myth of religious violence helps create a blind spot about the violence of the putatively secular nation-state. We like to believe that the liberal state arose to make peace between warring religious factions. Today, the Western liberal state is charged with the burden of creating peace in the face of the cruel religious fanaticism of the Muslim world. The myth of religious violence promotes a dichotomy between us in the secular West who are rational and peacemaking and them, the hordes of violent religious fanatics in the Muslim world. Their violence is religious, and therefore irrational and divisive. Our violence, on the other hand, is rational, peacemaking, and necessary. Regrettably, we find ourselves forced to bomb them into the higher rationality.<sup>11</sup>

Oddly enough, radical Islamic terrorists were not attacking Christianity on September 11, 2001; rather, they were assaulting the proliferation and mass dispensation of secular economic and moral norms in Western culture to the rest of the world. Their targets were the World Trade Center towers, the Pentagon and the White House, not the National Cathedral.<sup>12</sup> One of the major conundrums of secularism is its naive assumption of neutrality, an un-self-reflective position that makes

its superiority seem plausible. But secularism is no more neutral than global Christianity, and it has no fewer contestations inside itself or with the outside world. These two, radical Islam and radical secularism, share a good deal in common—radical intolerance of all other worldviews. As award-winning British journalist Melanie Phillips writes, “The correspondences between Western progressives and Islamists are really quite remarkable. Both are attempting to create utopias to redeem past sins; both permit no dissent from the one revealed truth. . . . Both are giving expression to a totalitarian instinct that involves a wholesale repudiation of reason.”<sup>13</sup>

Strangely unnoticed in many analyses is the fact that much of the contemporary upheaval around the world occurs within nation-states. These conflicts often arise from attempts by citizens to import Western ideals of egalitarianism, freedom, justice, democracy, human rights, freedom of conscience, and freedom of religion, speech and assembly, all of which grew out of Judeo-Christianity.<sup>14</sup> Part of the secular strategy, conscious or unconscious, has been to rewrite the history of Western civilization without reference to these contributions. Such was the case in the development of the new European Union. Eminent German philosopher Jürgen Habermas came to the defense of Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger’s objections to the omission of Christianity in the European documents. Though an atheist, Habermas has written:

For the normative self-understanding of modernity, Christianity has functioned as more than just a precursor or catalyst. Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of a continual critical re-appropriation and reinterpretation. Up to this very day there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of a post-national constellation, we must draw sustenance now, as in the past, from this substance. . . . Everything else is idle postmodern talk.<sup>15</sup>

I have a friend who occasionally remarks, “I don’t let that [person,

idea, thought] rent no space in my head.” Would that we all knew what it is that rents space in our heads and whether, when we understood it and its alternatives, we would still believe it. If we consciously knew, we could live more awake in the world. James Sire, author of one of the most popular books on worldviews, suggests that “for any of us to be fully conscious intellectually we should not only be able to detect the worldviews of others but be aware of our own—why it is ours and why in the light of so many options we think it is true.”<sup>16</sup>

Understanding the relatively straightforward assumptions of the four major worldviews around the globe—naturalism, secular humanism, pantheism and monotheism (represented here primarily by Judeo-Christianity)—makes us less susceptible to the strong ideologies (left and right) of the media, education and government of which we are often not consciously aware. Unfortunately, in today’s culture there is often more indoctrination than education in its broadest sense.<sup>17</sup>

As a professor in a secular university who once fearlessly indoctrinated my students (to the left), I am now convinced that for people all around the globe to be well educated they must be acquainted with all the frameworks available from which to think, live and work. No reasonable worldview should be withheld, automatically discounted or ignored; all four major worldviews need to be made explicit. For serious seekers, the truth will vindicate itself. No matter what worldview(s) we may hold or seek to understand, “ideas have consequences,” sometimes colossal and devastating ones, sometimes brilliant and life-enhancing ones.<sup>18</sup>

The fundamental concern here is whether one of these worldviews is actually true. Or does some combination of these worldviews more adequately describe what is real? Or should we look for another? Two of the four worldviews currently dominate the West; they are the secular worldviews of secular humanism and material naturalism. The first question before us then will be, is reality secular?

Philosopher Dallas Willard asks the first of the two most critical questions of the twenty-first century:

Is reality secular? Is adequate knowledge secular? And is that something that has been established as a fact by thorough and unbiased inquiry? Is this something that today’s secular universities thoroughly and freely

discuss in a disciplined way? Certainly not! Nowhere does that happen. It is now simply assumed that every field of knowledge or practice is perfectly complete without any reference to God. It may be logically possible that this assumption is true, but is it true?<sup>19</sup>

If there are doubts about reality being secular, the second question emerges: Is Judeo-Christianity or another religious worldview true? These are the guiding questions of this book as we test the assumptions of the four dominant worldviews on earth.