

Sacred inwardness: Why secularism has no meaning

Perhaps the real lack of faith in modern society comes down to a lack of reverence for the people around us.

by [Marilynne Robinson](#) in the [July 8, 2015](#) issue



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The world is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.

—Psalm 24:1

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will.

—Matthew 10:29

I will pause over the word *secularism* because I don't know how it should be understood in a Christian context. In contemporary use it means the ground gained in society and culture by agnosticism or atheism as religion recedes.

Historically it has meant the dispossession of one religious system by another, notably Catholicism by Henry VIII's Church of England. It is true that Henry won the support of peers by giving confiscated holdings to private individuals, a part of the process of shoring up royal dominance over the church which he and many others

justified on religious grounds. It is also true that during the Reformation, again on religious grounds, Catholic art was destroyed or painted over by Protestants who felt iconography encouraged forms of worship that amounted to idolatry. However regrettable the destruction, this was no more secularizing in our sense than was the Catholic destruction of Wycliffite Bibles. This is to say, in neither case was disbelief a factor.

Secular is a term used within Catholicism to distinguish the world from the church. "The world" has had strongly negative connotations at various points in Christian history, particularly during the Middle Ages, but the influence of the biblical insistence that God made the world and that he loves it seems to me to be very strong among the religious traditions now. Many modern denominations have defined themselves for centuries against the belief that the sacred is especially localized in shrines and sanctuaries, or that the presence of God or of faith in God can be inferred from the number of crosses and pious billboards to be seen along the highways.

Typology was or is one way of understanding and experiencing an articulate presence of God, the Creator pervasively present in the natural world in what he gives us to understand through it. This again raises questions about the notion of the secular, the worldly, as existing in opposition to the sacred. If the world is the Lord's, if it speaks of him, if it is sustained by him in every moment, then, granting the historical importance of the idea of secularism, I cannot in good faith proceed as if it has meaning for me, or as if I find it at all appropriate as a term of judgment brought to bear against our period or any other.

We presume to know more than we can know. In periods and places where religious doubt is criminalized, unquestioning faith is likely to appear universal. Where religious faith is treated as naive and intellectually indefensible, few will confess to it. Where it truly is naive and intellectually indefensible, those who can't identify with it are often treated as having actually rejected faith, and may believe this of themselves.

So let us call this inability to know the state of our fellow's soul a veil dropped down between his or her sacred inwardness and the coercive intrusions to which the religious and the anti-religious are equally tempted. If the fate of souls is at the center of the cosmic drama, is it difficult to imagine that it will unfold, so to speak, in a place set apart, a holy of holies—that is, a human consciousness? Where better

might an encounter with God take place? If God is attentive to us individually, as Jesus' saying about the fall of a sparrow certainly implies, then would his history with us be the same in every case, articulable and verifiable, manifest in behaviors that square with expectations? Would it be something we should be ready to talk about to pollsters or journalists?

Perhaps the real lack of faith in modern society comes down to a lack of reverence for humankind, for those around us, about whom we might consider it providential that we can know nothing—in these great matters that sometimes involve feigning or concealment, that are beyond ordinary thought and conventional experience, and that can in any case be minutely incremental, since God really does have all the time in the world. Perhaps it is a gross presumption to try to imagine a God's eye view of things, but I can only think these encounters, every one unique, must be extraordinarily beautiful. If it is hard for us to believe that the God who searches us and knows us also loves us, perhaps we should learn to be better humanists.

Luke concludes his genealogy with Adam, whom he calls "son of God." Paul calls Christ the second Adam. Our universal ancestor is also humankind, both in our mortal singularity and as a species. Typology in the classic sense might trace out the inverse symmetries of Fall and Redemption.

I would rather think in terms that are not quite so literary, that perhaps extend the meaning of the words *type* and *antitype*. In 1 Corinthians Paul says, "the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God."

This is an instance of the kind of a *fortiori* argument that is so often the method of biblical writers. If something is true of a human being, how much more profoundly must it be true of the Lord. This is a strategy of comparison, asserting that a quality exists in the divine being for which our reality offers analogy, and no analogy. If we know how to give our children good gifts, how much more . . . If, in this instance, the human person is the type and God the antitype, as is also clearly implied in the very primary tenet that we are made in the image of God, and if our thoughts, our spirit, our inwardness, the secret that we are, shares a likeness in kind to the being of God, then they are all certainly owed reverence.

All I wish to suggest is that faith lives in the human world by the grace of God, because of the love and loyalty of God, and in the presence of God, which is free, indifferent to our anxieties, to our categories, and, quite emphatically, I think, to our very negative judgments about the spiritual state of our neighbors. If the churches are uneasy about their status in contemporary society, these are problems for the churches to deal with. Their waning, if it is real, cannot be interpreted as an invidious change in the Divine Nature.

If we suppress that slightly inquisitorial impulse to fret over the state and the nature of belief among those around us, we will no doubt find ourselves inclining toward at least a tentative universalism, toward extending the courtesy of nonjudgment very broadly indeed in deference to human mystery and divine grace. If our presumption is that God's fatherly likeness to us is reflected in our characteristics as a species, our capacity for thought, for love, for generosity and creativity—reflected especially in our inwardness and self-awareness, that haunting *I am* that must be part of what Paul means by the word *spirit*—then exclusivist ideas about God's dealings with humankind are very hard to sustain.

This may sound like a concession or an accommodation to contemporary critics of religion, but it is in fact a very old belief in Christianity, though put out of sight by traditions that were concerned first of all with establishing and defending a prescriptive orthodoxy.

William Langland, presumably a Lollard or Wycliffite, wrote in the late 14th century. In his *Piers Plowman* he rejects the teaching "that neither Saracens nor Jews nor any other creature in the likeness of Christ can be saved without Baptism." He says, "The divine fire comes not to consume, but to bring light. So an honest man that lives by the law that he knows, believing there is none better (for if he knew of a better he would accept it)—a man who has never treated any one unjustly, and who dies in this spirit—surely the God of truth would not reject such honesty as this."

Elsewhere he says, "faith alone is sufficient to save the ignorant. And that being so, many Jews and Saracens may be saved, perhaps before we are." And again, "the Jews possess a true Law, which God Himself engraved on stone so that it should be steadfast and last for ever. 'Love God and your neighbour' is the perfect Law of the Jews, and God gave it to Moses to teach to men until the Messiah came. So to this day the Jews follow that Law and believe it to be the best." I need hardly point out that Jesus agreed.

The popular religious movement Langland speaks from and to was persecuted with great violence for generations in an effort to suppress it as heresy. That suppression failed. But our forgetfulness of the breadth of Christian tradition has almost suppressed what violence could not. It is hardly possible to look at history or at the present state of the world without bitterly regretting the loss of such voices.

All this came to my mind when I watched President Obama's speech at the National Prayer Breakfast and then the reaction to it. He and I are members of the same denomination, the United Church of Christ, which may give me some advantage in interpreting his words. The president made a clear statement of his own Christianity, and at the same time he resisted any suggestion that he made negative judgments of others on the basis of their religion, or that he would define Islam itself as an adversary. If I am any judge of such things, this posture is profoundly Christian. If I am to take the objections to his speech as made in good faith, then I think we Christians have to have a good long conversation about what Christianity is and what it means for the world.

Langland speaks of the image of Christ where we might say the image of God. Here is Christ as the antitype of Adam, our universal ancestor. Our likeness to him and to one another, his great, mysterious blessing on us all, should compel our reverence.

This essay was Marilynne Robinson's presentation at a session this past spring at the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta on theological imagination and secularization.