Politics, parenting, and other secular things we put our faith in

We’re religious about lots of things, says David Zahl. Just not God.

by Jason Micheli in the November 20, 2019 issue

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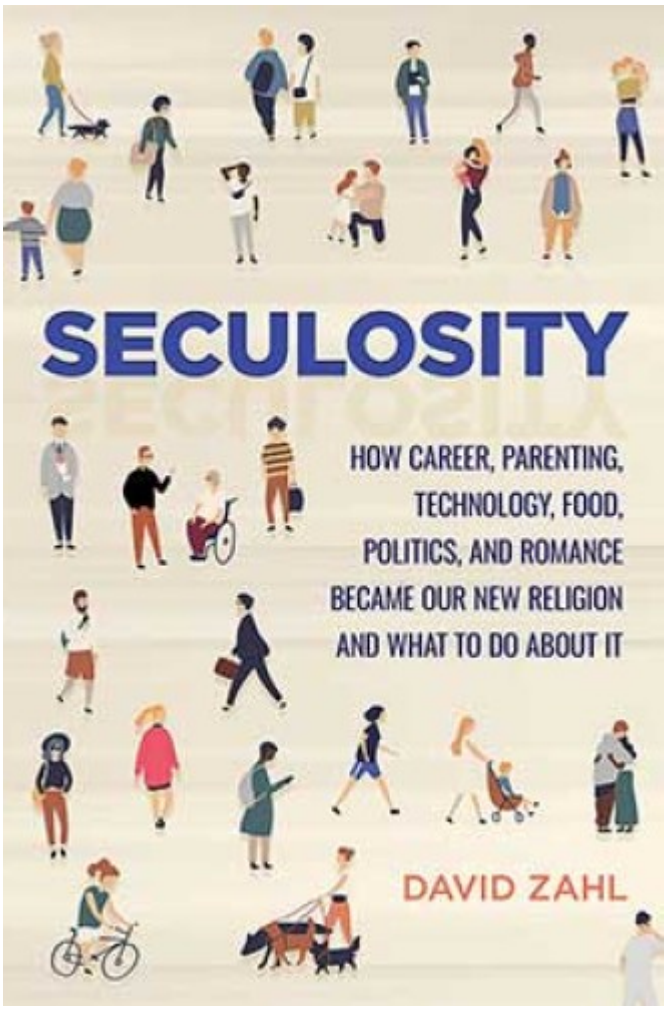

Seculosity

How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics, and Romance Became Our New Religion and What to Do about It

By David Zahl
Fortress Press

Last Halloween I lit some logs in the fire pit, put a chair in the driveway, and passed out candy to the many versions of Elsa, BB-8, and Captain America who crept up my sidewalk. We'd just moved to the neighborhood. Sometime after dusk gave way to dark, a neighbor ambled up to the fire. We'd exchanged pleasantries a few times before. Noticing the bumper stickers on our cars, we'd congratulated each other on both graduating from the University of Virginia. Otherwise, we'd remained strangers.

He offered me a postcard announcing a Dessert with Democrats gathering. "We'd love to have you there," he said, and asked about placing some campaign signs in my "ideally positioned" front yard. When I demurred on using the parsonage lawn for political advertising, he spoke of the stakes come November.

"Thanks, really," I tried, "I'm just not . . . I'm . . . independent."

"Are you one of those *evangelicals* (the word sounded rancid on his lips) who voted for Trump?"

"No, I'm not an evangelical," I said. "I'm just not that interested in politics."

He looked stricken, as if I was sheltering Nazis in my basement or had stolen kittens from children. "I just don't understand," he said, shaking his head, "how a good person—like you seem to be—could not be invested in politics and making a difference."

"I've just got a different religion," I said.

If David Zahl is correct, this Halloween encounter with my proselytizing neighbor is a slice of all of our lives. Seculosity names the religion-saturated culture in which we find ourselves increasingly angry, judgmental, and exhausted. The religions we adhere to are no longer the conventional Sunday morning varietals. They're religions grounded in our stances on politics, food, parenting, and leisure—areas of life which would seem to be secular.

The fact that worship attendance continues to decline and an increasing number of people check “None” next to religious affiliation does not mean that Americans are done with religion. “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God,” said Augustine, no stranger to shifting religious landscapes, and no matter what Gallup finds in its polling, Augustine wasn’t wrong. The restless quest for what only God can give, Zahl shows, continues apace and is expressed with the zeal and fervency of the newly converted.

The irony exposed by *Seculosity* is that while churches wring their hands at their dwindling numbers, “we’re seldom not in church anymore.” The many articles announcing the decline of religion in America are not so much wrong as myopic: they are looking to the places where religion once thrived instead of to the places where religiosity has migrated. As the ability of Christianity to shape people’s lives wanes, people turn to secular activities “to provide the justifying story of our life.”

Justify is the key term. Zahl is not arguing that our convictions about politics or our investment in an exercise class are forms of idolatry, although they may be. Rather, they are activities from which we’re unconsciously attempting to derive our ultimate value. Religion, as Zahl defines it, is “what we lean on to tell us we’re okay,” to impute to ourselves the sense that we’re enough. A seculosity is a religious striving for “enoughness” that is directed horizontally—to career, technology, or politics—rather than vertically to God. Because the religious impulse cannot be quenched, we pursue enoughness outside of the traditional vertical mechanisms. We do so to the detriment of our well-being and that of our neighbors.

A quick foray into any thread about politics on social media will illustrate Zahl’s point. Discussion quickly devolves into self-righteousness, judgmentalism, and anger. The horizontal dimension cannot supply what the heart is wired by its Maker to seek. Ever restless by design, we’re increasingly exhausted by default.

In *A Secular Age*, philosopher Charles Taylor explains the explosion of secularity as unwinding in stages, beginning with the Reformation and culminating in the late 20th century with the rapid diversification of alternatives to traditional belief. “We are now living in a spiritual super-nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane,” Taylor writes. Using illustrations that are both funny and frightening, Zahl offers a kind of detailed ethnography of life in the spiritual supernova, that effulgence of religiosity that has followed the explosion of traditional religion.

The religious impulse cannot be quenched—only pursued outside the traditional places.

One effect of the supernova is that we've simply traded pieties. Whereas our predecessors could say, "I'm baptized," we say, "I'm so busy," and hope that the state of busy-ness is enough to justify our lives. Whereas ancient Christians apprenticed themselves to the saints, we count our exercise steps and Facebook likes to validate ourselves. We don't pray to icons that serve as windows onto the divine, but we carefully stage and edit images for Instagram that will be windows for others to gaze upon a more perfect version of ourselves.

We might not believe any longer in a God who visits the sins of the parents upon their children, but we seem to believe that the achievements of our children will be reckoned as our own. Exhibit A is actress Lori Loughlin, who was indicted for using a bribe to get her daughter into a selective college. The language of righteousness strikes our ears as hopelessly archaic except when it comes to our political or other causes. We're seldom reticent to excommunicate someone who commits heresy against our preferred ideology.

Seculosity shines its light upon on the conditional "if/then" construction of the promises seculosities make. *If you eat organic and sustainably sourced food, then you will be enough.* In the language of the apostle Paul and Martin Luther, the oughts and shoulds of seculosities pledge the very same promise that is at the heart of any religion based only on law. The promise is predicated entirely on our performance. Seculosities ultimately lead to exhaustion because we can never measure up to their ever-shifting standard of performance. They also lead to judgmentalism: the fact that we ourselves fall short of the standard doesn't stop us from pointing out how others fall short.

By the conclusion of the book, readers are in on the joke of the subtitle "and What to Do about It." Doing is exactly our problem. We're busy producing, earning, climbing, proving, striving, and performing. We're chasing our enoughness "into every corner of our lives, driving everyone around us—and ourselves—crazy." The law is inscribed, Paul says, not just on tablets of stone but on every heart.

The remedy is to be found not in another exhortation about something we must do but in the proclamation of something that has been done for us. The conclusion of *Seculosity* is a contemporary companion to Luther's thesis in the Heidelberg

Disputation: “The law says, ‘do this,’ and it is never done. Grace says, ‘believe in this,’ and everything is already done.”

In other words, relief from all our replacement religions just might be found in the opposite of religion—the promise of the gospel. Unlike religions of law, Zahl argues, Christianity does not instruct us in how to construct our enoughness. The language of earning is antithetical to the gospel. Christianity rather invites us to receive our enoughness, which is Christ’s own enoughness, as sheer gift. Our Christian activities are the organic fruit of our enoughness, not the stuff by which we earn it.

Much of Christianity in America has been construed according to the if/then formula. The gospel of grace has gotten muddled with the law. On social media you can find Christians making pronouncements like “If your church isn’t preaching about the border crisis this Sunday, you need to find another church.” Pastors make promises about the spiritual transformation, deeper discipleship, or fruitful marriages that can be gained through the prescribed practices or simple steps their church recommends. The message from many pulpits in America boils down to either “You can build a better world” or “You can build a better you.”

“Whether the goal is personal holiness or social justice,” Zahl contends, “the same dynamic holds sway: faith serves as a means to end, a spiritual method of producing such-and-such result.”

As much as I agree with *Seculosity*, I have the nagging suspicion that my agreement stems in no small part from my identification with its author and the culture he describes. Like Zahl, I’m a fortysomething, relatively affluent white guy. The replacement religions he identifies are the familiar pursuits of my demographic tribe.

We are enough. Our Christian activities are the fruit of this fact, not the stuff by which we earn it.

Being a foodie is not cheap. Apple’s AirPods are as much conspicuous consumption as they are earphones. The boxing gym my teenage son attends works hard to appear authentic and costs a pretty penny to do so. By definition, only the well-off have the luxury of investing food and leisure pursuits with the significance of a religious performance.

I note this sociological fact not to criticize Zahl but to suggest that his argument may go even deeper than he admits. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans that the law

increases the trespass, so it follows that seculosities would function not only as replacement religions but as vehicles for sin. That same letter indicates that an intractable feature of any religion is the propensity of its sinful adherents to make distinctions among people. We should not be surprised then that seculosities grounded in food interests, leisure activities, and parenting styles are not just secular outlets for religious impulses but secular ways to wage sin. They're overt but socially acceptable ways to express how we're superior to other—usually less affluent—people.

If the cultural landscape is rife with religions of law, and this religion surfaces even in the church, then perhaps the remedy is a return to the Protestant distinctives of "grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone." Zahl writes in his conclusion:

> The ultimate trouble with seculosity has nothing to do with soulmates or smartphones or tribalism or workaholism or even our compulsive desire to measure up. The common denominator is the human heart, yours and mine. Which is to say, the problem is sin. Sin is not something you can be talked out of ("stop controlling everything!") or coached through with the right wisdom. It is something from which you need to be saved—even when the nature of sin is that it lashes out at that which would rescue it.

But one problem with the Protestant mantra of grace alone is that it can neglect the formation of a community of people who witness to God's ongoing creation. As Stanley Hauerwas has argued, the gospel requires communities that perform the message being proclaimed. In that sense, performance need not be a bad word.

Furthermore, if people aren't seeing around them a Christian community that plausibly invites them to perform their lives in the belief that Jesus has been raised from the dead, it's more likely they will seek their righteousness in replacement religions. In a world without foundations, Hauerwas says, all we have is the church. To put it another way: in a world after the explosion of traditional belief, we all seek communities that make our lives and our religious impulses intelligible.

Over the past year I've gotten to know my neighbor down the street, and I've learned he's more than the enoughness he gets through his political views. He's a lonely man, and he also values the community he's found in his political work. Through his progressive tribe he's found friends who, he says, "just might show up when I'm about to die."

As every pastor knows, participation in religion has as much (and usually more) to do with belonging as it does with belief. From what I can tell, communities built around CrossFit or politics can be better at building a community of accountability, challenge, and joy than many churches. Zahl, whose wonderful and nerdy first book was about rock music, can probably empathize with how people find secular communities of affinity to be vessels of communion.

As I finished *Seculosity*, I felt saddened by the thought that so many people are exhausted and unhappy in replacement religions because Christianity has failed to be for them a religion of grace. I also felt chastened to realize that some of my friends and neighbors are not unhappy with their new religion at all.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “What is religion now?”