

NEWMAN ON SECULARISM - OUR CRISIS IN FAITH
By Deacon Jack Sullivan

PART I - NEWMAN'S LIFE AND SPIRITUALITY

Right from his earliest beginnings, even up to today mankind has sought to re-create for himself a humanly designed Heaven on earth to replace Almighty God's eternal Kingdom. Hence, the rise of secularism. Unschooled in the essential doctrines of our faith, vast numbers of our laity have fallen victims to religious apathy and indifference, generated almost exclusively by the allurements of secularism. As a result of this insidious ideological movement, the Church is currently experiencing a crisis in faith of unprecedented proportions! But our holy Church lives on and is constantly renewed, in a very special way, by those called by God as His servants to guide, inspire, and revitalize Her. One such a person, called for this purpose was Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman. So many people in Blessed Cardinal Newman's time in 19th century Victorian England, indeed so many people today still seek to criticize the Catholic Church as being antiquated, out of touch with modern worldly realities. The results have also left a devastating mark upon the Church, buffeted by a giant wave of aggressive secularism and militant atheism on the outside, as well as religious apathy and spiritual indifference from within.

I firmly believe that both of these formidable forces, working in tandem are most responsible for our current crisis in faith as seen by diminished Church attendance, and the practice of the faith. Foreseeing the dangers to our Church and culture, which secularism represented, Newman prophetically sounded the alarm. This treatise contains his unique warning and personal message to the modern world.

Inasmuch as orthodoxy is our greatest defense against the modernist or secular movement, Newman once wrote in his battle with the forces of religious indifference, "Religion has two sides to it, a severe side and a beautiful side. And we all will surely stray from the narrow path that leads to life, if we indulge ourselves only in what is beautiful, while casting aside what is severe." Only by engaging in what is severe, can we acquire true faith.

PART II - NEWMAN'S ANALYSIS OF MODERNISM OR SECULARISM

As a Catholic thinker and writer, Newman tried to address the issue of our crisis in faith in our western culture brought about by secularism - that difficult zone of controversy and concern where religion and culture fuse and overlap. Newman anticipated and foresaw so much of what our present day Church is experiencing, as well as sounding an alarm to warn off the coming crisis.

A. Newman's Views on Christian Religious Indifference

Speaking of this crisis of faith, unfolding in his day, Newman delivered his memorable sermon and essay in 1870, entitled "the Infidelity of the future." In it he described indifferent Christians as follows: "Many people are searching for the divine, or at least, some transcendental meaning in their lives. And yet, these same

searchers feel they must be in control and are not willing to allow anyone, not even God Himself to question their values and lifestyles." Newman warned his fellow Christians about the dangers of spiritual liberalism leading to a human, self-designed religion, without firm doctrine or religious depth. He insisted that "God shouldn't be interpreted according to personal and individualistic preference, for divine revelation challenges each person to both accept the divine message, and to live it - fully!" He also criticized the external posture of so many Catholics without any interior commitment or conscientious conviction. He prophesied that this liberal, progressive, secular movement, which was appearing on the horizon, would someday "swallow them up alive, without a firm and vibrant faith to protect them!"

B. Newman's Views on Secularism

B1. Cardinal Newman once said of secularism, "The secular world seeks to set the state up as a substitute for Almighty God." He later added, "Those of the religion of this world try to make life more carefree and expedient for the preservation of human institutions. They indulge themselves in what is beautiful, while casting aside what is severe. They give us no solutions because you can't get rid of vice and wickedness simply by human expedients." To them, religion is merely a value system to soften the impact of the world's harsh realities, or a self-centered ideology for a person to get the best he can out of himself."

But the thought process that so infuriated Newman were the views on subjectivism and relativism espoused by the secular modernists. He said in his essay, *The Infidelity of the Future*, "They teach that there is no real truth or doctrine in religion. It is merely a matter of each person's subjective perception or opinion. If there is no objective truth, then it follows that one doctrine is as good as another. No one is answerable for his opinions, and may safely trust in himself, with no need for Church guidance. They insist that man is the master of his own destiny because of his superior intellect, entitling him to even re-create Almighty God in man's own image!" Newman said of his time, "Man has discarded any notion of the unseen or supernatural because of his religious enslavement to his senses!"

PART III - THE RISE OF SECULARISM IN OUR WESTERN CULTURE

Now I should like to pick up where Newman left off by applying his analysis of secularism in a more timely fashion, as it has had a definite impact on our present day crisis in faith in our Church. Secularism is nothing more than anti-religious worldliness at odds with God's Kingdom. For at the heart of his humanity lies mankind's malignant inclination toward self-centeredness. This tendency toward self-preference leading to self-exaltation gained even greater momentum since the period of the "Enlightenment" in continental Europe. Arising out of the French Revolution in the early 1800's, it was a philosophical movement characterized by rationalism, skepticism, and empiricism in both social and political thought, and directed precisely at undermining religion. Since then mankind, in varying degrees has sought to assume God's sovereignty unto

himself.

In this essay on "Modernism - our Crisis in Faith," I will also attempt to shed some light on just what secularism is by analyzing four (4) of its major component parts, or pillars supporting its ideology. The first pillar or mainstay of secularism represents an attack upon the concept of "Truth," as applied to our daily living. The second a distorted definition of the concept of "Freedom," and thirdly an artificially contrived interpretation of the traditional meaning of "Equality." The fourth and last principal component of secularism is the introduction of what the liberal modernists call the "Doctrine of the Separation of Church and State." Although the title sounds reasonable enough, the words in its title were specifically chosen to disguise and camouflage its true meaning. It was designed to banish religion from all facets of public life, in order to make room for a more secular society.

A. The Secularist's Denial of "Truth"

How do the secularists seek to dismantle, as they must, this vital and transforming concept of "truth," thereby diminishing the quality of faith in our people? Truth, correctly defined is nothing more than God's revelation of Himself to humanity, as spoken by His Word, the Son of God. But so many in our secular world strenuously maintain that there is no such thing as objective truth or factual authenticity outside of ourselves! Truth, they say is only what a person subjectively perceives it to be. It is merely a matter of personal opinion or random choices. As a result, everything becomes relative, with no fixed systems, and no standards to guide our conduct. In a spiritual sense, there are no ups and downs and no fixed measuring points.

What modern man views to be direction is merely based on worldly expediency. Within such a context, our sense of morality and the deadly nature of sin ceases to be of any concern. And each person has a right to determine his/her own standards of behavior without Church interference! When life finds greater meaning and satisfaction by conforming to social convention, then man's thinking becomes reduced to his/her own subjective and superficial convictions. And the less depth the better!

Its practical effects are that this type of society soon becomes dismantled and lost! As a result of this tidal wave of liberalism, subjectivism, and relativism, our culture has deteriorated to a point best described as a "culture of death!" It has left in its wake the senseless killing of over fifty million of the unborn, the systematic undermining of the sanctity of marriage and of human sexuality, and a giant wave of permissiveness which has had devastating effects on both our family life and our human identity. With our identity all but lost, our society has gravitated toward more pleasurable distractions and artificial stimulants to fill the void; stimulants such as alcohol, drugs, and irresponsible sex.

As a consequence of this deteriorating sense of God, the family, and Christian values, we have seen a corresponding increase in incidents of extreme violence, both on our streets and in our homes. Today our public school children are taught the politics of the godless, as the religion of the future! Novelties now serve a

substitute for happiness. Political correctness now serves as a substitute for common sense. Our Crisis in Faith is therefore rooted in our Crisis in Truth! Newman once observed that "Christianity would certainly have been reduced to mere moralism, if no message which surpasses man's thought and actions were discernable."

B. Secularism's Misuse of the Concept of Freedom

The most accurate definition of the word "Freedom" is the God given ability or capacity to do good and avoid evil. To seek to do what is morally right. More accurately, the capacity to both perceive and acknowledge the truth about humanity's true relationship with God and one another. Secondly, to then seek to do what is right by these relationships. It involves the desire, through divine grace to choose the good, despite more attractive alternatives and pleasurable options. The practical effect of one who humbly chooses to do God's will over more pleasurable alternatives is his transformation to newness of life; his transformation into the very likeness of Christ. Only then does he attain true freedom!

Unfortunately, our worldly minded secularists have sought to re-define its true meaning to bolster their own liberal agenda, also contributing to our crisis in faith. Therefore, freedom to the worldly minded results from being set free from truth, set free from Church authority that propounds it, and set free from religious conformity. They say that the Church intrudes upon modern notions of free will and self-expression by imposing archaic rules and moral restrictions on man's conduct and behavior.

In our contemporary culture the definition of the word "freedom" has been altered to justify unrestrained, unbridled, and often irresponsible license for self-assertion, whose only goal is self-exaltation! It amounts to undisciplined and limitless permissiveness in our behavior, which seeks to overshadow God's sovereignty. Furthermore, to the secularist, self-interest is most often disguised as a right, and always undertaken in the name of freedom! This brand of freedom inevitably leads to serious levels of sexual promiscuity in our society. Is it any wonder why the numbers of unwanted pregnancies and abortions have sky-rocketed? Don't these facts reveal why the pro-choice people have become so protective of their ideology? When a person becomes immersed in sin and self-preference, he then becomes addicted to the self destructive and unbreakable habit-forming properties of sin. As a result he loses the element of freedom of choice, by compromising his ability to choose the good. So by embracing his own brand of freedom, doesn't he actually become it's slave? Freedom can never mean that a person can do whatever he pleases, because it always involves the ability to do what he should!

C. Secularism's re-defining meaning of "equality"

The third essential element or pillar supporting secularism is the fabricated and artificially contrived view of the word "equality." The traditional and accepted definition of the word "equality" as found in Webster is a "balance of similar objects, things that are the same or alike." Of late, however, the secular

movement, in order to bolster its liberal agenda has seen fit to artificially refashion the meaning of equality by blending things together which are definitely not the same or alike, as if they were. This major deviation from the norm occurred when various states, at the instigation of many liberal progressives saw fit to change the definition of traditional marriage, so as to include same sex or gay unions. The reasoning was that the partners in gay unions, based on their concept of "equality," should be afforded the same rights as those in traditional marriages. And those who, even for legitimate reasons, would deny its equality with traditional marriages were publicly branded as being unsympathetic, bigoted, and homophobic! They were charged with practicing unlawful discrimination by denying them their basic civil rights! Therefore, many fell into line because of the seriousness of these charges.

The notion of "Equality," on its surface at least sounds good. But at this juncture, an important distinction must be made, with reference to the standard definition of equality. There are many things in this world, which on their surface at least appear to be the same, when clearly they are not! For example, the nature of man and woman. While they are indeed equal in terms of their respective stature, dignity, and value before God and humanity, still they are clearly not the same. They differ in their physical, emotional, and spiritual characteristics. And this is as it should be. Each gender possesses its own essential distinctiveness and special perfection, replicating the image and wisdom of God. In Genesis we read, "And God created woman from man to be his perfect partner." Distinct as to their respective genders, they are joined by God Himself in marriage for life, inaugurating the human family.

And right from the beginning, the family formed the basic building blocks supporting all civilized societies - until now! By saying those of the same sex are the same as men and women in traditional marriages and therefore should enjoy equal status is to defy the laws of nature and common sense! My point is that it is the differences in their gender that sets them apart and makes them different from same sex unions. It is the differences in their gender that prepares their children to develop their own emotional identity and parenting skills. When joined together as husband and wife, because of their differences, each supplies what the other lacks, thereby broadening their mutual horizons, their personal perfection! Distinct as to gender, they are endowed with the capacity to express self-giving love and to pro-create children, in accordance with God's will. Traditional marriages require persons of the opposite sex. Those who comprise gay marriages are limited to one and the same sex! How then, can gay marriages possibly be considered the same and thereby equal to traditional marriages?

D. The Concept of Separation of Church and State

The fourth component of the Modernist's agenda or pillar supporting the structure of secularism is their frequent use of an expression borrowed from Thomas Jefferson called the doctrine of "Separation of Church and State." While we hear this expression frequently today, it has only appeared on the scene in the US

relatively recently.

The First Amendment to our Constitution guarantees religious liberty to all our citizens. Our founding fathers wisely sought to prevent our government from intruding upon our religious institutions, or suppressing our religious beliefs. Furthermore, the anti-establishment clause would prevent our newly formed government from establishing an officially sanctioned state religion, as was the case in England with the Anglican Church. Many came here fleeing from its persecutions!

Lately however, the liberal progressives have seen fit to use this expression of "Separation of Church and State" in a different and most sinister way, to violate and subvert the true meaning of these constitutional protections. Indeed, to use this doctrine to actually inhibit religious freedom - to do exactly that which the first Amendment expressly forbade! In order to give it greater popular appeal, while disguising and camouflaging its true meaning, the secularists borrowed this expression from a letter written by Thomas Jefferson to a convention of Southern Baptists in New Haven, CT. in 1803. Some of its leaders expressed deep concerns to Jefferson that the new government seemed to officially elevate the Congregational Church as its official state religion. Jefferson wrote back re-assuring them that the new federal government would never violate the anti-establishment clause, by setting up an official state religion. To best illustrate his reasoning, Jefferson used this expression of "Separation of Church and State" to make his point, because it appeared to be consistent with our first amendment protections. In fact, he borrowed it from a patriotic cry arising out of the aftermath of the French Revolution, which was being waged during his presidency. And this expression was probably familiar to him because of its popularity among the French, our closest ally.

It actually served as the rallying cry to crush the French monarchy, replicating our own revolution by dissolving our ties with the British monarchy. But, what Jefferson didn't realize was that it also served as the justification to crush the Catholic Church in France, which was seen as being closely allied with the monarchy. This doctrine, therefore was applied for entirely different reasons from those intended by Jefferson! The original purpose of the doctrine of "separation of church and state" was to create a totally secular state and society by first isolating and then separating or severing the Church from the affairs of the state, thereby freeing the state from any of Her so-called "adverse influences."

At the heart of this patriotic movement was the motivating principle of "Laicite" or "secularism!" In a burst of patriotic fury this expression served as their rallying cry to create a totally new secular state. And if "Laicite" or "secularism" was their goal, then this newly devised doctrine of "Separation of Church and State" would now provide the means for its attainment. This liberal, secular movement was initially spear-headed by the recognized French philosopher Voltaire. His rallying cry, "Ecracy L'Infame" was heard throughout France. Literally translated, it meant "Crush the Infamous One," which was directed not only at the king and nobility, but also at the Pope and the Catholic Church. Because the Church was considered closely allied with the nobility, the revolutionaries considered Her an enemy of the state as well. Their strategy was

to first denounce and demonize the Church, blaming Her for all the evils in France. And then to separate, or more to the point, segregate the Church from society, thereby preventing Her from exerting any further influence over the affairs of the state or its citizens. When fully implemented, the Church was not only separated from the state, but was also totally excluded from the domain of all political thought. In fact, its influence was extinguished completely! By reason of this doctrine, all people had a right to be free from the Church's so-called antiquated moral demands. Although it excluded the Church from society, this doctrine did nothing to prevent bold governmental intrusions into its religious practices. Because the Church was considered an enemy of France, serious reprisals were justified for "the people's protection." And this doctrine of separation of Church and state soon became established law in France!

When applied, thousands of clergy and religious lost their lives for rejecting the compulsory oath to the new government, called "The First Republic." It then withdrew recognition of all the Catholic universities. All religious orders were commanded to recognize the new government or face dissolution. All religious instruction in public schools was suppressed and most churches and monasteries were burnt to the ground, And all religious signs and symbols were forbidden. "Laicité" or secularism is still robustly proclaimed even up to this day by many French politicians.

When the state assumed mastery and sovereignty over the Church, it necessarily had to assume its role as the people's new provider and social guardian. The state would now provide for all the humanitarian needs of its people, especially the poor and disenfranchised in society. So out of the secularist movement, the principles and ideology behind "socialism" or the "welfare state" were born. Aren't we witnessing this same thought process today? Which leads us to the obvious question whether these charitable concerns of the state should be best left to our churches and charitable organizations generally to avoid an environment of dependency and ultimate subjugation?

These radically secular, liberal views spread rather quickly throughout all the rest of Europe. And this anti-clerical philosophy soon found its way to the US in the early 60's, together with its closely guarded, secret ideology! Therefore, is it any wonder that our modern-day secular progressive remains steadfast in terms of applying this same definition of separation of Church and state, as he did in 19th century France? True to its founding principles, it still proclaims that religious institutions must be excluded from the affairs of the state, thereby preventing any moral criticism thereof. But that directive still does not preclude the state from making serious and bold incursions into Church practices, thereby subordinating the Church to the interests of the state. We have recently witnessed this device effectively deployed, depriving the Catholic Church as well as other religious institutions from exercising their God-given rights and constitutionally protected religious freedoms! These governmental incursions began with state funded abortions. Then banning of school prayer or other religious displays, even assailing the statement "under God" in our pledge of allegiance. Recently the Department of Health and Human Services

required that all religious institutions including the Catholic Church provide coverage for contraception, sterilization, and abortive drugs in their private health care plans. As of late, many people of good will and religious conviction have become well defined targets of their anti-religious hostility!

Another glaring example of secular, anti-God intrusions occurred when the memorial to Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was erected on the National Mall in Washington, DC. It contained 14 inscriptions of his most famous quotations. And not one of them contained any reference to God. Can you just imagine how difficult it must have been for it's designers to find 14 quotes from Dr. King without any reference to the Almighty? Ironically, just a few feet away on the Jefferson Memorial we read, "Can the liberties of a nation be considered secure, when we have removed any conviction that these liberties are a gift to us from God?" The importance of religious liberty in the minds of all Americans, which the first amendment sought to protect was underscored in George Washington's farewell address, "Religious worship and the practice of Christian morality which flows from it are the 'Indispensable Supports' to our political prosperity." He also warned us that "reason and experience doth forbid us to expect that national morality can be retained without religion!" When they banished religion from the public domain, didn't they also expel any sense of morality and accountability as well? Subsequently, John Adams was quoted as saying, "A truly successful representative government can survive only when its citizens are both well informed and firmly grounded in religious principles!"

PART IV. - Conclusion

Newman once said of his time, "Man has discarded any notion of the unseen or supernatural because of his religious enslavement to his senses!" Unfortunately, without the defense of authentic faith and firm doctrine on the part of many Catholics, this worldly ideology has successfully compromised both the Church and our culture. Newman suggested that Christianity has found itself in a life/death struggle with secular, anti-religious forces on the one hand, and so many indifferent Catholic Christians on the other. Both movements he called the "great multi-headed beast." (symbol of Satan in the Book of Revelation) The Church, Newman wrote, "Ought to combat the spirit of Modernism by making use of its "infallible teaching authority" to throw back the immense energy of the ARROGANT, CAPRICIOUS, AND UNTRUSTWORTHY INTELLECT." The problems Newman encountered in the Church of his day are still very much with us today, leaving our western civilization plummeting in steady decline because these problems remain largely unaddressed and therefore, unresolved! Finally, it was Cardinal Newman, living in 19th century Victorian England, who was the first to witness this dark, menacing figure of secularism appearing on the horizon. His essay, "The Infidelity of the future" from which this treatise was inspired, represents Bl. John Henry Cardinal Newman's "Precious Gift of Untold Value" to our modern world.

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August 15, 2012