

1

The New Secularism

First Thesis: Since the old programme of secularism has run aground, I propose a new secularism that sees the entwinement of religion and secularism as necessary and beneficial, that reads the Bible in light of theological suspicion, denounces the abuse of the Bible, and fosters liberating readings and uses.

This chapter explores what the first thesis means in some detail. It sets up the context for rescuing the Bible in terms of the collapse of the old secularism, the false hopes of ‘post-secularism’, and the possibilities of what I call the new secularism.

Introduction

In late 1999 I taught a class entitled ‘Culture, Religion and Spirituality’. Such a course had never been taught before at this particular place, the University of Western Sydney, but at the first class the students flooded in and I found myself with more than I could handle. In particular, there were two surprises in store for me. The first was more personal: I suddenly realized that I had slipped into another generation, for these students were the age of my eldest children. The true meaning of those things I had been denying, such as the wombat nose, sprouting ears, and an increasing chrome dome, was now revealed to me.

The New Secularism

More importantly, however, was the fact that virtually none of the students in the course would admit to being religious. If they were anything, it was spiritual. No one, apart from a stray fundamentalist or two that had wandered into the class by mistake, read their Bibles. But they read and did a great many other things. There was the Satanist who gave a tutorial telling us how nice Marilyn Manson really is. Or the sports freak, who told us she felt spiritual when her stomach muscles ached from too many sit-ups. Then there were the crystals passed around another tutorial group; ‘feel how warm they are’, we were instructed, as we heard how they help calm and orient oneself in the morning. In another tutorial, a student told us about the spirituality of the *Matrix* films, showing snippets of the film from a badly pirated copy that must have been made with a hand-held camera in the cinema. Perhaps my favourite was a presentation, held off until the last day and given a little nervously. After a last drag on a menthol cigarette the student pulled a pile of books out of his bag in order to bolster his position. He then proceeded to explain – with abundant ‘proof’ – how all the great religious leaders were actually from a superior civilization that happened to live on one of the comets that passed the Earth every few centuries. Moses, Zoroaster, Jesus, Mohammed and the Buddha had all leapt to earth for a time, passed on their wisdom recorded in the various scriptures, and then rejoined their galactic home as it moved on. When I asked him how they had managed that small problem of leaping through space onto Earth and back again, the reply was disarmingly simple: they are superior to us, aren’t they?

My experience with this class raises in an acute form the topic of this chapter: the relation of the Bible to secularism, post-secularism and what I will call the ‘new secularism’. In particular, the question I faced was why it had become perfectly acceptable, cool even, to be spiritual. It was certainly not what I had assumed was the status quo: not that long ago, if you showed a tendency to meditate and hum the sacred syllable, ‘om’, or if you actually went to church and read the Bible, you were a ‘weirdo’, part of a fading minority, and definitely not cool. What had changed? I wondered. Why was secularism on the retreat after a century and a half of a somewhat rocky march forward?

So in the chapter that follows I need to make a detour through the issues of secularism and post-secularism before returning in the second half to consider the impact of these developments on the Bible and how it might be read.

The Paradoxes of Secularism

As for my discoveries in the ‘Culture, Religion and Spirituality’ course, I soon found a term for the development of all manner of spiritualities, a development that had somehow escaped me, trapped as I was at the time in an insular church-based theological college. It is post-secularism. But before I discuss that, a few words on secularism are in order. Although I am usually wary of etymologies that trace the meaning of a word back to its Latin or Greek origin, occasionally the exercise is useful. ‘Secularism’ derives from the Latin term *saeculum* (adjective, *saecularis*); it means an age, a generation, or the spirit of the age. The basic meaning of secularism (it was coined by George Holyoake around 1850 after a short stint in prison for blasphemy) draws from this Latin sense; *it designates a system of thought, indeed a way of living that draws its terms purely from this age and from this world.* That is the positive sense of the term. Of course, it has an implied negative, namely that secularism does not draw its reference point from something beyond this world, whether that is a god or the gods above, or a time in the future, or indeed a sacred text such as the Bible that talks about both.¹

If secularism designates a certain way of living and thinking, then its related term – secularization – deals with the process by which secularism comes about. More specifically, secularization is the long process in which the key reference points for the everyday workings of a capitalist society focus on this age and this world and not any world beyond. With a few bumps and hiccoughs on the way, secularization has generally been understood as an inexorable process. One by one, social assumptions concerning everything from sexuality to food have been shifting their focus away from religious authority.

The New Secularism

These are the basic senses of secularism and secularization with which I work. However, there are some derivatives or secondary features of these terms that I will discuss briefly: secularism as an anti-religious programme; the nature of intellectual inquiry, especially biblical studies; and the separation of Church and state. Most significantly, I want to highlight the fact that each secondary feature has a number of problems and paradoxes. Finally, I consider the paradox of secularization itself.

Anti-religious secularism

The problem with a term such as secularism is that its sense has slipped to mean anything that is opposed to supernatural religion. Secularism then becomes another word for atheism. This slippage and confusion of the term was made quite clear to me in the story of a now distant friend. He had been appointed as the inaugural lecturer in studies in religion at a rural university. On enrolment day, he dutifully took up his seat in the enrolment hall, seeking to enlist the odd student who wanted to take his only course for that year, 'An Introduction to Religious Experience'. In a few minutes, a stout grey-bearded lecturer from another discipline walked up to his desk and boomed out so that all could hear, 'Are you the new religious studies lecturer?' My friend replied in the affirmative. 'Are you religious?' asked the other lecturer. This time the reply was negative. 'I don't believe you', said the man. 'This studies in religion you're supposed to teach – it's just a cover for religious proselytizing. Religion has no place in a secular university'. The other lecturer thumped off to his desk as my friend pondered what he had walked into.

This bearded lecturer had made the popular confusion of secularism with a non-religious or indeed an anti-religious stance. However, we can distinguish this sense – the anti-religious one – from the basic sense of secularism rather easily. If secularism means a system of thought and a way of life that is based in this world and this age, then the anti-religious sense is derivative and not crucial to its meaning.² The catch is that too often implications like this one are understood to be *the* meaning of secularism. Yet the anti-religious position

The New Secularism

may follow from secularism, it may even be an implication of it, but it is secondary to the meaning of secularism itself. Too soon problems arise with the anti-religious position. If we take such a position, then secularism becomes confused with atheism, which is itself a religious position. It is an old point, but the denial or rejection of a god or gods would not be possible if there were no religions. Formally, atheism is no different from the many other religious commitments one might make.

Further, there are a good many people who are religious secularists and who see no contradiction in holding both religion and secularism together. What they mean by this is that secularism is the basis for religious tolerance, arguing that secularism was an effort to deal with the religious conflict between Roman Catholics and Protestants in Europe. No one religion should lord it over another, and the only way to ensure such tolerance is to insist on a secular society that favours none. Again, this is an implication or one of the outcomes of the basic sense of secularism.

Biblical studies

As far as intellectual disciplines are concerned, secularism means that they must operate in a secular manner. Here the catchwords are 'science' and 'reason'. A discipline is 'scientific' and operates according to principles of 'reason' if it makes use of evidence and develops its hypotheses and theories on the basis of such evidence, not on any divine revelation. As for the Bible, even theology and biblical studies must be scientific in order to be disciplines of any value. One still hears claims that biblical studies is a scientific discipline, concerned with the hard data of textual manuscripts, history, archaeological artefacts and other sundry pieces. Indeed, some claim that biblical studies has been a secular discipline for well over a century, and that this tradition is well worth fighting for over against the return of faith-based readings. What is meant by this claim is that when biblical scholars deal with the history of the text – its gradual development into the final text we have now – and the history behind the text, or indeed

The New Secularism

the history of interpretation of the text, they do not count divine forces or influences as viable historical categories. God or the gods are matters of faith and not scholarship.

At this point we really face a paradox, if not outright schizophrenia: a good many, if not the majority, of biblical scholars carry out their secular 'scientific' research to the exclusion of matters of religious faith. Yet a good many of them also attend a church or synagogue at the weekend. To top it off, the students they teach, whether in secular universities or in theological colleges, are often training for some form of ministry. This is an old paradox, and I am not the first to point it out: many biblical scholars live double lives, one of secular scholarship and the other of a personal life of faith, and never the twain shall meet. This contradiction may take a number of forms: in Europe we find secular theology faculties in the state universities, engaged in scientific research, who train people in secular biblical studies to be priests and ministers. In the United States, where such theology faculties cannot exist in state universities, but where 'divinity schools' operate in many private universities, many biblical scholars try to keep their objective scholarship separate from their personal lives of faith. And in Australia, where most biblical studies is taught in theological colleges, the biblical studies lecturer will move from teaching, for example, the theory of various sources for the Gospels, to preaching from the same Gospels at the weekly chapel service. Nothing to my mind shows how much the old programme of secularism is flawed. In light of this schizophrenic situation, it has become a commonplace to assume, especially by those outside biblical studies, that the proper place for biblical studies is a theological college or theology department.

Church and state

A further troubled derivative of secularism is the separation of Church and state. Perhaps the most discussed version of such a separation may be found in the United States, where the relevant section of the first amendment to the Constitution reads: 'Congress shall make no

The New Secularism

law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof'. Initially a response to the established Church of England, especially after the American War of Independence, it has come to be interpreted as any act by the Congress and the legislature that favours one religion over another with the possible outcome that such a religion may become established. In practice, this really means Christianity and shows up with monotonous regularity in the area of state-funded education. The Bible is not to be taught, prayer is not appropriate and one cannot teach religious doctrines in state schools. As we will see in Chapter Four, a major area of conflict in state education in the USA concerns the efforts to have 'intelligent design' taught as a scientific alternative to evolutionary theory. The proponents of intelligent design keep coming up against the First Amendment; the courts keep deciding that intelligent design is a religious, not a scientific, theory, and therefore has no place in public schools. As a result, the First Amendment has come to be interpreted as an effort to restrict the promotion of religion by the state.

However, in the United States the separation of Church and state has become something of a legal fiction. The more strictly the courts apply the First Amendment, the more pervasive religion becomes in public life. An external observer cannot help noticing that religion saturates public life in the USA: the founding myth of the escape from oppression to a land of freedom is drawn from the story of the Exodus and the Promised Land; presidents must be openly Christian, they make decisions with religious concerns in mind, most recently on the questions of sex education and stem-cell research; voting patterns follow religious lines, and, especially in the Bible Belt, there is a sharp polarization over religion. One is either passionately Christian or passionately atheist.

I am tempted to argue for an equation: the sharper the separation between Church and state, the more the two mingle with each other. The obverse of this equation may be found in the countries that do have an established church, such as Denmark, Sweden, Norway and England, where we find that secularism is far advanced indeed. However, this equation doesn't hold in all situations, as France shows

The New Secularism

all too clearly. With its doctrine of *laïcité*, the separation of Church and state in France is much more deeply entrenched. The government must not support any religious position, including atheism. The First Article of the French Constitution reads: '*La France est une République, unie, indivisible, laïque et sociale*'. Indeed, it is distinctly un-French to display one's religion openly, especially if one is a politician or public servant. Yet a problem, and controversial one at that, has arisen in France: that of the *hijab* (literally 'modesty'), a covering or veil, worn by Muslim women. In line with the principle of *laïcité*, the French government passed a law on 15 March 2004 that bans overtly religious dress and signs in public or state-run schools. These items include Sikh turbans, Christian crosses, Jewish skullcaps and of course the *hijab* for Muslim women, or more specifically the *khimer* or headscarf that some Muslim women wear. While the law does not state what items of clothing or signs are to be banned, the timing suggests that the issue that sparked the law was the *hijab* or *khimer*. This has become an impossible issue to resolve: allowing the *hijab* would be an exercise of religious toleration and freedom; banning the *hijab* confirms the non-religious nature of French public institutions. Both positions are consistent with the separation of Church and state, and yet both cannot exist together.

I am about to move onto the third derivative of secularism, namely the process of secularization, but there is one last example of the paradox concerning the separation of Church and state I would like to raise – Turkey. Ever since Atatürk, the first President of the Republic of Turkey, disestablished Islam as the state religion in 1924, the separation of Church and state has been fundamental in Turkey. Government departments and employees, including schools and universities, must operate without influence from the Sunni Muslim majority. Yet in Turkey the paradox I have been tracing shows up in a different way. Under the auspices of the Department of Religious Affairs, Islam is watched closely: while the state supports mosques through taxes and subsidies, the content of sermons, statements and views must avoid political content, and, as in France, all female state employees are banned from wearing the *hijab*. The state also restricts any independent

The New Secularism

religious communities and religious schools. What we have here is a situation analogous to the established church in some western European countries, and yet that recognition, even to the point of providing state funds, is a means of ensuring that Islam and its institutions do not interfere in the political realm. It is an ingenious if highly paradoxical solution.

Secularization

My last search for paradoxes is with secularization itself – the historical process in which the life in capitalist society has shifted its points of reference to this world and not any world beyond. Of course, the nature of this historical process is hotly debated, but what I find intriguing is that even in the most secularized societies, there has been a sharp recovery of the idea that ‘Western’ society is based on biblical and Christian values, that the Bible is its founding document, if you will. I am saying nothing new by pointing out that this recovery has much to do with the perceived threat of Islam. Confident, robust and open societies across Western Europe once brought in workers from the Middle East, most of them Muslims, to do the jobs that no-one else wanted to do. These people settled, brought their families, had children, and today the countries that first actively encouraged these immigrants have become fearful. Now, I have little sympathy with the fear of a so-called ‘terrorist’ attack, since I have about as much chance of being knocked off my bicycle or being stung to death by a bee as I have of dying in a bomb attack. The threat may be largely a fiction, but the fear is real – even if it is the manifestation of a host of other fears such as climate change or economic collapse. And in response to that fear we find assertions of the essentially Christian nature of the West by people who have not had a religious thought or feeling from the moment they were born.

At one level, this reassertion of the Christian roots of the West is a statement of the obvious. Indeed, another version of secularization is that it involved the gradual process of emptying the theological content from central ideas, such as justice, love, authority and community, and

The New Secularism

refilling them with a secular content. Justice is then not based on the Ten Commandments but on the needs of human beings to live together (respecting private property of course); love is not a divine quality that Jesus commands in the New Testament but a necessary human process for reproduction, and so on. What has happened then is that the recovery of the idea of a Christian West is a recovery of the half-forgotten basis of Western society. Secularization becomes a veneer for a deeper Christian – or as some like to call it, a Judaeo-Christian – heritage. The story is all too familiar: the Ten Commandments are the basis of the rule of law, respect for private property and for one's parents; the command of Jesus to love your neighbour as yourself, as the second greatest commandment, is the basis for human society, of which the Church is the ideal; the call to follow Jesus is the basis of the idea of a vocation or calling to a profession; and so on and so on.

This recovery is but the first sign of a contradiction at the heart of secularization. The second is that the very idea of a 'Christian West' is a fantasy that has been perpetuated for hundreds of years on the basis that the West is different from the East, especially the Muslim East. That fantasy trades on the idea that 'the West' was somehow established by the widely perceived fear of Islam (or rather, the Turks) throughout the Middle Ages. Rather, the West is unimaginable without Islam, for the idea of 'the West' began with the expulsion of what made it possible in the first place: the Moors in Spain in the fifteenth century. Several million Muslims and Jews were either forced to convert to Catholicism, or flee, in a programme that would now be called ethnic cleansing. Even so, hundreds of thousands of resolutely Catholic *Moriscos* – 'Spaniards' of (mixed) Muslim ancestry – were expelled as well, including priests, monks and nuns. The capture of the last Muslim outpost of Grenada in the auspicious year of 1492 marks the beginning of a long process by which Europe appropriated Muslim learning, dragged itself out of an intellectual and cultural backwater, and identified itself as Christian and West. Today, the more the ruling classes try to marginalize and demonize Islam, the more it becomes clear that the West relies on Islam for its very identity (see further Boer and Abraham in press).

Conclusion

So much for secularism and secularization: I have done enough to show that it is riven with problems and paradoxes. In fact, I would suggest that the old programme of secularism is deeply flawed. The paradox of anti-religious secularism is that it is a religious position; the separation of Church and state seems to produce a whole range of unofficial involvements of the state in religion; the development of an apparently scientific biblical studies leads to a scholarly paradox; and in the midst of the process of secularization we find a contradictory assertion that secularized Western societies are in fact Christian societies, which is itself a fantasy that conceals the Muslim roots of the Christian West. What are we to do? Do we just give in and admit that it is well-nigh impossible to separate the secular and the religious, the scientific and the biblical?

Post-secularism

I would suggest that we need to think about secularism rather differently. The problems I have outlined above do not mean the end of secularism as such, or at least that secularism is a sham. Rather, the critical perspective on secularism that I have outlined briefly is a sign of something rather different, namely what is increasingly called post-secularism. I want to emphasize two features of this post-secularism: the first is the reassessment and critical perspective on secularism, especially the realization that secularism really is the flip side of religion; the second is the explosion of a host of spiritualities and, more lately, religion itself.³ In other words, the 'post' of post-secularism has both critical and historical senses. Since I have discussed the critical sense of post-secularism in the preceding section, here I will focus on the second, more historical dimension.

Let me go back to my class on 'Culture, Religion and Spirituality' where I came to terms with my advancing years and the new spiritualities sprouting up everywhere. These were students in a secular

The New Secularism

university, one that has no formal programme in theology, let alone biblical studies, and yet here were scores of students asserting their relatively new-found spiritualities, all the way from crystals to comet-bound saviours. These students were my first-hand experience with one aspect of what has come to be called post-secularism.

The rise of spiritualities

Something has indeed changed. We need to be careful at this point, for there are two phases to this historical change. The first is the rise of a host of essentially private spiritualities, and the second is the return of religion to the centre of the public, global stage. These two, the sprouting spiritualities and the return of religion, mark distinct moments in the unfolding of post-secularism. As far as spiritualities are concerned, the crucial period is the 1960s and 1970s when hippie culture and the alternative lifestyle movement began the search for alternative religious practices that had been buried under the dominant culture. Wicca and the occult more generally, indigenous religions, astrology, various forms of Buddhism, the Tao and Hinduism all became viable sources for such alternative spiritualities. But as is the way with such movements within capitalism, all too soon these spiritualities became big business. Indeed, they seemed all too suited to capitalism, with their focus on the private individual and the inner life. One might exhibit that glowing eye of the fanatic, or perhaps the strange inner calm that was more than the effect of laxatives, but above all it was a private affair. Further, sundry practitioners sprang up like spiritual entrepreneurs, selling insights into one's hidden life, the future, the alignment of one's poles and what have you. It became chic to have crystals and perhaps a pyramid in one's apartment, and to consult the stars and Tarot over morning coffee, and all of these spiritual accessories could be bought at a market fair, or your local incense-laden shop. By the 1990s one could be *spiritual* in all manner of senses, but God – or rather, the spirits – forbid that one should be *religious*. No-one wanted to be religious any more, since religion had that reek of moth-eaten robes and empty religious buildings,

The New Secularism

whether Jewish synagogues, Christian churches or Muslim mosques. Religion had become the bogey term, that from which nearly everyone recoiled in institutional horror. To be spiritual, on the other hand, meant being free to pick and choose from supposed ancient practices or from any of the new forms that sprang up daily. And if you did read your Bible, it was for some kinky spiritual reason rather than anything as straightforward as conventional belief.

Eclectic, private, free from political as well as institutional taint, these spiritualities seemed to run against that fundamental tenet of secularism, namely the need to refer only to this age and this world. Why, people began wondering, did all these spiritualities spring up when secularization was everywhere dominant? An all too easy answer trotted out once too often is that our (post-)modern, materialistic world does not provide spiritual answers. You still hear this tired old reason spouted by those who feel that the ecological 'crisis' is a spiritual crisis. People hunger for spiritual realities, they say, for a deeper spiritual truth. As politely as possible, let me say that this is rubbish. Rather, the rise of spirituality is a major – I hesitate to write 'first' – sign of the tensions within secularism and the beginnings of post-secularism.

On the other hand, spirituality fits perfectly well with another feature of secularism: any spiritual or religious belief should be a private affair and should not be shouted from the rooftops, or worse still, affect one's exercise of public office. Whether one dances in a circle at the winter solstice, or feels the movements of planetary bodies at every moment of the day, or attends a Roman Catholic mass at least twice a week, or indeed reads one's Bible for devotional or spiritual reasons, these practices should not influence one's life in business or government or education. The new spiritualities obeyed this rule of secularism rather well. Private spirituality was fine; institutional religion was not.

The return of religion

At least that was the case until those planes flew into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2001. Since then religion has certainly been in, especially the religions of the

The New Secularism

book. Or at least it has been at the forefront of public policy and the public imagination. Soon we encountered the rhetoric of ‘axis of evil’ and the ‘evil empire’ invoked by the President of the United States in order to describe Iraq, Iran and North Korea, and then quite specifically to designate Muslim majority states. Mr Bush was then called ‘the devil’ himself in response, not merely by Muslim leaders but by the President of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, who is himself a Christian with a distinct liking for liberation theology.

One after another the stories came to light: George W. Bush took part in Bible study groups at the White House, sought divine guidance, and felt that God had told him to invade Iraq. Pat Robertson, one of the religious right’s major leaders in the USA, called on the USA to assassinate Venezuela’s president, Hugo Chávez. And Christian Zionists became increasingly influential in US policies towards the Middle East. Christian Zionism, a standard position among the religious right, especially in the United States, may be defined as Christian support for the Zionist programme of the establishment and maintenance of the state of Israel. In a nutshell, it holds that the key events of the end of history, as interpreted through the New Testament, will take place quite soon in modern Israel. These events involves the arrival of the anti-Christ, Jesus’s return to destroy the forces of evil in the final battle of Armageddon, and then his rule on earth, all of which will take place in Israel.

Of course, the Bible is central in the Christian Zionist programme. They string together a number of disparate passages to come up with a strangely coherent narrative. Thus they take the passages from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), especially those concerning the promise of a full occupation of the land of Canaan (Genesis 15:18–21, 17:7–8, Numbers 34:1–12), as referring to the present day ‘return’ of the Jews to Palestine. The first moment of the end, the ‘Rapture’, comes from 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17, especially verse 17: ‘then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air’. Matthew 24:40–1 also helps: ‘Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left’.

The New Secularism

Another important passage is 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11, with its depiction of the day of the Lord coming ‘like a thief in the night’. This Rapture is nothing other than the moment when all true believers will suddenly be whisked away into heaven, all at the same moment. It marks the beginning of the end times.

Throw in the seven seals from Revelation (6:1–17 and 8:1–5) and you get the seven years of tribulation after the Rapture, with Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21 helping out with the term ‘Tribulation’. Paul’s words in Romans 11:11–27, especially his desire ‘to make some of my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them’ (verse 14), becomes the prophecy of a part of the Jews. The exact number to be converted comes from Revelation 7:1–8 with its mention of ‘a hundred and forty-four thousand sealed, out of every tribe of the sons of Israel’ (verse 4). The rest will be annihilated. The battle of Armageddon comes from Revelation 16:16, and the final conflict between the armies of Jesus and the Beast appears in Revelation 17:13–14: ‘These [the ten kings] are of one mind and give over their power and authority to the beast; they will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful’ (see also Daniel 7 and 11).

In sum, after the anti-Christ (in Babylon) and seven years of tribulation, Armageddon in Israel will be the scene of the final battle, after which will come 1,000 years of peace. Jerry Falwell, another leader among the religious right in the USA, puts it well. Preaching at the outbreak of the first Iraq war, Falwell told us what to expect when the end comes, which it will, sooner rather than later:

While the dead are buried over a seven-month period of time during the Kingdom Age that has just began, our Lord Jesus with the Saints will sit down upon the Throne of David in Jerusalem and for one thousand years will rule in perfect peace upon the earth ... God still has one thousand and seven years of use for this planet. The seven-year Tribulation period, the thousand-year Kingdom Age ... (cited in Harding 1994: 73)

The New Secularism

There is one small catch if you happen to be a Jew: all the Jews who refuse to convert to Christianity will simply be wiped out in the battle to end all battles. This problem hasn't escaped Jewish commentators, such as Gershom Gorenberg, who states, 'The Jews die or convert ... I can't feel very comfortable with the affections of somebody who looks forward to that scenario ... it's a five-act play in which the Jews disappear in the fourth act ...'. (Simon 2002).

In Australia, vilifications of Muslims by politicians became the new version of anti-Semitism: Islamophobia found expression in caricatures of a violent and misogynist religion hell-bent on destroying Western culture. One after another, politicians of all stripes tried to outdo each other in the new game of Muslim-baiting, all in the name of a biblically based Christian heritage. For example, Peter Costello, the reactionary Treasurer of the Australian Federal Government recently said: 'Before entering a mosque visitors are asked to take off their shoes ... This is a sign of respect. If you have a strong objection to walking in your socks, don't enter the mosque. Before becoming an Australian you will be asked to subscribe to certain values. If you have strong objections to those values, don't come to Australia' (Garnaut 2006). Not one to miss out on a chance to go even lower, the Prime Minister, John Howard, has picked on the perceived oppression of women in Islam, signalled by the *burqa*, or full body covering (see Farouque 2006), and what he sees as jihad-mongering extremists. Indeed, Howard finds the whole community of immigrant Muslims a problem: 'It is not a problem that we have ever faced with other immigrant communities who become easily absorbed by Australia's mainstream' (Schubert 2006). For their part, the Exclusive Brethren hired a private detective to dig up dirt on the husband of New Zealand's prime minister (Helen Clark), releasing a story that suggested he was gay. The substantial contributions of the Brethren to the reactionary National Party, their expensive advertising in favour of John Howard and against the Greens in Australia also came to light.

On it goes. However, I am at risk of a common mistake – attributing too much to the destruction of the World Trade Centre, or '9/11' as it is often called (recognizing Osama Bin Laden's punning reference to

The New Secularism

the USA emergency phone number in the timing of the attack). It is not so much the cause of the return of religion into the political and cultural spheres of life, but rather the convenient signal of a change. And that change is the second phase of the rise of post-secularism: in its first phase we found essentially private spiritualities sprouting forth all over the place; now, it is a very public and political religion that has returned. I need to be careful at this point, for it is not all religions that are equally in focus: Islam, Christianity and to a lesser extent Judaism are the religions in question – the so-called ‘religions of the book’.

Not only has religion returned to the stage, not only have church, synagogue and mosque become the topic of urgent conversation and political policy (under the propaganda term of ‘terrorism’), but the Bible finds itself blinking in the harsh glare of the spotlights. All too accustomed to the quiet corners of ageing religious institutions, used to the pious attention of students training for the priesthood and ministries of different churches and synagogues, used to the contemplative murmur of those strange creatures, biblical scholars, the Bible is now behind the microphones and cameras, forced to answer prickly questions from inquisitive journalists. Is the Bible really a violent text? Is it misogynist, or homophobic? Is it the basis of ‘family values’ or of private property? Is it an oppressive text or a liberating one? Or is it the fount of Western culture and ‘democracy’? Do you need to believe in God to be able to understand it? Indeed, things have changed for students of the Bible. In the 1980s and 1990s it was quaint, at the most, to be a biblical scholar, but one was certainly not in demand. If you wanted a job teaching the Bible, and not merely droning on to a dwindling number of grey heads on a Saturday or Sunday morning, then a rare job or two might have opened up every decade. Or one might eke out an existence in some disguise or other, such as religion scholar, or parish minister or priest, perhaps a scholar of literature or the sociology of religion, or even a radio announcer (not a few have taken this path in Australia). Now, however, that esoteric training in languages, ancient history and the interpretation of a motley collection of texts that some claim as sacred scripture is in demand. The



The New Secularism

suspicion abounds, among politicians, commentators, policy makers and newspaper editors, that the Bible may indeed have something to do with the current climate of global fear. What exactly does the Bible have to do with the 'New World Order' (remember that phrase?) where supposedly democratic states become increasingly totalitarian while using the lame excuse of 'security'?

Post-secularism, then, has two features: a critical perspective on secularism itself, and the historical shift to a renewed interest in the spiritual life and religion as such. In what follows I will argue that we need a 'new secularism', particularly with regard to the Bible. Tossed about in the currents and waves of spirituality and religion, the Bible faces a problem: if we declare that secular biblical studies is an oxymoron, then do we allow all manner of spiritual, religious and political readings as perfectly acceptable?

The New Secularism

In response to this situation, I argue that we need a new secularism, with particular reference to the Bible. The new secularism *both* recognizes the importance of this age and this world *and* offers a sustained criticism of it. This new secularism has the following five points:

- 1 It begins with the recognition that religion and secularism are entwined like two strands of a rope and asserts that this is to the benefit of both.
- 2 In light of the paradox of witch-hunts, it operates by means of a theological suspicion that seeks to read the Bible neither as a sacred text nor 'merely' as profane literature. Theological suspicion leads to the following three points.
- 3 Suspicious of both religious and secular (ab)use of the Bible, it identifies and denounces such (ab)use.
- 4 Where possible, it fosters emancipatory uses of the Bible, whether religious or secular.
- 5 It seeks a politics of alliance.



The entwinement of the Bible and secularism

Let me begin with a parable. Once, a group of scientists – physicists, chemists and biologists – set out to climb a particularly difficult and high mountain. They have all the necessary equipment with them, such as ropes, high-grip boots, tents, thermal clothing and high-energy food. For what seems like an eternity they climb, at times quickly, more often slowly, and at times they come to a dead end and must backtrack in order to find a better way upward. On the way they have their disagreements, threaten to break up the group, and then learn to co-operate with one another. Finally, they come to the last part of the mountain, a particularly rocky and steep section that requires a concerted effort from the weary and dirty scientists. With one last heave, they climb over the ledge, and what do they see? A group of hoary old men, with one or two women, well rugged up against the cold, sit around a campfire. The scientists stagger over to the group and ask, ‘What are you doing here?’ ‘Oh, we’re biblical scholars’, says one of the group. ‘With a few theologians’, says another, ‘and we’ve been here for ages’.

Others have told this parable, although probably not in this form. Its point is obvious: scientists still pursue ultimate questions that have been the preserve of biblical scholars and theologians, such as the origin of life or of the universe itself, or the workings of universal laws; or they seek to uncover puzzles and paradoxes, all in order to understand better the world, and indeed the universe. Usually, this story or ones like it are told to unmask the objective pretensions of science. Is not science the ultimate expression of secularism in the old sense? If we can merely show that these pretensions are at heart religious or biblical, then we have shown up science as a secularized religion.

My point is quite different: science, as the flagship of secularism, cannot separate itself from religious questions.⁴ Rather than saying, to paraphrase the Marquis de Sade,⁵ ‘One last effort, my dear scientists, in order to be truly secular, for you are not secular just yet’, I would rather say that we should begin any consideration of the new secularism from the recognition of the inseparability of secularism and religion. Fellow travellers they are, but also far more. It is not merely

The New Secularism

the case that this entwinement is a fact of life; rather it is actually *to the benefit of both*. Rather than resigning themselves to the presence of an unwelcome partner, they gain strength from one another.

The problem with witches, or, theological suspicion

In 1234, the Church's Inquisition burnt its first witch. In 1782 the last witch was executed in Switzerland. During that time somewhere around 40,000 witches were hunted down and put to death. Initially, the problem was eradicating heresy, and witches occasionally came under suspicion by the Inquisition. However, from approximately 1450, waves of mass hysteria swept Europe until the end of the seventeenth century. Following the biblical injunctions, 'You shall not permit a sorceress to live' (Exodus 22:18) and 'A man or a woman who is a medium or a wizard shall be put to death' (Leviticus 20:27), witches were put on trial, tortured and killed.⁶

The problem with witch-hunts is that they produce ever more witches. You are never quite sure if you have managed to eradicate the last one, so there is always at least one more. The situation is not unlike the current hysteria over terrorism and Islam. But it is also the problem with secularism, or at least the form of it that sought to eradicate religion. There is always going to be one more theological skeleton in the closet, one more scientist who has that whiff of biblical religion, one more politician who tries to enact policies that agree with his or her religious belief, one more biblical scholar who sneaks religious commitment into the interpretation of the Bible.

In order to avoid this situation where religion and secularism perpetually chase each other's tails, we require what I would like to call 'theological suspicion' when reading the Bible. I draw the idea from Theodor Adorno (1973), although I have given it a name and a distinct practice. Theological suspicion means that *we should be perpetually on our guard against the theological history, content and use of the Bible*. The Bible is not merely one text in the Western canon that can be treated like any other book. Rather, what we need is an approach that accounts, in the very process of interpretation, for the theological

The New Secularism

effects of the text. This is partly due to the institutional context of Synagogue and Church in which the Bible has been passed down, but also due to its content. It does after all talk about God and the gods, people who do or do not do what God says, and so forth. In other words, I am suggesting a way of reading that *takes into account and critiques the theological underpinnings* of the Bible and the discipline whose business it is to interpret the Bible, namely, biblical criticism. Similarly, we need a way of holding Church and Synagogue responsible for their domination and (ab)use of the Bible; for their continued rejection in many quarters of people due to gender, sexuality, race and class. We must not let these religious institutions off the hook.

There is one further point from Adorno, who is always worth a reread. He was particularly scathing of secular theology. By this term he meant those systems of thought that believed they had managed to exorcise theology from their own workings. Too many philosophical systems have attempted to laicize or secularize theology; that is, they have taken theological terms, emptied them of their theological content and then refilled them with secular content. What happens is that theology has a knack of sneaking in the back door in even more powerful forms. Now, Adorno has in mind philosophy, but the same applies to the study of the Bible. It is not merely the case that biblical scholars cannot keep their lives of faith separate from their secular scholarship; rather, the attempt to separate the two makes the effect of religious commitment on the scholarship even more powerful since it is now hidden. The same applies to politicians: a politician may have a private belief that the Bible is the Word of God and that he or she should follow its teachings. However, in public life this politician will seek to make decisions without obvious recourse to the Bible, giving other reasons for opposing abortion or gay couples or stem-cell research. Unnamed and unacknowledged, the Bible is even more powerful in this politician's public life than if it were openly proclaimed. This force of the Bible, generated by a belief that it is sacred scripture and yet hidden, is what theological suspicion seeks to unmask. There are two implications of theological suspicion: the need to denounce (ab)use and to foster emancipatory readings.

Denouncing (ab)use

The new secularism undertakes the task of identifying and denouncing (ab)use of the Bible, especially in politics and society. Let me make it perfectly clear what I mean by (ab)use of the Bible. I do not mean abuse in terms of heresy. That is, 'abuse' does not mean deviation from some supposed doctrinal truth, some perversion of the true meaning of the text. By (ab)use I mean the use of texts in order to dominate, oppress and denigrate others. Now there are plenty of texts in the Bible that can do this without much twisting or interpreting away from some legendary true meaning. Indeed, this type of direct abuse, without perversion of what the text says, is the worst of all. In other words, biblical texts can be *used* for the purpose of *abuse* without too much fancy footwork – hence my use of parentheses in '(ab)use'.

There are a number of ways such a denouncing of (ab)use may be done. I follow a more systematic approach in Chapter Four, but we also find distinctly playful ways of doing so. One such possibility is the outrageous 'Brick Testament' (www.thebricktestament.com). Drawing on many of the biblical stories in both Hebrew Bible and New Testament, the stories are illustrated using Lego reconstructions. These reconstructions are then photographed, and on the website and in the books they form a series of stills with biblical texts beneath them. Without commentary, they tell the stories as they are. Each story is rated according to the categories N (nudity), S (sexual content), V (violence) and C (cursing). My favourites would have to be 'The Second Circumcision' (Joshua 5:2–8), 'When to Stone Your Whole Family' (Deuteronomy 13:6–10), 'How Long to Hang Somebody' (Deuteronomy 21:23) and the 'Instructions on Marriage' (1 Corinthians 7:1–9).

However, by means of small twists in the reconstructed scenes the Brick Testament manages to show how abusive such texts can be. You will have to look for yourself in order to see what they are, but let me give one example. In the story, 'When to Stone Your Whole Family', the opening scene has beneath it the quotation, 'If your brother, or your son or daughter, or your beloved wife tries to secretly entice you, telling

The New Secularism

you to go and worship other gods, gods of people living near you, or far from you, or anywhere on earth, do not listen to him' (Deut. 13:6–8). In the Lego reconstruction we see a family, with a father sitting down reading the newspaper. His wife says 'Jesus is Lord'. A character who appears to be his brother says, 'Hey Jon, what say you come worship Jesus with us'. And his daughter says, 'C'mon dad'. For this they must be stoned, and the next scene has the father throwing stones at them, with the quotation, 'You must kill them. Show them no pity. And your hand must strike the first blow' (Deut. 13:8–9).

Created by a laconic and self-titled 'Reverend' Brendan Powell Smith, the Brick Testament quietly brings out all of the tensions of the Bible, especially its obnoxious and toxic texts, but also its better ones. Above all, it is one exhibit in the new secularism, created by an atheist, but one who is clearly fascinated with the Bible and yet who does not subscribe to any religious belief concerning it.

Emancipatory uses

At this point, I would like to invoke Ernst Bloch's (1972) old point: the pernicious and damaging texts of the Bible cannot exist without the revolutionary texts, and vice versa. These texts exist; they can't be cut out for a trimmed down, more palatable Bible. You can't choose the texts you like and forget the rest. This means that it is not merely an abusive and obnoxious text.

It follows then that the Bible may at times have emancipatory or liberating moments buried within its oppressive ones. We can't, however, simply leap into the Bible and find the liberating texts that suit us. Rather, only by keeping theological suspicion at the forefront can we use these texts as a wellspring of a viable struggle for freedom and justice. We don't want such readings of the Bible to be hijacked by theological pretensions, nor indeed by the robber barons of global capitalism. Thus texts that I will discuss in Chapters Five and Six, such as the legendary image of the early Church's communist societies in the book of Acts, or the call to 'Let my people go', or the stories of the Murmuring in the Wilderness when the people rebel against

The New Secularism

Moses, must all be read with theological suspicion. While we recover the repressed stories of rebellion, we need to watch for their appropriation by Church and state. My point here is not a theological one, although it might be mistaken for that. It is a political one. Rather than some knee-jerk reaction that dismisses the Bible as a religious document, a sacred text, this point recognizes that the Bible may have a motivational power for liberation.

There are two reasons for such a search for emancipatory readings. Firstly, there is a long history in which the Bible has been used by groups working for a better society, for the alleviation of suffering and oppression. It is a history which I will trace in Chapter Five. Secondly, I think of a marvellous book by Michael Löwy called *War of the Gods* (1996). After considering liberation theology in Latin America, one of Löwy's most telling conclusions is that the old secular left needs to rethink its attitude to the Bible and theology, for sometimes they may well be on the same side.

A politics of alliance

Löwy's conclusion leads to the final element of the new secular approach to the Bible. Given that religious and secular readings of the Bible are inseparable at a deep level, given that the Bible has inspired revolutionary movements throughout its long history, and given that the religious and secular left often have the same political aims, it seems logical that they should develop a consistent politics of alliance. This means that the religious left is not stranded to fight its battles alone, surrounded by a rising tide of the religious right and all manner of fundamentalisms. It also means that the secular left may in fact find the Bible a source of political inspiration, as figures such as Ernst Bloch and Georges Sorel found.

Indeed, Sorel and Bloch, among others, show that I do not need to urge the old secular left to take an interest in the Bible, for there is already a history of such interest. Let me take a moment to say a little more about Sorel and Bloch. Georges Sorel (1847–1922) was a leader of the French left at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth

The New Secularism

centuries. A heretical Marxist (the best sort), Sorel was fascinated with early Christianity and saw many affinities between Marxism and the early Christian movement. Rather than following the line of historical determinism – the famous ‘history is on our side’ position – that may be found in some types of Christianity and Marxism, Sorel was a strong believer in ‘direct action’, a phrase he coined. We should take history into our hands, he argued, as a voluntary and willed act, rather than sitting back and waiting for either God or the economy to do the job for us. As a Marxist and later anarcho-syndicalist, he argued for and was involved in boycotts, sabotage, strikes and the continual disruption of capitalism. Above all, however, Sorel is known for his idea that Marxism needs a foundational myth like Christianity. If Christianity has the myth of Christ’s death and resurrection as its driving force, then Marxism needs the myth of the general strike. The truth of such a myth lies not in its content (he was not a Christian), but in its practical effects: the purpose of such a myth was to motivate the masses to bring about change, to generate solidarity and a revolutionary focus. On the need for positive myths for the left I think Sorel is absolutely correct, but Sorel is important here for another reason: the use of the Bible in order to provide insights for the secular left. Thus, along with his *Reflections on Violence* (*Réflexions sur la violence*, 1908), he also wrote *Contribution to a Secular Study of the Bible* (*Contribution à l’étude profane de la Bible*, 1889), returning to the Bible time and again in his later writings.

As for Ernst Bloch (1885–1977), as you’ll see if you ever come across his official photograph, he did his best to look like a craggy and cranky prophet as well as write like one. The two great inspirations for Bloch’s work as a Marxist philosopher were Goethe’s *Faust* and the Bible. Not only does the Bible saturate his magisterial *Principle of Hope* (1995), but he wrote a book on the Bible, *Atheism in Christianity* (1972), which is really an introduction to the Bible for secular readers on the left. In his programme of a hermeneutics of utopia, Bloch found the Bible a great storehouse of utopian images and themes, which has provided the worldview and motivated generations of radicals to seek a better society. Bloch’s favourite themes

The New Secularism

are those of the Exodus and the rebellion of Korah against Moses (Numbers 16), and characters such as the Nazirites with their ideals of a simple communal life in obedience to the God of the poor, among whom he counts Samson, Samuel, Elijah, John the Baptist and Jesus. He loves Job's challenge to God – 'Here is my signature [on the indictment]! Let the almighty answer me!' (Job 31:35; see Bloch 1972: 110) – and the prophetic statements such as, 'Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow' (Isaiah 1:17; see Bloch 1972: 110). Bloch eventually fell out of favour in East Germany – he was, refreshingly, too heretical – but he argued that it was crucial to understand why the Bible had been so powerful in the revolutionary consciousness of the peasants who supported radical political change.

I will have more to say on a politics of alliance in the next chapter, but four points need to be made before I do. First, readers of the Bible need not be religious. The assumption that you need to believe in order to be interested in the Bible would have to be one of the strangest making the rounds today, and one shared by believers and non-believers. Yet we don't expect an art critic to be an artist, a literary critic to be a novelist or a poet, a student of classical Greece to be a believer in Apollo or Aphrodite, or a lecturer in French to be a French national. Why then, must a reader of the Bible have a religious commitment?

Second, the old antagonism between the left and religion, once seemingly set in cement, should be a thing of the past. We can well understand how those antagonisms came to be so. For instance, following the criticism of Christian socialism in *The Communist Manifesto* – as 'but the holy water with which the priest consecrates the heart-burnings of the aristocrat' (Marx and Engels 1967 [1848]: 108) – socialism and communism since the time of Marx became largely secular and often anti-religious movements. And popular opinion followed suit, so much so that if a Christian declared that she or he had become a socialist, then the assumption was that that person had lost their faith. It didn't help matters when the major churches also declared communism to be 'Godless'. But these are, or at least should be, things of the past.

The New Secularism

Third, those who do believe are not necessarily reactionary or fundamentalist. The 200,000 members of the International League of Religious Socialists put the lie to that assumption. Both the secular and religious left have more in common than they might think.

Fourth, a politics of alliance recognizes the diversity and pluralism of the left. Rather than the long tradition of one small group on the left feeling as though it is the keeper of the grail, spending all its energy condemning other groups as revisionists, deviationists or heretics, the sheer diversity of the left is one of its great achievements. Within this diversity a religious left has a legitimate and crucial role to play. I will not say more here, since this politics of alliance will be the subject of the next chapter.

Conclusion

In summary, the old programme of secularism has revealed a series of problems: intellectually, religion and the sacred can be held apart only with extreme effort; no matter how strong the separation of Church and state, religion has a knack of turning up in all manner of state functions; and secularization has not meant the disappearance of religion or religious authority. However, this critical perspective on secularism is not a sign of its demise, but rather of a new situation that may be called post-secularism. The other major feature of post-secularism is historical, for it marks the rise of a host of spiritualities and now religion itself on the public stage. Finally, I argued for a new secularism that has five features: the recognition of the entwinement of religion and secularism; the need for theological suspicion in reading the Bible; denouncing abuse of the Bible; supporting emancipatory uses; and the need for a politics of alliance. The new secularism may recognize the importance of this age and this world, but it also offers a sustained criticism of that world.