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Dear listener,

My editorial goal since launching Mars Hill Audio full time in 1993 was to understand the logic of modernity more deeply. Part of that logic is the modern assumption that there is, in the nature of things, an inviolable separation between the sacred and the secular. We imagine two discrete spaces, one involving the spiritual and the other the material aspects of our existence. In the one region, faith provides guidance, in the other, reason rules sovereignly.

We expect that theologians will discuss redemption in the sacred space, and if the secular authorities grant theologians a visa or visitation rights, they are only permitted to talk about Creation — and then in terms that essentially echo what the sciences (soft and hard) have already discovered. It's all very neat. It's also an entirely novel invention of the modern world.

Moral philosopher Oliver O'Donovan has pointed out that in the premodern West, the corresponding term to “secular” in Christendom was not “sacred” but “eternal.” And they were *corresponding* terms, not opposites. The Latin word from which “secular” is derived means pertaining to an age. It only lately came to mean “non-religious.” The last several words of the Trinitarian doxology known as the *Gloria Patri* are “*et in saecula saeculorum.*” They are rendered in English “age after age” or “and ever shall be” or “to the ages of ages.” “Secular” meant a *time*, not a *place*, let alone a place free from God's interference.

When “secular” meant “temporal,” those exercising authority in the temporal realm (“civil powers”) could still defer to God's word in fulfilling their duties. They could seek guidance from the Church, from those charged with studying and teaching God's word authoritatively.

The redefinition of the word “secular,” the acceptance of the modern idea of the secular, is a huge shift in Western history, and some understanding of how our conventional idea of the secular originated can help us understand the cultural challenges we face today, as well as give us some idea about what we need to do about them.

Theologian Simon Oliver is one of many scholars who have observed that “the secular is not simply the rolling back of a theological consensus to reveal a neutral territory where we all become equal players, but the replacement of a certain view of God and creation with a different view which still makes theological claims, that is, claims about origins, purpose and transcendence. The problem is that this ‘mock-theology’ or ‘pseudo-theology’ is bad theology. Secularism is, quite literally, a Christian heresy — an ideological distortion of theology.”

If it's true that the invention of the realm known as the secular was based on bad theology, and if bad theology is not just inconsistent with divine revelation, but inconsistent with reality, then it should not be surprising that the modern experiment in a fully secularized public life is (finally) coming apart at the seams. Almost thirty years ago, in *The Desire of the Nations*, a magisterial book of political theology, moral philosopher Oliver O'Donovan observed that the West's project of constructing political life on “an avowedly anti-sacred basis” had reached an impasse. Citizens don't trust people holding political power, and it's not just because they are

perceived as crooks, liars, or racists. It is because *the very idea of political authority* is, in O'Donovan's word, unbelievable. "[B]inding political loyalties and obligations seem to be deprived of any point. The doctrine that *we* set up political authority, as a device to secure our own essentially private, local and unpolitical purposes, has left the Western democracies in a state of pervasive moral debilitation, which, from time to time, inevitably throws up idolatrous and authoritarian reactions."

For many decades, theologians, philosophers, and social scientists have been warning us about the danger of the unravelling of our social fabric, and what many of them (Christian and non-Christian) have warned is this: That as modern cultures become more and more detached from a religious understanding of the nature of human purpose and social order, our institutions will suffer from a growing crisis of legitimacy. The wide-spread sense of frustration that our institutions are not doing what they should be doing is not just a judgment that these institutions are failing. It is a symptom that — as a society — we do not agree on what they *should* do. And we do not agree on what our institutions should do because we are no longer collectively confident that Nature has a Creator and that History has an Author.

As long as we lack confidence in the reality of a supernatural order that guides social life and its varied practices, our institutions — especially those institutions that wield power — will never enjoy a widespread assent to their legitimacy. Frustration with government may be due to a real failure on the part of government. But behind that frustration (and behind that failure) is a lack of consensus on such fundamental questions as the purpose of government; the nature of justice; the proper relationship between wealth, communal well-being, and social obligation; and the possibility of limits or restraints on individual or communal practices. Questions like these go far beyond disputes about technical matters of policy. They require an understanding about the meaning and purpose of human life. But such an understanding is increasingly prohibited from political conversation.

Much of the civic friction and chaos we witness are symptoms of a deeper malaise that is caused by the unreal — increasingly *surreal* — regime of radical secularization. If the myth of the secular is the result of bad theology, then the way to address our problems is with theological reflection that is deeper, broader, and more capacious. Pious and energetic denunciations of the *effects* of modernity's dualism will not address their relevant *causes*.

There are many thinkers pursuing the exercise of such theological reflection, but their work tends to be known only in academic circles. Your generous support of the expanded work of Mars Hill Audio (thanks to our membership and partnership programs) is a way of increasing the awareness and availability of resources vital to faithfulness. Such resources are vital as confidence in the modern order dissolves, leaving for many confusion and fear. Christians have an opportunity to lead the recovery of a vision of cultural order rooted in what is really Real. In such a time, we need all the wisdom we can get.

Gratefully,

Ken Myers

Host and producer