# THE SECULAR CITY[[1]](#footnote--1)



1. Over the last three centuries there has been an increasing movement in the west that has desacralized the urban environment. This has also been occurring in Eastern cities during the rapid urbanisation processes this century

2. Theologians have sought to interpret and to respond to threes processes. One liberal response has been well articulated by Harvey Cox among others known as “Secular Theologies”. Understanding these is of importance in understanding the drift in responses to the city.

## A. The Secular City

Harvey Cox's classic stands as a cornerstone in liberal theological responses to the city.

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## 2. Secularization: The Concept[[2]](#footnote-0)

Secularization and urbanisation walk hand in hand.

Definition: Secularization is a process of changes in the social order as migration, new technologies and modes of production result in loss of traditional patterns of belief, religious norms, community values and fragmentation of family relationships. "People don't go to church any more." The clergy are parodied as an outdated enclave. Believers feel a distinct minority in what was supposedly once a Christian civilisation.

In the West it involved a shift from a medieval and Christian worldview, focused on God to a worldview focused on the immediate world as the centre of reality and the individual as authority.

Secularism as a philosophy (as against secularisation as the process) emerged hostile to spiritual beliefs and supernatural explanations. The combined effects of secularisation, urbanisation and secularism are often meshed into the concept of “modernity” or “the modern project”.

Modernity spread from the Western nations around the world, paralleling the spread of urbanisation.

Religious thinkers have sought to give a "secular" meaning to religious belief, emerging a number of "secular" theologies which have merged into Post-modern theologies. Harvey Cox in ***The Secular City*** and John Robinson in ***Honest to God*** can be perceived as initial spokesmen for this movement. By secularisation, Cox means the historical process by which societies are delivered from church control and closed metaphysical systems. God is a God of this world not of some fenced off religious systems. Secular theologians are activists for whom Christ cannot be shut up in the sacred church but must be evident in all spheres of life.

The difficulties with these perspectives lie in the liberal presuppositions. There is a failure to come to terms with the Biblical perspectives on the depravity of man, the nature of God and the world. Based on an uncritical admiration for the achievements of modern man, there is a lack of reality about the lack of similar achievement in the ethical and moral domains. In the failure to separate the church positionally from the world, the church becomes defined by its service to the world.

## 3. Phases of Secularization

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Phases of Secularisation | Phases of Industrialism | Phases of Civiliz  ation | Period | Churches' Response |
| Mediaeval Worldview  Fixed social order under hierarchical authority  mercantilism | Farm labour | Rural |  | Theology: Aquinas' nature and grace (the perfecting of form rather than the God-transformation)  Emergence of mainline denominational structures. |
| Enlightenment rationalism and empiricism  nation-state as primary shaper  capitalism  bureaucracy | Labour intensive | Urbaniz  ation | Muscle | Kant (1724-1804) Enlightenment and autonomy based on the power of reason. Grace became freedom  Rural structures unsure how to cope. |
| The Modern Project: rational order, human progress, management of the social order | Capital intensive | Metropol  itanization | Machine | Accommodation: social gospel (Rauschenbusch, Matthews, Fosdick), liberalism(Karl Barth (1886-1968)), historical-critical method, neo-orthodoxy (Bultman), existentialism  Sustaining integrity of the gospel but divorce from the processes |
| Postmodernism  Economics based on technology with spirituality | Information intensive | Globaliz  ation, hyper-urbanization | Mind | Breakdown of traditional religions, along with the resurgence of traditional religions.  Presenter of global truth into a secular, spiritual arena where pluralism and relativity is the norm. |

## B. Theological Responses to the Modern Period

Kant, Hegel and Kierkegaard (late 1800's) first realised in philosophy the impossibility of a rational integrated worldview starting with the rational individual. While empirical truth could be related to "facts", no unified knowledge could be related to "values".

This devolved through the arts, collapsing the search for the essential principles. Impressionism led to expressionists then to abstract. Theories of social order and artistic expression came to be seen as only social constructions.

In the 20th century the same shift occurred in the physical sciences. Chance and chaos, symbolised in the theory of relativity, or the Heisenberg principle of uncertainty, replaced the absoluteness of Newtonian physics. In the social sciences the reaction to behaviourism in psychology and determinism in sociology in the 1960's moved increasingly to an open systems approach.

Similarly in European theology, the rejection of an absolute base for theology in the scriptures (or tradition for the Catholics), has lead to an endlessly shifting sea of theological theories, primarily from within the German schools.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Progressions in European "Modern Theologies"** | | |
| **Liberal European Theologian** | **Some key ideas** | **Common description of the theology** |
| Kant (1724-1804) | The power of reason, man's emergence from immaturity, independent from any authority external to himself. | Renaissance |
| Kierkegaard | All theological assertions are paradoxical, and cannot be synthesised. We must hold the elements in opposition, in a "leap of faith". |  |
| Harnarck (Germany) | not infallible word, not historical Jesus. | Liberalism |
| Barth (1986-1968) | Theology as dialectic of paradoxes, God as the wholly other, Two types of history, Historie (historical Facts), and Geschichte (things that touch me existentially - Jesus being in this category). | Neo-orthodoxy |
| Bultmann (1884- ) | *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (1921). Demythologisation. | Form Criticism |
| Cullman (1902 - | Heilgeschichte = Salvation History |  |
| Harvey Cox, John Robinson, the secular theologians | Erase distinctions between church and world. God is dead | Theology of Secularization |
| Pannenburg (b 1928) | Universal history is the exclusive medium for God's Revelation. The resurrection enables us to grasp that history. | Theology of History |
| Theilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) | The Law of Complexity Consciousness - matter becomes increasingly complex. God becomes the final rather than the efficient cause of the universe | Theology of Evolution |
| Moltmann (b 1926) | The churches purpose is to be the instrument through which God will bring about universal , social reconciliation. This may at times involve revolutionary means, with violence and non-violence as being "an illusory problem". Man builds a future utopian Kingdom of God. | Theology of Hope |
| Chicago Group, Hartshone (b 1897) building off Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) | God is becoming, is process itself. | Process Theology |
| Paul Tillich (1886-1965) | God is Being. Sin is estrangement from being. | Theology 0f Being |
| Rauschenbusch | American evangelist with concern for the poor who was able to espouse a Christian form of socialism. | Social Gospel |
| Reinhold Neihbur | Spokesman for the social gospel over several decades | Modifications of Social Gospel |

Paralleling this are shifts in the broader culture, the economic and political domains. Nationally based production/consumption capitalism has begun to unravel into the globalized economy, nation-state political systems have lost the allegiance of citizens who now have reverted to ethnic origins as the basis of political organisation. The economy has moved from manufacturing to information technology. The result is a flattening of bureaucracies. This has been accelerated by the rapid expansion of technology, resulting in an endless expansion of choices, and global patterns of relationships

## 1. Contrasts of Structural Changes from Modern to Postmodern Society

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Modern Period** | **Post-Modern** |
| Institutional Carriers | Modern Nation-State  Industrial capitalism  The Knowledge Sector (Universities) | ??? |
| Economic Structure | National Capitalism and Communism | Global Hyper- Capitalism |
| Production Technology | Transition from Agriculutre to Manufacturing | Transition from Manufacturing to Information |
| Institutional Political Carriers and Allegiences | Modern Nation-States | Urban World connecting  Ethnic Political Entities |
| Organizational Structures | Bureacracies  Hierarchies | Networks  Flattened levels of authority |
| Range of Decision-making | Growing level of choices within a nation | Endless expansion of choices within the global city |
| Modes of relating | In-city relationships clustered around vocation and family | Global webs of common interest relationships |
| Structural Location of Belief | Structural Relocation from Centre to Periphery along with Economics, Politics, Sociology, Psychology etc. | Relocation from Periphery to only one of Multiple Belief Options |
|  |  |  |

## 2. Contrasts of Worldviews from Modern to Post-modern[[3]](#footnote-1)

Along with these structural changes, are cultural responses, a series of worldview evolutions that seek to interpret and respond to the realities.

The meta-narratives, the grand truths, indeed the great traditions have been challenged and found wanting. For example the claims of rational science to progress are viewed sceptically by those who have benefited by the technical progress, but damaged by its economic oppressions. Justice is no longer seen as a universal but only as a rationally defensible concept within the society in which it is exercised. Indeed yesterday the Chinese questioned the Western concept of a world order saying it must be replaced with an Asian concept.

Since we can no longer stand objectively outside and look for the grand themes, the only place to stand is on the inside. And if there are no grand narratives, then there are only stories, representations, images, in juxtaposition to show that there is no point of reference. Thus design uses different fonts, and left margin art irregularities, film flashes multiple images without seeming connection. Style not meaning becomes the issue. Since we cannot integrate meaning at depth, the surface images become the media, body and bodily sensation receive new focus.

There is a loss of hope. Modernity denied the hope of the gospel and reinterpreted hope as development of man through rationality towards grand themes of happiness, justice , freedom (reinterpreted Biblical themes). With the collapse of that hope one response is incredulity towards all hope Another is the recreation of hope within a particular set of reasons, a particular cluster within the pluralistic society, allowing for the emergence of new intellectual or religious movements.

This all leads to fragmentation. History loses meaning and time itself fragments into a series of “presents”. In politics and social structure the loss of authority is applauded as the emergence of democracy. In the medical field the rejection of the formal medical profession and emergence of multiple medical traditions means a loss of the court of appeal. but the loss of authority and hence integrative social structure allows opportunity for the emergence of darker forms of societal control. Perhaps Russia remains as the test case of this theory, while it and the Balkans clearly show the break-up of political structure into clear ethnic identities. The common community of values, allows for the reactionary movements to hold large sectors of society to ransom for good or ill - gay and lesbian rights, ecology, environmentalism, justice for the oppressed.... Law becomes fragmented into a collage of disjointed principles with no integrating theme. Even poverty becomes disjoint, each group competing for its market share.

|  | **Early Modern** | **Late Modern** | **Postmodern** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Knowledge | Inherently good, certain, objective (outside observer) and rational. Search for universal beauty, truth and justice. | Search for unity, expansion from rational to include intuitive and emotional. No universals. | No coherency to knowledge, rational is not the arbiter for reality is relational, participatory and personal (serach on the inside) |
| Truth, search for truth, relationship of truths | objective, unified, supracultural, timeless, universal principles or “meta-narratives”. Truths integrate into the universals | Truth is relative. Respect for difference  Everyone has right to their own opinion | No absolute truth. Differing viewpoints and perspectives. Community based understanding of truth, story-based rseulting personal and communal well-being. Parallel truths coexist in plurality and relativism, a mix and match of ideas from multiple sources. |
| Progress | Optimistic view, inevitable as we increasing control the world | technically optimistic, limits to growth, morally pessimistic | pessimistic view of use of technology and capacity of human ingnuity to solve problems |
| Economics | unlimited expansion | limits to growth | life is fragile  decline of economic levels compared with parents |
| Relationship to Nature | control and conquest |  | existence dependent on co-operation |
| Art | Realism, search for absolute beauty and meaning | Impressionism, Expresionism, Cubism, search for elements of meaning | Abstract, surface image and experience, no search. Ecclectic multiple collages of random ideas and art and music. Body and bodily sensations as focus. Collage |
| Justice | Search for universal themes of justice | Search for justice for communities |  |
| Cultural Diversity | Colonial empires and post-colonial nationalism | Polite cultural pluralism | Multicultural states and cities. Celebrate diversity, ecclectic integration from multiple cultures, juxtapostion of opposing styles |
| Concept of culture | the cultured class | mass culture | taste culture |
| Philosophic Principles | reason (based on doubt), autonomy, nature, harmony, progress |  |  |
| Religion | Religion of reason, Deism |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |

In the modern period the search for self was a central theme, but outside of the external authority of God, it leads to despair. In the post-modern the search is abandoned, being replaced by a series of images of self that can be pulled off the shelf. This leads not to alienation but to schizophrenia. Maddonna best symbolises this multiplicity of representation from Material girl, to Marilyn Monroe, to Evita, to creator of her own sexuality

## Consumer Society: Jihad vs. McWorld[[4]](#footnote-2)

Barbar tells us that as communist man disappears, and democratic man disappears, what is left is consumer man, a one dimensional man. That the world has become a global consumer culture. The only escape from this global consumer McWorld culture are the cultures of poverty. The mad rush for China and Africa is seen as an opportunity for consumption. Even the internet is for sale now - watch it free if you watch the ads!!

The loss of citizenship is a side effect of consumerism. It requires time and energy. It is proactive, doing. The consumer by contrast is a passive receptor, placid. When the consumer becomes the whole of our identity, even the public place has largely disappeared.

Consumerism empowers us to make private choices, not public choices. The social consequences have largely been removed from us by the privatisation of consumerism. National health care has been taken off the public agenda. Private health has surfaced as the choice. Public domains have disappeared. You can choose the mall. There is no longer a genuine civil society.

Democracy is the second casualty of consumerism. Increasingly we are being disempowered through the ideology of privatisation, which means giving away publicly accountable organisations, to non-accountable multinationals where manufacturers can migrate to the countries that are the weakest link in the global accountability.

The global watchdogs have been co-opted to the multinationals’ interests. The World Trade Organisation has declared sanctions illegal. Even this instrument of civic reaction has been muzzled by these global organisations. The corporations have become the global sovereigns. And they are wholly private, wholly unaccountable to the public good. Nor are the IMF, or the World Bank accountable to the public square.

The alternative according to Barbar, in an echo of Schumacher, is that peoples in free communities should be the locus of self-government. These ideas closely parallel the apocalyptic thinking of most Pentecostal and evangelical believers with their rejection of the idea of one world government as leading to the role of the anti-Christ, recently popularised by Hal Lindsey’s ***The Late Great Planet Earth***.

### The Biblical Critique of the Consumer Society

Classic Christianity has rejected greed, the accumulation of wealth, consumerism. The great transition occurred with the failure of the British church in the middle of last century, to sustain a consistent public critique of these sins as Britain lead the world into the new consumer and technological age. While Christian socialism and the social gospel which emerged from it spoke to the issue of redistribution of wealth, they did not deal with the popular value systems of ordinary Christians with the call to live lives of simplicity, without greed, in the midst of increasingly competitive systems.

This is in direct contrast to earlier Calvinism, with its understanding of the just use of resources for the common good, frugality, diligence etc. and their relationship to the emergence of capitalism as summarised in ***The Protestant Work Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism*** [Weber, 1980 #475].

While all are enjoying the expansion of wealth, the abolition of poverty, the freedom of the middle class, the violations of Biblical principles of stewardship, remaining debt-free, wealth for work (vs. creation of paper money) etc., cause chronic sicknesses across the society.

Recent Christian responses in New Zealand have had to do with simplicity, community, co-operative economics.

The answer of the church in the collapse of an earlier civilisation was the monasteries which sustained culture through 1000 years. Building from Pierson’s analysis of the monastic and preaching orders, I have proposed and developed similar alternative apostolic orders, prophetic in commitments to simplicity and community. Disciplined fundamentalist and strict Pentecostal churches carry some of the same characteristics.

### Pragmatism as a Way of Life

With the rejection of the spiritual for the secular, and an embracing of the technological, modern personality gravitates to pragmatism, goal orientation, achievement as the measures of a man or woman. The dilemma of a President Clinton is that while his moral and spiritual values are abhorrent to his people, yet in a secular world where he is a brilliant achieving president, he is judged to be a success. Does one judge a postmodern President by the spiritual values and absolutes of what is seen as an earlier civilisation or by the values of the new secular world culture. Secularists would see the latter as simply a remnant of the town virtues of long gone rural Christendom.

Peter and Brigitte Berger [Berger, 1973 #44] identify several score characteristics of “the Homeless Mind” the mindset of modern man or woman. Jacques Ellul critiques “Technique” as replacing Spirituality as the essential being of modern man [Ellul, 1964 #147]. Mankind no longer controls the technology God has placed in his hands to manage, but rather the technology defines mankind.

Our speech is full of database terminology, and talk of networking (impersonal relating across a broad spectrum of secondary relationships). Our mind chops time into manageable chunks like a mass production assembly line. Rest becomes meaningless for it does not appear to produce. Intellectual pursuits are frowned on in contrast with applied knowledge. The interchangeable parts of an organisation, its executives, are replaced every two to three years regardless of personality, evaluated on performance, man has become a cog in a machine.

The relational Christian community, be it community church, cell-based church, missional church or apostolic mission community is built from a Biblical understanding of humanness, an alternative that brings integration to this lostness of being.

In the midst of all of this we need present the gospel as the only foundation with which to support a rational world view.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Modern Worldview** | **Post-Modern Worldview** |
| The "Modern Project" | The "Pluralist Reality" |
| Machine | System |
| Parts to the whole | Interrelated |
| Law and order | Order and chaos |
| Closed | Open |
| Construction | Deconstruction |
| Essential principles | Contextual "truths" |
| Stability | Flux |
| Order | Change |
| Grand Narrative | Multiple Story lines |
| Truth | Relativity |
| Inner Essence | Surface and image |
| Historical Context | Endless succession of "nows" |
| Purpose of the whole | Participation in the particular |
| Centring | Dispersal |
| Substance | Symbols |
| Anti-spiritual | Spirituality |
| Natural | Supernatural |

### 3. Evangelization of Postmoderns

(1) Logical extension of their ideas to show how there is truth

.



(2) Showing the diversity of Christian communities - Christian bikies, Christian rap groups etc.

(3) Wisdom to the issues of life: This shows that a right head and a right heart and faith leads to spiritual fulfilment.

(4) A foundation for right responses to human rights and nature

(5) Not just facts, but communication of the mystery of Christ (touches their investigative, mysticism)

(6) Radical message and action. There is a dislike of conservative views. people like the radical "fringe."

(7) Belief and tolerance of all truths does not necessarily result in freedom.

## C. The Evangelical Response To Urbanisation and Secularisation

### 1. Westminster Seminary

But what of the Evangelical response to urbanisation and secularisation? over the last 20 years, Harvey Conn, Roger Greenway and more recently Manny Ortiz, write with an evangelical reformed mindset out of Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. Urban Missions magazine published by them has emerged as a central communication tool for evangelical discussion of urban issues. Urban Missions Classes have multiplied across the U.S and are gradually filtering into the rest of the world. Ray Bakke has been a spokesman within the evangelical world and across its borders for such a movement.

### 2. Summary of Conn's, "A Clarified Vision for Urban Mission: Dispelling the Urban Myths" [[5]](#footnote-3)

For example, Conn examines in this monograph a number of popular cultural myths about the city. The chapter titles show the range of his brilliant mind.

i. The Rural/Urban Myth

ii. The Depersonalization Misunderstanding

iii. The Crime Generalization

iv. The Secularization Myth

Harvey evaluates the backtracking of Harvey Cox.

(1) "We need a post-modern theology in order to cope not with the decline of religion but with its resurgence; not with the death of God but with the rebirth of gods; not with the spreading scepticism, but with t a new sense of the sacred; not with piety but with political faith[[6]](#footnote-4).

v. The Privatisation Generation

vi. The Power Misunderstanding

vii. The Monoclass Generalization

## 3. The Global Expansion of the Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches During the Modern Period

The emergent third world church is largely urban and this affects global theology. Where the church is expanding across the globe it is growing within a spectrum of identifiable values related to the working of the Holy Spirit in power, indigenous leadership patterns, commitment to the authority of the word of God as truth for all things in life and faith, and the authoritative preaching of the gospel with expectation of conversion. The numerical growth of this wing is such that it increasingly is dominating the global councils of the church, and determining the future of ministry. The World Council of Churches (WCC) now has to deal with the increasing number of Latin, Asian and African members who are highly evangelistic and reject much f the past liberal German consensus of the last decades. World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF) and Laussanne, two movements dominated by European and American evangelicals now warmly embrace the spectrum of Evangelical and Pentecostal beliefs. AD2000, perhaps the first global movement to be truly directed from the “third world” leadership, is perhaps the most recent indication of this global trend.

This movement is rapid among people movements in tribal areas, but multiplies even more so as the rural people migrate into the slums of the cities. Much of the growth is focused on urban poor, but increasingly we are seeing the emergence of central city mega-churches. It is generally categorised as Pentecostal and charismatic.

The numerical growth within these patterns of Evangelical theology and Pentecostal realities, juxtaposed with the failure of the German school and associated Liberal theologies to reverse the massive losses of the European churches, indicates a believable future dominated by urban evangelistic perspectives, linked to development motifs as against inner city pastoral problems linked to the loss of identity in the Western churches. In a sense it is a vindication that “by their fruit you shall know them.” While Robinson proclaimed, “God is dead,” it may perhaps have only been the liberal view of God which has died. He seems alive and well.

1. Supplementary Readings: Theology of the City

   Conn, Harvey

   1992 "The Kingdom of God and the City of Man: A History of the City/Church Dialogue." In ***Discipling the City***, Roger Greenway, ed., Baker. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Supplementary readings:

   Van Gelder, Craig

   1992 "Secularization and the City: Christian Witness in Secular Urban Societies." In ***Discipling the City***, Roger Greenway, ed., Baker, 1992:69-83 [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. An expansion of these ideas can be found in:

   Sampson, Phillip,

   1997 “The Rise of Postmodernity”, in ***Faith and Modernity***, Philip Sampson,ed., Regnum: Oxford.

   Chart from Craig Van Gelder

   1992 "Secularization and the City: Christian Witness in Secular Urban Societies." In ***Discipling the City***, Roger Greenway, ed., Baker, 1992:81 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. Title and ideas from Benjamin Barbar [, 1996 #31]. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. Conn, Harvey

   1987 ***A Clarified Vision for Urban Mission***, Zondervan. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. Cox,Harvey

   Religion in the Secular City, 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)