

## **An Argument for Engaging Secularism in Dialogue**

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In the midst of a rapid surge of controversial social issues emerging like wildfires throughout the world, Orthodox Christians in the academy are confronting a dilemma. How should they respond to the force of social changes pressing upon the world? Should intellectuals engage ideologues of vastly different perspectives in dialogue? Or is it safer to protect the Church from ideas that might afflict the body of Christ?

Certainly, there is no consensus on how theologians should respond. Adopting a defensive posture to resist and fight against external ideologies is one reaction to fear. Drawing deeply from the intellectual tradition is a better response, as it has the capacity to contribute to the common good and repel variants of political extremism.

The Church needs to respond with a twofold strategy consisting of inquiry and dialogue. This strategy includes dialogue with secular humanism.

Let us begin with an example of the value of a dialogue with secular humanism. This approach is essential because secular humanism - or the catch-all category of secularism - is the usual villain identified by Christian cultural warriors. Orthodox tend to depict secularists as a large and anonymous community of sociologists, politicians, and technocrats who push for modernity and progress by eliminating religious institutions. For some, secularism is a catch-all term for anyone promoting progressive initiatives that challenge the Church's core values.

It is somewhat misleading to categorize progressives who do not endorse religious values and traditions as secularists. Secularism originated as a concept of time, a focus on the present, and therefore, the this-worldly perspective. The tendency to dismiss the transcendence of time in God led theologians like Alexander Schmemmann – whose critiques of secularism are oft-quoted – to define secularism as the “negation of worship.”

What Christians seem to truly fear about secularism is how it has evolved from its origins as a concept of time into a spirit described by Belgian theologian Joris Geldhof as “opposed of any claim made in the name of something transcendent of this world and its interests.” The problem seems to be the anthropocentric tendencies of secularism, especially those that pursue initiatives exclusively for human progress and flourishing and leave no space for religion at the table of public discourse. Geldhof observes that secular critique has made it “no longer possible” to talk about heaven and earth at all.

Geldhof is one of many influential voices who favors Christian engagement with secularism. He states that Christian liturgy occurs in a space where heaven and earth are one, bringing God's reign into the present as the Church continues on its journey to heaven. In other words, the kingdom of God is not indifferent to secular agendas.

Jaroslav Pelikan strongly encouraged robust Christian participation in dialogue on difficult public issues. In a commencement speech at Wittenberg University in 1960, Pelikan reminded

graduates of the value of inquiry into all topics, including the natural sciences. He noted that the pioneers of the natural sciences had delivered a necessary chastening to the Christian intellectual tradition by reminding us that life is always a process of becoming.

Our expanded understanding of the natural world, the universe, and humanity was empowered by the Holy Spirit, whom he described as the “agent of change and the ground of variety.” Feting the “new insights” of secular studies, especially the social sciences, Pelikan illustrated the value of *engaging* them instead of dismissing them as antithetical to Christianity:

Instead of panicking at these insights and trying to evade them, as much of Christian thought has done, we need to recognize their validity and their limits as guides to human thought and behavior. What if these insights shake our stereotypes of what men are or puncture our clichés about how men act!

Pelikan suggested that the Christian intellectual is always a learner, and a member of a community of learning that is willing to reflect critically on its own presuppositions.

The Orthodox academy can make a substantial contribution toward resolving ominous global problems. Consider the impending [catastrophe of water scarcity](#), which is a reality for billions of global citizens. The Orthodox liturgical tradition reveals and proclaims water as God’s precious gift to the world – so precious, that God uses it as an instrument of our salvation, over and over again. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew’s commitment to protecting the environment is well known. Imagine the prophetic message Orthodox theologians could send to governments and corporations if we marshaled our intellectual resources to show that water is God’s gift, and that the world’s response should be to preserve and share the divine gift equitably.

We are capable of harnessing our intellectual tradition to critique dangerous secular ideologies as well. No voice demonstrates the power of Christian dialogue with secularism more powerfully than the Czech priest Tomáš Halik, a former political prisoner and dissident of the Communist era. Halik provides multiple examples of populists who capitalize on fear in developing narratives that oppose the initiatives of so-called elitists. He writes that populist narratives appeal especially to frustrated people, especially those longing for a strong sense of group identity – which they find in communities that demonize the “outside world.”

Halik appeals to the Christian intellectual tradition – including universities and churches – as society’s “immune system” that prevents dangerous political ideologies from infecting communities. He appeals to learning in community through critical thinking and engagement as the path to healthy public discourse and the repudiation of extremism.

Orthodox theologians and leaders are at a crossroads today. One can draw from the new populism that demonizes secularism and make churches and educational institutions into outposts that defend the faith from enemies. This popular approach runs the risk of alienating the Church from the world and its troubles.

The alternative is to reboot the vocation of the Orthodox intellectual tradition and re-enter the arena of public discourse in a spirit of self-reflection, inquiry, and confidence that God is making

all things new (and not just new things) by the power of the Holy Spirit. God grant us the courage to overcome our fear and meet the challenges of our time with wisdom.

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