

Secularism is good for you

Danny Stevens, 28 July 2009

Tim Mander (*On Line Opinion*, July 17, 2009), in responding to an article by Hugh Wilson on religious influence on public education in Queensland, put forward a couple of arguments that don't fly.

To begin with he put forward that secularism is defined by the first line of definition in the *Macquarie Dictionary*. To wit: that which "refuses to accept all forms of religious faith and worship". There may be some who operate under that definition of secularism, but I believe the majority of supporters of secularism would agree with the second line in the definition "the view that public education and other matters of civil policy should be conducted without the introduction of a religious element".

Well we could play dictionary wars *ad nauseam*. Instead I will provide to you, earnest and thoughtful reader, my understanding of what secularism is and why we should all want it, even the religious.

Second, Tim put forward the idea that religious incursion into public school is really only a minor matter. "Perhaps" he suggests "anyone who is worried should ask students and find out how many of them think that Queensland state schools are dominantly religious environments." Of course that is not our concern. Our concern is that our children are being indoctrinated into somebody else's idea of the nature of reality and the moral codes that flow from it. I will return to this a little later.

Before I get into it let me state that there is one thing I will not do. I won't impugn Tim's motives. Yes, he is deeply involved in Scripture Union and yes, he has an axe to grind, but so do I. I identify myself as a **Bright** and I don't like all this silly running around bending at the knees religious nonsense. I expect both Tim's arguments, and mine (and Hugh's for that matter) to be considered on their merits. Of course you will be smart enough to do just that so I'm really talking to everyone else here.

So, secularism. To understand why it's good for you and why you want it, you have to know something about rights, civil and human, in a democratic and pluralistic society. Many folks think of democracy as "majority rule". That's a big fail right there. Point at somebody and ask them "are you in the majority?" If they answer yes or no you picked the wrong person, move on to someone else. Their answer should be "which majority?" That is the crux of the matter that parliaments have had to come to terms with for centuries, you may be in the majority on one issue but in a minority on the next. If you go around bludgeoning everyone with "majority power" whenever you can, without some thought, then other majorities are likely to come and get you. So majority power needs to be tempered with the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Rights are an example of some thinking that we have prepared and cooked earlier on this subject. We say "these rules about rights are not subject to change by simple majority decree". Rights are usually worded so they are applicable justly to everyone. So a secular public education system is saying that many parents have many different religious views, and only one of those views will be a majority at any one time. The majority will always change as time passes. Hence it is not right for any one view to be imposed on the kids, and that further, the kids should not be admonished to learn, and cleave to, any one religious view.

Does that mean, as Tim suggests, that we should stand at the gates of each school with a flaming sword in hand, keeping all religious views and knowledge out of the school? Of course not! Our religious heritage and history are important school subjects. It only means we should be teaching about religion, not indoctrinating students into religion. That does mean that Religious Instruction is out - to be replaced by properly qualified teachers in Religious Education.

So, what about the chaplains? Well, they don't turn schools into "dominantly religious environments". What they do is present a religious authority to the kids without equally authoritative representation of other religions or of those with no religion. At my daughter's school I would be happy with our Pentecostal chaplain (to a degree) if the school would also take me on as their atheist chaplain and we got in a Buddhist, Taoist, Islamic, Catholic and Judaic chaplain as well.

But honestly, why would you want even one chaplain in your child's school? Schools have properly trained and accountable councillors.

If you want spiritual guidance for your children, take them to the spiritual leaders at your local church.

What can a chaplain do that a school councillor can't do?

Well, according to the Scripture Union they can introduce everyone's children to Jesus, and they are a grooming ministry. That means they find the susceptible, non-believing young ones and induct them into their religion through extra-curricular activities such as camps. In other words the SU believe that if your children aren't already believers then you have been bad parents, and they should take the whole problem out of your hands.

I think there may be a conflict here with the idea of secularism that I was chatting to you about earlier. What do you think?

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