BOOK SUMMARY
Harvey Cox
The Secular City: Secularisation and Urbanisation (A Theological Perspective) (1966, Pelican Books)

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What has happened to our society? What is happening to our religious practises? Why don’t people go to church? Is our faith relevant to today’s society? Will religion die out?

How many times have you been involved in discussions around these issues among believers and non-believers? For most of us we find it difficult to articulate any sound and measured response.

It is time to read this book. Cox traverses the history and journey toward the realisation of our current secular society in the modern city. He outlines its links with religion even before Christ and how religion, particularly Christianity, has encouraged a secular response to change. Cox embraces the secular society rather than opposes it and challenges us to respond particularly to the social teachings of Jesus and presumably faith and belief will follow.

Whether you arrive at the same conclusions as Cox is for each person’s discernment. The importance of reading his dissertation is an opening of one’s mind so as to engender a clearer understanding of what are some of the dynamics and impacts on the type of society living in a secular city today.

SECULARATION: What is secularization? Cox reiterates the definition of Dutch theologian C. V. van Peursen: “(Secularisation is) the deliverance of man, first from religious and then from metaphysical control over his reason and his language. It is the loosing of the world from religious and quasi-religious understandings of itself, the dispelling of all closed worldviews, the breaking of all supernatural myths and sacred symbols. It represents the "defatalisation of history," the discovery by man that he has been left with the world on his hands, that he can no longer blame fortune or furies for what he does with it. Secularization occurs when man turns his attention away from worlds beyond and towards this time.”

Cox goes on to say: “Secularization implies a historical process, almost certainly irreversible, in which society and culture are delivered from tutelage to religious control and closed metaphysical world views.” This implies deliverance through the tribal, town, large cities and changes experienced in the technological era and now in the digital (cybernation) era.

SECULAR MAN: So what is this secular man? Cox sees him as very pragmatic and profane. “By pragmatism we mean secular man’s concern with the question ‘Will it work?’ Secular man does not occupy himself much with mysteries…. Profane means literally ‘outside the temple’… By calling him ‘profane’, we do not suggest that secular man is sacrilegious, but that he is unreligious.”

He is a man who is living in a large society (city) with multitudes of choices and distractions. He has no choice but to be in command of his own destiny. He can no longer rely on a
mystical God to deal with his life. God has given him this world and he is required to manage it. Secular man departmentalises his life in order to survive at work, at play and at home. Cox says “The anonymity of city living has helped preserve the privacy essential to human life….urban man…wants to maintain a clear distinction between private and public.”

**RELIGIOUS BODIES:** Cox anticipates the complete reorganisation of religious bodies, leading to their removal from all things capable of being dealt with by the state. Further, the freeing up of these bodies from property ownership, company investment and the like, thus will align them with their true mission “to perform the supportive role of the good things that are happening, and the critical voice against things that are damaging to human life in society, a prophetic voice.” He says that: “Jesus did not try to assume worldly power, secular power at all, but confronted the corrupt powers, both religious and secular of his time, from a position, a freed position, of non-violence and uninvolvement in the running of the society.”

Cox is concerned that we live in an age of accelerating change, with a static theology. So one of the fundamental questions to be asked is: “What are the sources of meaning and value by which man lives his life? Are they created and imposed by God, or does man invent them himself?” If man is now the leader (the responsible one) then: “our task is that of developing a theology of politics, and in particular a theology of revolutionary social change.”

Generally in our time, the preacher, priest or religious who speaks to man about God remains for the most part unheard. Cox’s holds that:“The sociological problem of speaking about God is that the role of the people who try to do so places them immediately in a perceptual context where what they say can be safely ignored.”

**LIBERATION THEOLOGY:** Cox sees the way forward as embracing the tenets similar to recent experiences of ‘Liberation Theology’ which is essentially a religious movement having political expression, or a political result. “Liberation theology is that ‘accompanying’ the poor and the captives in their pilgrimage is not only an ethical responsibility, but also provides the most promising context for theological reflection.”

**PASTORAL CARERS:** Pastoral carers do not limit their care to those of their own faith beliefs. Nor do they seek to proselytize. For pastoral carers then, Cox provides a good insight to the secular man within *The Secular City* and outlined the ‘why’ he/she is what he/she has become.

Understanding this is an important step in our caring ministry where we must accept fully a person’s journey and in doing so rejoice in the goodness of each person. There is no doubt also that pastoral care would fit well into Cox’s social response to the Gospel.

Pastoral carers and others who have strong ties to religious bodies and creeds may no doubt feel uncomfortable with Cox’s almost complete removal of the metaphysical and also to his challenge to the wider role religious organisations undertake today. But he does lead us to open our minds on the future of peoples’ belief in God and seeks to show one way in which this belief can be outwardly demonstrated.

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