

Fighting on Two Fronts

An Adventist Response to Secularism and Neopanthemism

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The human mind is the terrain on which God's followers have fought their crucial battles. Jesus was well aware of the dynamic power of ideas and commitments to change and move women and men. "You will know the truth," he said, "and the truth will set you free."¹

Jesus also saw a time prior to his second coming in which his followers would be challenged by two opposing forces in the spiritual arena. He anticipated the loss of belief in a transcendent God. "When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" he asked.² He predicted widespread fraudulent spirituality: "False Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible. Watch out that no one deceives you," he warned his disciples.³

These prophecies are now a reality, taking the form of two popular ideologies—secularism and neopanthemism—that appear under many guises. What do these opposing perspectives represent for Bible-believing Christians? In this essay we will draw their profile, examine their challenges, and propose an Adventist response.

Understanding Worldviews

All ideologies are ultimately based on a worldview (German, *Weltanschauung*): an integrated way of thinking about the world, life, and human destiny, which in turn determines one's ethical values and conduct.⁴ Every human being possesses a worldview:

Consciously or subconsciously, explicitly or implicitly, man knows that he needs a com-

prehensive view of existence to integrate his values, to choose his goals, to plan his future, to maintain the unity and coherence of his life—and that his metaphysical value-judgments are involved in every moment of his life, in his every choice, decision and action.⁵

Worldviews answer four basic questions:⁶

- **Who am I?** What is the origin, nature, meaning and purpose of human beings? What am I here for?
- **Where am I?** What is the origin and nature of the universe in which I live? How can I understand the reality I perceive?
- **What is wrong?** What is the basic problem that prevents me from attaining ultimate fulfillment? How do I understand and relate to evil?
- **What is the solution?** How can I overcome the obstacles to my fulfillment? How do I find lasting happiness?

Human beings have answered those fundamental questions in various ways. However, their responses can be grouped into three major worldviews:

1. **Theism** posits the existence of a personal God who is Creator, Sustainer, and Sovereign of the universe. He personifies justice and love. This worldview has been nurtured by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Christianity, in particular, has played a major role in shaping the philosophy, arts, science, technology, and social institutions of the modern world.

2. **Pantheism** identifies the Deity with the forces and processes of nature. From this perspective, everything that exists possesses a portion of the divine essence. Pantheism blurs the distinction be-

tween Creator and creation, between good and evil, and between the religions of the world. It emphasizes the divine in all beings and the sacredness of all things. Pantheism has been nurtured by Neo-Platonic influences and by Eastern religions.

3. **Naturalism** explains everything that exists in terms of physical elements and processes, and thus denies the reality of the transcendent. Although this worldview was known among the Greek philosophers, it gained impetus during the scientific revolution of the Enlightenment. During the past 150 years, naturalism has become the predominant worldview. Its assumptions undergird our scientific and technological culture. Several ideological currents derive from this worldview: materialism, empiricism, positivism, scientism, secularism, atheism, and Marxism.

Secularism: "There Is No God"

The difference between secularization and secularism can help us better understand the first challenge to the Christian worldview.

Secularization is a cultural phenomenon in which religious thinking, institutions, and practices lose their relevance in society. It represents the steady decline of organized religion, but not necessarily of spirituality. Secularization occurs in all societies as they modernize, and the results are not entirely negative.⁷

Four major cultural movements have advanced the process of secularization in the Western world:

The European Renaissance (14th-15th C.) marked a shift from theocentrism to anthropocentrism,

placing new emphasis on human values, creativity, and achievements. It also brought philosophy out from under the tutelage of theology.

The Protestant Reformation (16th C.) emerged as a result of open criticism of the church's deviation from its original principles and condemnation of its blatant abuses. The Reformers emphasized a personal faith, individual study of the Bible, and direct access to God through prayer and meditation.

The Enlightenment (17th-18th C.) granted paramount importance to human reason. The scientific method became the principal means of discovering truth, and divine revelation was gradually sidelined.

Socialism and Marxism (19th-20th C.) promoted scientific materialism as the best method to analyze the world and solve the problems of humanity. In this perspective, religion was "the opiate of the masses."

The Christian church as an institution has seen its role steadily reduced in Western societies. The church has been gradually replaced by the state in areas such as research in the natural sciences, business and economics, politics, education, the behavioral sciences, and social services.

Secularism, on the other hand, is a philosophy that consciously rejects all forms of religion, accepting only the facts and influences of the present life as being valid. In biblical terms, secularism is the intention of living "without God in the world."⁸

Langdon Gilkey lists four basic premises that characterize secularism:⁹

* Everything that exists is the result of contingency; that is, everything was caused by some natural phenomenon that preceded it in the natural universe, which has itself always existed.

* Since in this view human beings came into existence as the result of chance, it follows that they are endowed with autonomy.

Only they can determine the meaning of their life and chart their destiny.

* When human beings create their social environment without reference to a superior Being, relativity is the natural consequence. There are no moral absolutes. Time and place determine what is acceptable for an individual or for a particular group of people.

* Secularized humanity is very conscious of its own temporality. Since there seems to be no empirical evidence of life beyond the grave, death is the end of everything. Human thoughts and accomplishments disappear forever. Even the physical universe appears to be moving toward its own extinction.

Neopanthemism: "You Are a God!"

In contrast with the well-defined premises of secularism, neopanthemism cannot be easily catalogued. It represents a broad spectrum of religious trends derived from strands of Buddhism, Hinduism, Theosophy, shamanism, gnosticism, and the occult. Much of it is seductively wrapped in the jargon of modern psychology and science. In some circles this homogenized religion is known as New Age, supposedly in opposition to the Old Age of Christianity and rationalism.

This return to the mysterious and the transcendent in broad sectors of the Western world can be understood as a collective reaction to the loss of the sacred. This has, in turn, resulted from the combined impact of secularization and of secularism in modern culture. The Creator fashioned us as both *homo sapiens* and as *homo religiosus*. For that reason we find it difficult to carry out normal lives without referring to our spiritual dimension. Certainly God has "set eternity in the hearts of men."¹⁰ And even as old faiths collapse, human beings continue to seek

meaning, value, and purpose beyond themselves.

At the same time, we seem to be losing faith in the ability of reason and science to solve human problems. The devastation caused by two world wars and many bloody regional conflicts, the failure of political ideologies to bring a millenium of peace on earth, the possibility of global holocaust triggered by nuclear weapons, the threat to the ecological balance of our planet from human activities — all these factors contribute to a deep disillusionment with technology and to a search for the transcendent. In fact, some scientists are beginning to acknowledge that the scientific approach may not be the only or even the best method for knowing reality. Science is being openly considered to be "a story," with *homo sapiens* as its protagonist attempting to survive in a hostile environment.

This recent tendency toward a resacralization of the entire universe and life occurring in the West may be traced to the counterculture of the 1960s. During this time, hallucinogenic drugs began to be used as a way of reaching higher levels of consciousness. Parapsychology and transcendental meditation acquired an air of scientific respectability through university experiments. From within Roman Catholicism, the controversial writings of Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin suggested that matter and spirit are but two distinct aspects of one single cosmic element. De Chardin proposed that humanity is evolving, mentally and socially, toward a final spiritual unity with the cosmos — "Point Omega."

Hollywood soon exploited these trends in films such as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *The Exorcist*, *E.T.*, and the *Star Wars* saga, which attempt to depict the world beyond and friendly contacts with "the Force." With the "The Age of Aquarius" a deluge of pseudo-scientific and semi-re-

religious practices began to alter Western consciousness and its understanding of reality. These practices included biofeedback, self-hypnosis, yoga, est, Jungian dream analysis, primal therapy, and shamanistic rituals, to name a few. With her books *Out on a Limb* and *Dancing in the Light*, actress Shirley MacLaine emerged in the 1980s as the celebrity evangelist of the New Age. Her central message was clear—All of us are gods. We have lived before and will live again. There is no death. Each of us creates his or her own reality.

Douglas Groothuis outlines six premises that the New Age movement shares with neopanthemism:¹¹

* **All is One (Monism):** Everything in the universe is interrelated, interdependent, and interpenetrating. There is no essential difference between God, human beings, animals, and inanimate objects.

* **All is God (Pantheism):** Everything that exists somehow partakes of the divine essence. The Superior Being is a force, an energy, or a personality.

* **Humanity is God:** Each one of us is a god in disguise, and our own ignorance prevents us from fully realizing it.

* **A New Consciousness:** We have forgotten our true identity and need to be enlightened. Western rationalism must be replaced by a new way of thinking and feeling.

* **All Religions are One (Syncretism):** There may be various paths to the truth, the external features of religion may vary, but ultimately all aim at helping human beings become one with the One.

* **Cosmic Evolutionary Optimism:** We are at the threshold of a global transformation. Humanity will soon begin to direct its own

evolution. Domsday scenarios must be replaced by an expanding spiritual futurism that will lead us forward into a glorious future.

This new spirituality manifests itself in various ways such as the popularity of holistic health, the Human Potential movement, the convergence of physics and mysticism, and a vague religiosity that infuses contemporary Western culture. Some of these concepts are also penetrating Christianity. They subtly affect the language of preaching, church rituals, and the content of religious consciousness-raising seminars.

Basic Contrasts

As we compare the basic tenets of secular humanism and neopanthemism with those of biblical Christianity, we see opposing perspectives on reality and life.¹²

SECULAR HUMANISM	BIBLICAL CHRISTIANITY	NEOPANTHEISM
<p>1. Ultimate Reality Inanimate matter and energy that have always existed.</p>	<p>A transcendent and immanent God, knowable by human beings.</p>	<p>The spiritual universe, which is God/Mind/One/All.</p>
<p>2. Nature of God There is no such thing, because God is a myth.</p>	<p>A personal (triune), creatively active, morally perfect, omniscient, sovereign and eternal Being.</p>	<p>An impersonal, amoral but powerful God/Mind/One/All.</p>
<p>3. Origin of the Universe and Life The universe is eternal and operates according to laws of cause and effect in a closed system.</p>	<p>Created by God, ex nihilo and by his word, to operate according to laws of cause and effect in an open system.</p>	<p>Manifestations of the eternal God-Mind/One/All.</p>
<p>4. Means of Knowing Truth Unaided human reason, working through the scientific method.</p>	<p>God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ, through the Bible, through nature, and through human conscience and reason illuminated by the Holy Spirit.</p>	<p>Trained introspection plus channeled supernatural revelations.</p>
<p>5. Nature of Human Beings Extremely complex, self-conscious "machines" or highly intelligent animals, possibly evolving toward a higher species.</p>	<p>Physical-spiritual beings, with personality, created in God's image, capable of free moral decisions, now in fallen condition.</p>	<p>Spiritual beings, temporarily inhabiting physical organisms, in transition.</p>

<p>6. Purpose of Life Arguable: Self-fulfillment, pleasure, service to others, betterment of future generations.</p>	<p>Preparation for eternity, service to others, self-realization, attaining <i>shalom</i> (peace with God, oneself and others).</p>	<p>Seek progress (or suffer penalty) in movement toward union with God/Mind/One/All.</p>
<p>7. Basis of Morality Arguable: The majority consensus, contemporary mores, the best traditions, particular circumstances, individual conscience.</p>	<p>The unchanging character of God (just and merciful), revealed in Christ and the Bible.</p>	<p>Inner impulses; there is really no "right" or "wrong".</p>
<p>8. Cause of the Human Predicament Arguable: Ignorance of reality and true human potential; bad laws; imperfect government; negative social influences; lack of human understanding and cooperation.</p>	<p>Sin: conscious rebellion against God and his principles; attempt to enthrone human beings as autonomous and self-sufficient; as a result, the image of God became defaced and the entire world suffered.</p>	<p>Arguable: Ignorance of reality and true human potential; inability to comprehend supernatural messages.</p>
<p>9. Solution to the Human Predicament Education, science and technology, just laws, better government, human understanding and cooperation.</p>	<p>Spiritual rebirth: faith in Jesus that leads to a new life of loving obedience to God. Christians can exert a positive influence on the world, but the ultimate solution involves God's final intervention in history.</p>	<p>Change in consciousness; self-redemption.</p>
<p>10. Death Final end of existence in all its dimensions.</p>	<p>An unconscious parenthesis (for other Christians, entrance into another conscious state).</p>	<p>Entrance into a different kind of existence.</p>
<p>11. Human History Arguable: For some, unpredictable and without clear overarching purpose, guided both by individual decisions and by as yet unexplained forces. For others, a tortuous process toward a better humanity.</p>	<p>A meaningful sequence of events, guided by free human decisions, but also supervised by God; moving toward the fulfillment of God's overall plan.</p>	<p>A cyclical process, moving toward eventual union with the Deity.</p>
<p>12. Ultimate Human Destiny Nothingness.</p>	<p>Transformed beings in a New Earth, or eternal annihilation (or for other Christians, eternal punishment).</p>	<p>Permanent union with God/Mind-One/All.</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">Response and Projections</p> <p>In spite of their profound differences, secularism and neopantheism have some elements in common. Both propose one single reality in the universe. Secularists posit the equation of matter + energy; neopantheists, a cosmic spiritual consciousness. More importantly, both appeal to our pride</p>	<p>by placing self-sufficient human beings at center stage, regardless of whether they are viewed as intelligent machines (secularism) or as gods in disguise (neopantheism). In fact, there are already suggestions that a point of contact may exist between these two perspectives. Since secular humanists have found it difficult to explain the appearance of mind and intelligence in the universe, they have tended to spiritualize matter</p>	<p>until it becomes mind. At that point naturalism becomes pantheism. The <i>Humanist Manifesto II</i> allows for this confluence by stating that "nature may indeed be broader and deeper than we now know" (Proposition 1). In balance, secularism and neopantheism can be viewed as seductive, man-made options that appeal to faculties God gave</p>
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human beings at Creation: rationality and imagination.

In formulating an Adventist response to these opposing ideologies, we may keep in mind the following factors:

The true nature of human beings. Contrary to the understanding of most fellow Christians, we believe that, biblically speaking, human beings do not *have* an immortal soul but *are* a living soul. At the moment of death human beings enter an unconscious state that continues until the day of resurrection. That is why we agree with those who reject the concept of a cruel God who is now punishing or who will eternally punish the souls of those who refuse to accept his love on this earth. This view also helps us discard the theory of reincarnation as clearly non-biblical and to better identify the satanic origin of many supernatural manifestations.

The Great Controversy. The overarching theme of the great conflict between God and Satan, as presented in the Bible, connects seven key moments relating to salvation history: (1) God creates a perfect universe inhabited by beings endowed with moral choice; (2) one of God's most powerful creatures rebels in heaven—he and his followers are defeated; (3) God creates life on planet Earth; (4) the first human beings rebel against God's principles and fall from their perfect state; (5) Jesus Christ—God himself—becomes a human being in order to redeem humanity through his innocent death and miraculous resurrection; (6) Christ returns to earth as king to judge all humanity; (7) planet Earth is restored to its original condition, and the entire universe regains its pristine harmony.

The whole conflict centers on the true character of God and on the cosmic rebellion against his principles. Men and women attain true meaning and dignity when

they understand that their free moral choices affect the universe for eternity. The Great Controversy theme also provides a context for a Christian approach to the painful puzzle of human suffering.

Informed spiritual discernment. Adventists in general, and particularly those involved in higher education—both students and professors—must remain up-to-date on ideological currents in order to distinguish truth from falsehood. University students should ask, "What are the philosophical assumptions behind this theory or explanation? How do they relate to my biblical worldview? What are their implications?" The apostle Paul can serve as our model. While he was in touch with the cultural trends of his time, he was firmly grounded in the Scriptures. Above all, he was totally committed to Jesus Christ. Using metaphors of slavery and war, Paul's blunt counsel is especially relevant to us:

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.¹³

A balanced experience of faith. The regular study of the Word of God, individually and in groups, together with time for prayer and congregational worship, nurture the spiritual life and strengthen the mind against error. The guidance of the Holy Spirit has been promised to the believers as we seek a clearer understanding of the truth. By responding in Christian love to our neighbors' needs and by sharing our personal experience of the gospel with them, our own faith is strengthened.

Using the metaphors of salt and leaven, Christ asked his followers

to mix with their fellow human beings while remaining different, thus avoiding the extremes of insularity and syncretism. "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow Me.'"¹⁴

Hopeful prospects. If sociologists Stark and Bainbridge are right, our contemporaries are still receptive to a persuasive presentation of the gospel:

What organizational secularization has produced is a large population of unchurched people who retain their acceptance of the existence of the supernatural. They seem only to have lost their faith in the ability of the conventional churches to interpret and serve their belief in the supernatural.¹⁵

Since the biblical worldview is the most coherent view of the origin, purpose and destiny of human life, many secularized men and women respond positively to a tactful explanation of the Christian faith that is matched by a corresponding life-style. However, the possibility that we may succeed on our own in the battle against the combined challenges of secularism and neopaganism seems remote. Thus, with humility and hope, we turn again to the words of Jesus for encouragement: "When I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself. Surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age."¹⁶

NOTES

1. John 8:32. All Bible quotations are taken from the New International Version.

2. Luke 18:8.

3. Matthew 24:24, 4.

4. See John Fowler, "The Making of a Worldview," *Dialogue*, 2:1 (1990), pp. 5-8, 30, 31. See also Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind: How*

Should a Christian Think? (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1978).

5. Ayn Rand, *Romantic Manifesto* (New York: New American Library, 1975), p. 19.

6. Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), p. 35. See also Norman L. Geister and William Watkins, *Perspectives: Understanding and Evaluating Today's World Views* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1984); Arthur F. Holmes, *Contours of a World View* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983).

7. See Klaus Bockmuehl, "Secularization and Secularism: Some Christian Considerations," *Evangelical Review of Theology*, vol. 4 (January 1986), pp. 50-73; Anthony Campolo, *A Reasonable Faith: A Christian Response to Secularism* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983); Humberto M. Rasi and Fritz Guy, eds. *Meeting the Secular Mind: Some Adventist Perspectives*, rev. ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987).

8. Ephesians 2:12.

9. Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).

10. Ecclesiastes 3:11.

11. Douglas Groothuis, *Unmasking the New Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986).

12. See James Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988).

13. Colossians 2:8; Ephesians 6:12.

14. Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1942), p. 143.

15. Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1985), p. 44.

16. John 12:32; Matthew 28:20.

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