



Ginger Ketting-Weller

# SECULARIZATION

## and the Disappearance of the

# HOLY

**H**oliness is central to the life the Scripture calls its followers to live. The word *holy* occurs almost 600 times<sup>1</sup> in the Bible. The first time the word appears is in Exodus 3:5, when God commanded Moses, “Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” Exodus also includes the following applications of the word: a holy assembly, holy habitation, a holy nation, a holy day, a Holy Place with the Most Holy Place beyond that, and holy garments.

Jesus used the word *holy* often, primarily to speak of the Holy Spirit. He also spoke of the “Holy Father” and the “holy angels” once each (John 17:11; Matthew 25:31 [KJV]). The one other time He used the word is in Matthew 7:6: “Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before pigs.”

Bible characters were quite aware of the concept of holiness, accepting that there were consequences when holiness was breached. But these days we don’t often hear the word *holy*, particularly in higher education settings. I have wondered: Have we as educators in Adventist higher edu-

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“. . . [C]onsecrate yourselves therefore and be holy, for I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 20:7, NASB).<sup>2</sup>

cation lost the value of places, times, and experiences that are holy?

I think we have.

This has troubled me as I have thought of Seventh-day Adventist higher education. It seems to me that the biggest threat to Adventist higher education around the world is that of *secularization*.

But first, what is “secularization”? According to *Oxford English Dictionary*, it is the “disassociation or separation from religious or spiritual concerns.”<sup>3</sup> In my experience, the term seems only marginally related to my life in Adventist higher education. But it became very real a few years

ago when I heard an Adventist chaplain comment that he seemed to be the only pastor for a number of the teachers and staff in the university where he worked.

“What?” I thought, coming to full alert. “They have no other pastor?” But soon I understood him to mean that many employees in that institution were disconnected from any local church, pastor, or fellowship outside of their work culture.<sup>4</sup> How does one accomplish Adventist mission in such a community? How do we form disciples and prepare leaders with an awareness of the wider fellowship of Adventism? How do we seek to understand the character of our church as it operates outside of our institution? How do we build a shared understanding with fellow believers as to what is holy? How do we discover commonly held values between church and institution to which we can invite our students?

While keeping in mind that there could be other explanations for the comment made by the chaplain, his statement suddenly distilled a clear picture for me of the very real pull of Adventist society toward the secular and away from the recognition that

there are places, times, and experiences that should be considered holy.

### Finding the Holy Amidst the Secular

Within any given nation, culture, or subculture, there are multiple societies. And, for many of these societies regardless of geographic location, there is a trend toward secularization.<sup>5</sup> Some have been secular for centuries while others have slowly, over time, embraced more secular ideology. For many living in secular countries or cultures, there is little that is holy in their current society. However, many of these societies *do* seem to promote nonreligious values that they consider “holy.” Here are some that I’ve perceived as sacred within a secular worldview (some more related to certain cultures than others):

- *Being yourself;*
- *Being authentic;*
- *Saving face;*
- *Protecting your own priorities and desires;*
- *Achieving your own happiness and joy;*
- *Attaining educational and career success;*
- *Seeking economic comfort;*
- *Pursuing social justice (whether or not it is founded in religious belief;*
- *Preferring self over others.*

In a society that is deemed secular, moderated by a secular culture, each individual often becomes the final arbiter of what is considered holy. This is often accomplished without forethought. So, let us deliberately wrestle with a few questions.

**1. Are there holy people in a secular society?** In a secular society, there are those, for example, who are deemed to be so because of their influence on the society in which they live. Many of these individuals have developed an increased sense of freedom (exacerbated by social media) to bitterly critique others—peers, leaders, public figures, people holding political beliefs other than their own—ignoring that God has placed a spark of His image in each person. When people lose the understanding that

human beings have been created by God, who is holy, they tend to assume that the social destruction of another person is permissible. In the current social climate, it seems that many people show love to those whom they like, and objectify those whom they do not like, or with whom they disagree. While there is still some sense that leaders and public figures should be held to a higher standard of expression, the common person may be absolutely vicious toward those with whom he or she dis-

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agrees, refusing to listen, to understand, or to learn. When those who may not fit the profile of the “in” group are treated as if there is no spark of holiness in the very breath that God has lent them, then they can just be viewed as animated matter, barely more valuable than a sandstone rock.

**2. Are there holy times in a secular society?** The world is in constant state of unrest. The news is on a 24-hour cycle, the Internet never sleeps, electronic alerts continue to pop up on our phones, and the opportunities for entertainment and distraction are end-

less. In reflecting on an overly rule-oriented, joyless approach to Sabbath in the lives of some Adventist families, the tendency is to overcorrect and replace it with ceaseless activity that ignores the presence of God. In other words, the loss of a sense of holy time leaves a life that only becomes increasingly frenetic, anxious, and exhausting. There is no call to lift eyes and hearts heavenward, no call to a holy time that is made for humanity, but is God’s. Is it possible to fully understand the concept of “holy time” anymore? If so, what would it look like?

**3. Are there holy experiences in a secular society?** Does God speak in a secular society in ways that can be heard by believers? Are there deeper meanings in the events of history and the circumstances of life? Does a community worship experience have any claim on the life of a follower of Christ, or is it up to the individual to decide in the mood of the moment whether to participate or not? What about “holy ground” kinds of experiences? Can individuals have an experience that includes the presence of the Divine—God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, choosing to be in their presence while relinquishing control?

With regard to the increasing secularization and the disappearance of the holy, most noticeable in Western countries, some educators in Christian education, even Adventist higher education, are becoming very comfortable in keeping God at a safe distance, believing they can learn, achieve, and live without Him. The history of Christian higher education, however, tells a different story.<sup>6</sup>

My thoughts always bring me back to this point: I do not want to live in a secular wasteland. Yet I see too many Christians—including Adventists—accepting and participating in the increasing encroachment of secularism without stopping to notice, discuss, resist, or at least be intentional about what is happening.

Ponder this for a moment: Can you name three places, times, or experiences that are holy in your life?—

holy, as in a “take off your shoes as you stand in the presence of God” type of “holy”? If we lose sight of what is holy, then how can we prepare our characters for a heaven in which God’s holiness is the atmosphere we will breathe? And to get practical: If we don’t know how to define what “holy” looks like, how can we as educators wrestle with it and discuss it with our students?

In the midst of such negatives, the wave of secularism can sweep us right out of any heart-connection with our holy God, making religion into a rather quaint practice that is easy to discard at the slightest discomfort.

How do we address this serious problem?

First, we don’t hold back a wave by reaching out and smacking the people who are overcome, and drown with them. In fact, we can’t hold back a wave at all. All we can do is paddle our little ark around as fast as we can and try to rescue people. And that means that our ark has to be seaworthy. Which brings me to my next thought.

### The Invitation

God *invites* us to be holy, to be a holy people. He doesn’t browbeat us into it. We are invited, and we must in turn be invitational to others. Can we paint an appealing picture of the beauty of holiness, and invite others into it? Can we ensure that our schools and institutions of higher learning, while striving always to develop credible, rigorous, academically capable people, also protect and develop them as humans who honor holy places, observe holy times, and acknowledge holy experiences? Can Adventist educators become the paddlers of little arks carrying people into committed discipleship?

I see some encouraging signs that a new generation is starting to feel a yearning to sense a call of the holy. A couple of years ago, I led an Asian study tour that included a European student who had been raised in a world-

view of atheism. Studying to become a scientist, she reflected on what she had seen in Asian countries as we watched worshipers involved in their religious practices. She commented that she had never been able to make the “leap of faith” to seek comfort in Someone who might not even exist. As she shared her thoughts with me, she shared that her question had always been “Why?” Why should anyone believe in God when there was no proof of His existence? Watching devoted worshipers in the Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian traditions, she commented, “Instead of asking myself ‘why’ all the time, I have started asking myself ‘why not?’” In countries only lightly touched by secularism, it was in observing the devotion of worshipers who believe in the “holy” that she found herself drawn to a sense of peace and joy that she saw in those worshipers.

There is no major conversion story here. The work of the Holy Spirit proceeds on its own timeline, and change can happen only with one’s consent. As educators, we can be patient; we can listen; we can model and encourage. My student’s story is not over yet. But I am encouraged by the pull of “the holy” on her heart. It was an invitation that could not be ignored, even as she heard it within the context of a lifetime lived without God. Holy spaces, holy times, and holy experiences spoke to this young woman.

### The Call

The call of the Scriptures is a call to holiness. We, as believers in Christ, and as Adventist educators, have been called to reflect the light that is a gift from God: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9, NIV).<sup>7</sup> This call, in the context of the biblical narrative of good and evil, holiness and sin, invites all to place their faith in His righteousness for “Even before the world was made, God had already chosen us to be his through our union

with Christ, so that we would be holy and without fault before him. (Ephesians 1:4, GNT).<sup>8</sup> We belong to God, and as His children, our lives are to be a fulfilment of His purposes and promises (Ephesians 1:5). The time is right to have deep conversations in higher education circles about what is holy, about how that inherently places claims on our lives, and about how it implies promises. ✍

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*This article has been peer reviewed.*

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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The word *holy* appears in the *New American Standard Bible* 592 times.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scriptural references in this essay are quoted from the *New American Standard Bible*®, Copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by The Lockman Foundation. All rights reserved.
3. Lexico Powered by the Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021): <https://www.lexico.com/definition/secularization>.
4. There could be other explanations for the comment made by the chaplain; he could have been referring to both Adventist and non-Adventist faculty.
5. The debate regarding trends toward global secularization is ongoing. Some credit disenchantment with social, political, or even religious institutions as a driving force. Other sources suggest an increase in religious fervor due to growing discontent with science, rationalism, and social/political or-

ganizations. For more, see Gabe Bullard, "The World's Newest Major Religion," *National Geographic* (April 2016): <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/160422-atheism-agnostic-secular-non-rising-religion>; Stephanie Kramer and Dalia Fahmy, "Younger People are Less Religious Than Older Ones in Many Countries, Especially in the U.S. and Europe," *Pew Research Center Fact Tank* (June 2018): <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/06/13/younger-people-are-less-religious-than-older-ones-in-many-countries-especially-in-the-u-s-and-europe/>; Harriet Sherwood, "Religion: Why Faith is Becoming More and More Popular," *The Guardian* (August 2018): <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/>

[aug/27/religion-why-is-faith-growing-and-what-happens-next](https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/27/religion-why-is-faith-growing-and-what-happens-next).

6. The history of Christian higher education is one that reflects an ongoing struggle with secularism, not only in the United States, but also globally. Works such as George M. Marsden's *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) explores this history in more detail. For more on this topic, see Stephanie Litzzette Mixon, Larry Lyon, and Michael Beaty, "Secularization and National Universities: The Effect of Religious Identity on Academic Reputation," *The Journal of Higher Education* 75:4 (July-August 2004): 400-419; Perry L. Glanzer, "The Role of the State in the

Secularization of Christian Higher Education: A Study of Postcommunist Europe," *Journal of Church and State* 53:2 (Spring 2011): 161-182. For more on the role of the Christian college, consider Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1987), or Todd C. Ream and Perry L. Glanzer, *The Idea of a Christian College: A Re-examination for Today's University* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2013).

7. 1 Peter 2:9. *Holy Bible, New International Version*®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

8. Ephesians 1:4-5. *Good News Translation* (GNT) Copyright © 1992 by American Bible Society.



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