

Notes from Fr. Nick

Sacred vs. Secular

The terms “sacred” and “secular” are bandied about regularly as if they are opposed to one another, but the origins of these terms suggests they are complementary. Generally, the category of *sacred* is understood to include spiritual things and is the purview of religion, while *secular* refers to everything else.

Throughout the Middle Ages, when the Church dominated all aspects of life, the concepts of *sacred* and *secular* were understood in terms of Neo-Platonic philosophy. Sacred was the realm of heaven and superior to the material or profane world. Secular and profane often were understood as synonymous.

The trouble is: *God made the material world.* He chose it as the arena in which we work out our relationship with him. To look on the material, secular world as inferior (or even evil) is to imply that God has played a nasty trick on us, or that he is not perfect. The secular world is messy, evolving, and fraught with peril, but it is God’s creation, and he created it out of love for us. While we can reject the love God has for us and make this world a difficult place, that is the fault of the human race. It is not God’s fault.



In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries many philosophers promoted the secular world as superior to the sacred. They believed, like Karl Marx, that religion was just a fantasy and would be gradually replaced by science and critical thinking. Clearly, their prophecies were wrong. For good and ill, religion is as strong as ever. Perhaps scientists should see human beings as “hard-wired” for religion and accept it as they do other human traits.

While we aspire to life with God, it is His will that we grow in His image in this secular, material world. Even heaven as envisioned in the New Testament will not ultimately be a place strictly of the spirit. The Kingdom of God is imagined as a transformed material world in which it and the spiritual realms are reconciled.

What does this mean for us today? Mostly it means that we cannot wish away the secular world around us. The challenges, joys, sorrows, and achievements we experience in the world here and now are the place God has decided to meet us. Who are we to critique his choice?