



DR STEVE HOLMES teaches in the areas of historical and systematic theology at St Mary's College, University of St Andrews. He is also a member of the editorial committee of *The Bible in TransMission*.

HUMAN BEINGS ARE INCURABLY RELIGIOUS. LEFT TO OURSELVES, WE TELL STORIES TO CREATE MEANING, AND THEN SHAPE OUR LIVES BY THEM AS IF WE HAD FOUND TRUTH. We endure every natural phenomenon with power, and then, believing our own lies, we fear and worship it. Giants and dragons war to create our worlds; elephants and tortoises carry them through space; spirits and ghosts inhabit every tree and stream and stone.

In a post-Christian Western society, we are arrogant and ignorant enough to dismiss such attitudes as 'primitive'. They are not; they are pre-Christian, but that is rather a different thing. Much of the Bible is the history of God teaching his people that the stories of gods and demons are not true, that the spirits do not hide under every bush. People who have not had the centuries of hard learning of these lessons portrayed in the Scriptures still believe such things, however technologically advanced they might be – and people who have given up on the Scriptures rapidly return to such beliefs, although at present in the Western world most of them remember enough shame to call the old gods by new names.

At the heart of Israel's faith is a confession: the words 'Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD' are to be repeated and repeated, discussed on journeys, taught to children, written on houses, learnt and remembered (Dt 6.4–9). Whatever else may claim worship and loyalty from human beings is to be dethroned and rejected. And the battle comes again and again: as God speaks of his care for his people on a mountain-top, at the foot of the mountain they are casting a golden calf to worship; another prophet comes to a different mountain, and challenges those who worship the wrong god.

Isaiah mocks those who construct and worship idols mercilessly: 'Half of it he bums in the fire; over this half he roasts meat, eats it and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, "Ah, I am warm, I can feel the fire!" The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, "Save me, for you are my god!" They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand. No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, "Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted meat and have eaten. Now shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?"' (Is 44.16–19 NIV)

THE CHRISTIAN INVENTION OF SECULARISM

STEVE HOLMES

His words are remarkably secular, deconstructing the enchantment of the world by exposing the banal origins of the things rendered awesome and sacred. Israel does not need to invest things with any spurious mystique: her God is mysterious and awesome enough already, as Isaiah has just been insisting.

One of the most interesting 'secularising' passages in the Old Testament is in Genesis 1. The passage is carefully constructed, balanced and poetic, but it breaks on the fourth day. The passage reads: 'And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. God made the two great lights – the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night – and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day (Gen 1.14–19 NRSV) Why not say 'sun and moon'? Why is this the only point in the creation account in Genesis 1 that suggests any purpose on God's part ('for seasons and days and years'; 'to give light on the earth'; 'to rule over the day and the night')? We need to remember that all the nations around Israel – like most human societies throughout history – worshipped the sun and moon as deities. In telling of their creation by her God, Israel responded with mockery. They are not gods, but lamps and clocks hung in the sky by the one true God to give light and to tell the time by!

Other common myths get the same treatment in the Old Testament. The great sea-monster, the personification of all the forces of chaos and evil in ancient Near Eastern mythology, appears as Leviathan, sometimes conquered with ease by the God of Israel (Ps 74.14; Is 27.1), and once even made by the LORD to 'frolic in the sea' (Ps 104.26). An evil monster? No, God's goldfish!

And so we could go on: spiritualism; fortune-telling; astrology – all are condemned and mocked in equal measure in the biblical text. The world described by the Scriptures is not endowed with mystery and full of strange spirits and occult happenings; it is created by God physical and comprehensible and rational, a welcoming home for human beings to live in, a place for us to enjoy and to respect and to shape, not to fear or to worship.

'Christianity invented the concept of the secular by offering a gospel that is, apparently, the only effective antidote to our religiosity'

► As Christianity spread, first across the Mediterranean coasts, and then into northern Europe, the Americas, and finally throughout much of the rest of the world, this disenchantment of the world spread with it. Some stories are iconic: St Boniface, for example, converting pagan Germany in part by taking an axe to a sacred tree, which would later be hung with baubles to announce the birth of the Christ who lived and died to free us from such superstitious slavery. In other cases the assault was quieter, but perhaps just as effective: St Augustine, narrating the very different lives of pairs of twins as an antidote to belief in astrology.

The most telling event in the history of Christian secularisation is less well-known, however. Francis Bacon devised and recorded the methods of natural science in the sixteenth century. Historians of science have for seventy years now accepted the analysis, first advanced by Michael Foster in 1934, that the idea of science became conceivable because medieval Franciscan theologians had carried on the programme of disenchanting the world with a thoroughness that had not been seen before. Taking as their starting point the core Christian confession of creation out of nothing, and that God's perfection was such that he neither needed nor gained anything from the creation, they argued that the creation was therefore free to be itself, to have its own internal logic which could be investigated. If the sun and moon are gods, and the motion of the stars is somehow intimately linked to human destiny, there is no point in plotting the motions of the heavenly bodies looking for patterns, but in a disenchanted world, we might do this, and even discover gravity.

The same applies to the human sciences. The very word 'secular' comes to us from St Augustine's great 'tale of two cities', *The City of God*, written to explain that the sack of Rome by Alaric's Visigoths in 410 was due to mundane politics and economics, not the vengeful actions of angry deities. The secular world, Augustine argues, has its own rationality which could be investigated and explained – he thought such investigation a distraction from the real business of living for the kingdom of heaven, true, but the point was there.

But what of our own culture? As we lose Christianity, we return to the old world of fearful enchantments, once again. Neopaganism is on the rise, placating the spirits of the trees that Boniface once took an axe to; every newspaper carries an astrology column, although Augustine's disproof remains unanswered.

Complementary medicine, seeking to 'balance energies' in our bodies is everywhere, citing (mostly spurious) tales of its roots in ancient wisdom in its defence.

Of course, living after the scientific revolution, we more naturally clothe our craven myths in pseudo-scientific terms. Those who trumpet most about the need for 'secularism' have tried to teach us to believe in memes, aliens and multiple universes. We look for evidence of premonition, telepathy and other scientific-sounding magic. Today's newspaper, even, carries a story about a famous hypnotist, censored for making over-extravagant claims about the power of his 'art' to change lives. There are also stories about a premiership football club using Feng Shui to design its new stadium and the Burmese military junta relying on the advice of astrologers for the timing of their campaigns.

Human beings are incurably religious. Christianity invented the concept of the secular by offering a gospel that is, apparently, the only effective antidote to our religiosity. The effectiveness of that gospel, however, depended on the ability to give a meaningful account of the rationality of the world. Our modern secularists do not understand this, and, decrying Christianity along with the false myths, merely invites the creation of new myths. As GK Chesterton once said, 'People who give up believing in God don't believe in nothing, they believe in anything.' ■