

Medieval Joe

Modern people search for meaning in life, in a pursuit that is often furious, but ultimately fruitless. When Thoreau wrote that “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,”¹ he characterized a modern problem that began long before. The industrial revolution, the sexual revolution, and more recently, the information age, social media, and a global pandemic have intensified feelings of isolation and meaninglessness for modern people. Wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leads to destruction, and many have found it.

Although skeptics will chide them as hopelessly naïve, more than a few Christian believers seem to have found meaning in life. The contrast between Christian belief and the dead ends of secular philosophy is greater than ever, as if to highlight the words that begin the Westminster Shorter Catechism, “What is the chief end of man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”²

But if we leave these hopeful Christians aside for the moment, we may ask, “What led to the loss of meaning for most people in the modern world?”

An examination of European medieval society will reveal there was social pressure not only to believe in God, but to see the entire world as an enchanted place full of meaning. Mark Sayers, author of *The Road*

Trip that Changed the World, coined the term “Medieval Joe” and remarks that in medieval times “it was almost impossible to not believe in God.”³

In the Middle Ages, the European world was filled with meaning. Today, modern people pursue meaning, unlike medievals, who found no need to search for it. In the Middle Ages, Medieval Joe continually acknowledged the intersection of spiritual realities with his daily life and therefore discovered meaning lurking in every corner of his world.

In some Christian circles, the modern conception of faith has been whittled down to a nub of propositional logic that can be rationally affirmed or denied. Today many who wouldn’t dare deny the Gospel lead compartmentalized lives, effectively repudiating on Friday and Saturday what was asserted with confidence on Sunday.

To Medieval Joe, such double-mindedness would be unimaginable. Likewise, the faith received by the medieval mind was so rich and deep that it’s hard for us moderns to grasp. Every decision and event whether good or bad, had meaning—gentle rain, the baby’s fever that broke, a good crop, or bandits on the road, dough that wouldn’t rise, a cow that died—and to medievals, such happenings were obviously spiritual. Small village communities, centered around the parish church, reinforced the belief that the world was a spiritual place. Sayers writes that “the overwhelming social

pressure was to believe,”⁴ and “God’s hand was everywhere and behind everything. The cosmos was a purposeful and ordered place where every decision held moral significance and morality itself carried cosmic weight.”⁵ By comparison, the impoverished modern secular worldview lacks any spiritual component. But even modern people are spiritual beings after all, so from time to time when the pressures of life reach us, we grasp impotently at spiritual things in irrational “leaps of faith.” However, this kind of “faith” has little or nothing to do with true Christian belief.

In his magnum opus, *Theology and Social Theory*, theologian John Milbank boldly remarks, “Once, there was no ‘secular’,”⁶ and goes on to write about a wholesome “single community of Christendom”⁷ in medieval times. As such, Christendom of the Middle Ages was a cohesive whole, with nothing separate, nothing secular. The secular itself had to be invented because it was not possible to conceive of reality without a spiritual component, as we now do so routinely and comprehensively.

Since the Middle Ages, philosophical shifts in the intervening centuries have changed much about the way we think. An artificial division has carved the secular out of the sacred whole. In his preface to an interview with theologian John Milbank, cultural commentator Ken Myers observes,

“the modern dualism that characteristically separates the sacred and secular gives rise to many other separations that impair and disorient us. Faith is divorced from reason, piety from erudition, redemption from creation, grace from nature, imagination from rationality, theology from philosophy.”⁸

The same driving forces that resulted in secularization have caused many other divisions since the medieval period when, not only was there no ‘secular’, but knowledge itself could be described as a unified whole under God as Creator.

Much of the unity of knowledge that was recognized in the medieval period and led to the founding of Christian universities has been lost because of the divisions Myers noted. Medieval Joe truly lived in a different world.

The Christian worldview offered hope to Medieval Joe, but it still gives hope and ultimate meaning to life, even for modern people—if they are willing to accept it.

[1] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Seattle, WA: Amazon Classics, 2017), 9.

[2] See, for example, *The Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (website), accessed January 7, 2021, <https://www.opc.org/sc.html>.

[3] Mark Sayers, *The Road Trip That Changed the World* (Chicago, Moody, 2012), 67.

[4] Ibid., 69.

[5] Ibid.

[6] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed., (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 9.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ken Myers, host, *Mars Hill Audio Journal* (podcast), Volume 138, accessed November 3, 2018, <https://www.marshallaudio.org>

Questions:

1. How have the sacred and secular been separated in modern life?

We are separated by social media’s cheap imitation of connectedness. Even families under the same roof are connected to devices but disconnected from each other while eating in the same room. Fast food separates us in time for the benefit of convenience. Television, the internet and social media separate us into bedrooms. People know less and less of their neighbors. Even before we consider the sacred, we are already separated from community with others, including our own families.

But we are also separated from what is sacred. Sex is no longer sacred because in the secular view it’s just biological and emotional. Work is no longer sacred. Not even work at our jobs should be outside the dominion and authority of God. We are to work as unto the Lord (cf. Colossians 3:23).

Meals are sacred. Marriage is sacred. Everything in life is sacred, because we “were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:20). Not only ourselves, but “whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). The supposed modern division between sacred and secular is an artificial one.

2. How did societal shifts like the industrial revolution and the sexual revolution contribute to the separation of sacred and secular?

Industrialization that began in earnest in the late 18th century began a massive societal shift in which families were separated because of work. At first men moved from country villages into cities to seek work in factories. Trends toward specialization and the division of labor eventually meant that whole families, including children, were separated by the demands of work. Family life was no longer held together in a local agricultural village with the church at its center.

The sexual revolution promised that sexual freedom for both women and men would result in greater self-fulfillment and happiness. Instead, the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s brought sexually transmitted diseases, divorce, and the breakdown of families. The fallout from failed, uncommitted relationships increased emotional and psychological damage. Perhaps most importantly, the breakdown of the family meant that fewer fathers were present physically or emotionally for their children, the single greatest contributing factor to a host of societal ills from drug abuse, gang violence, incarceration, to teen pregnancy and other problems.

Defending Your Faith

Youth Group / Small Group topics:

- Worldview: Christianity vs. Idea Viruses
- Investigate Intelligent Design (ID)
- How Not to Read the Bible
- Apologetics Crash Course



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