



# Seculosity

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## The Summary

### Introduction

In this modern era, we're constantly bombarded with poll results about declining levels of Church attendance and belief in God, and we assume that this means more people are abandoning faith and religion. However, what these polls tell us is more straightforward: the confidence in the religious narratives we've inherited has collapsed. What they fail to report is that the marketplace in replacement religion is booming. We may be sleeping in on Sunday mornings in large numbers, but we've never been more religious. That's a bold statement to make, I know, and one that greatly depends on your definition of religion. If you go with the common conception—of robes and kneeling and God, what we

might call “capital-R Religion”, then yes, people are indeed bailing in unprecedented numbers.

The perspective changes, however, once you choose a broader view of religion. Religion isn't merely that which explains the inexplicable but the lens through which we make sense of the world around us, set our priorities and focus our desires. We'll call this “small-r religion.” It's what we rely on to tell us we're okay, that our lives matter; it's our preferred guilt management system. It's the justifying story of our life. Our religion is that which we rely on not just for meaning or hope, but for *enoughness*, and enoughness is a universal human longing.

For centuries we've relied on capital R-Religion for this purpose. The Church provided us a place to go with our

guilt and shame but in the modern world, for more and more people that no longer feels like an advisable or available option. Some predict that in the near future, we'll no longer need religion, we'll be in a glorious post-religious age of human flourishing. However, the needs addressed by Religion, like hope, purpose, connection, justification, and enoughness, haven't diminished. The psychic energy involved hasn't evaporated. It can't. It has to go somewhere. And with alters off the table, fresh targets have cropped up all over the place. It seems the further we retreat from a shared Religion, the more contenders emerge to take its spot. These new religions go by different names, but function more or less the same, maintaining all the demand, but none of the mercy of the capital-R variety.

These days most people, even those who aren't atheists, don't like being told they're religious. The ever-increasing demographic of the "spiritual but not religious" shows that religion is considered a dirty word. This is why I propose a fresh term: Seculosity. A catchall for religiosity that's directed towards earthly rather than heavenly objects. This book aims to explore how leaning on Seculosity for enoughness has a tendency to turn toxic and what we can do about that.

## Chapter 1: The Seculosity of Busyness

Ask anyone how they're doing and aside from the stock replies like "fine" or "well", there's a good chance they'll respond with "busy". And as reflexive and unoriginal as the answer may be, it's not dishonest. I'm hardly the first to notice how common busyness has become in our everyday lives. To be busy is to be valuable, desired, and justified. It signals importance and therefore, enoughness. Busy is not just *how* we are anymore, but *who* we are, or who we'd like to be. Busyness now serves as a barometer for personal enoughness. It has become a virtue in and of itself. It's a status symbol; a public display of enoughness.

This is not a natural phenomenon, as research on this

issue paints a foreboding picture, health-wise. Being busy all the time has the possibility of resulting in chronic stress, and therefore heart disease, sleeplessness, higher blood pressure, and shorter life spans, to say nothing of general fatigue. But what if I'm exhausted? At least I feel accomplished enough. This chronic busyness is part of performancism, one of the hallmarks of all forms of Seculosity. Performancism is the assumption that there's no distinction between what we do and who we are. Your resumé isn't part of your identity; it is your identity. Performancism also implies that if you're not doing enough, you're not enough. It turns life into a competition to be won or a problem to be solved instead of, say, a series of moments to be experienced and cherished. Our devotion to performancism on various levels lies at the root of much of the anxiety, loneliness, and fatigue that we suffer from today. It particularly affects young people, pressured to meet the highest possible standards of academic and athletic excellence, resulting in skyrocketing rates of self-harm and suicide rates. The ever-increasing popularity and accessibility of social media don't help in this situation either, with our feeds starting to resemble the high-score rankings screen of Life, where we're constantly comparing our personal best to everyone else's and failing to meet unrealistic standards.

Now, performancism isn't a purely secular force, some of the most toxically performancist environments exist inside the church where anxious people frantically try to outdo one another in the good-works department. The goals might be different, but the exhaustion and anxiety produced are identical to the secular correlates. "I just couldn't keep it up anymore!" is the refrain I've heard from many a refugee from performancist churches.

Capital-R Religion once provided a space to come clean and free ourselves of guilt and shortcomings. The church wasn't busy. If anything, it was boring and full of silence; a place to receive rather than achieve. While churches devoid of performancism may have largely

vanished, the glimpses they offered of an alternative way of approaching ourselves and the world, will still be remembered.

## Chapter 2: The Seculosity of Romance

Back in 73, Ernest Becker, in his book *The Denial of Death*, predicted the wedding industry's explosive growth along with the idea of apocalyptic romance. To fill the void left by capital-R Religion, we turn first and foremost to romance. "The love partner becomes the divine ideal within which to fulfill one's life. All spiritual and moral needs now become focused on one individual." Becker foresaw what many of us are now experiencing all around us; that there is no more fertile ground for Seculosity than romance and relationships. Let's see:

- Do we look to romantic love to tell us we're enough? Check.
- Do our relationships often house our primary guilt management system? Check.
- Does romance provide a (theoretical) route to transcendence and salvation? Double check.
- Do we ritualize it into oblivion? Hey now.

If you're confused, think back to middle school when performancism reaches a peak in relationships. More than affection, we're looking for approval, the validation not that we're loved so much as lovable. Ironically, this type of self-consciousness has a way of repelling the opposite sex, while self-confidence attracts and makes sense. You can't get close to someone who's using you to prop up their enoughness. Sustaining love does not fit well with performancism.

Let's give ourselves a reality check. In the past couple hundred years, there has been an enormous shift in what we look for in a spouse. For most of human history, people used to marry for land, peace, security, offspring, etc. However, in recent times, instead of seeking

someone to meet our material and societal needs, we seek someone to meet our emotional needs. We come to one person and ask them to give us belonging, identity, continuity, comfort, novelty, familiarity, hope, basically everything that we once wanted from "God." We want to marry a savior. But whoever we marry with such a framework will inevitably fail us simply because of them being a person. We're setting ourselves up for failure with this approach, as trying to pursue love in an atmosphere like this seems to preclude love from being found at all.

I think this is close to what the apostle John meant when he spoke of God being love. The love of God, as we see borne out in the life and death of Jesus Christ, seems to correctly assume that we all have a very limited ability to love other people, let alone our Creator. And yet, like a shepherd going after a lost sheep, it persists. Instead of insisting on proof of lovability, it produces it.

The Bible posits a model for romance and marriages that's focused not on expediency or mutual gratification, but on self-emptying and sacrifice. In which both people aim to satisfy rather than introduce expectations.

## Chapter 3: The Seculosity of Parenting

Like many new parents, before our first child was born, my wife and I devoured a stack of books. Some of these we bought ourselves, but most were gifted to us by friends. However, truth be told, I cannot remember a single thing I learned from a parenting book and I wish I was exaggerating. I can remember tips that friends offered and stories our parents told, but all the approaches and to-do's we memorized vanished the second our little guy came into the world.

This doesn't mean the books had no purpose. They served what may have been their *true* purpose: to calm down our anxiety. All that reading makes us feel a little less afraid of what we're getting into.

It doesn't take thorough research to notice how much the parenting section in the bookstore resembles the religious one. How to raise a happy child, a gritty child, a creative child, a kind child. These handbooks adopt an almost identical format to Christian ones on prayer, purpose, or church growth.

Instead of denominations, however, you have camps. In our case, there were two dominant ones. The Babywise counseled ensuring a straight schedule for the newborn's naps and feeding. On the other hand, the Attachment paradigm counseled paying close attention to the child and following the baby's lead when it came to rhythms of sleeping and eating. While opposite, both camps (and most others) project a vision of what's "righteous": child-rearing. Both have their codes of conduct; both have their cardinal sins.

Since the early '80s, a whole industry has emerged around the word "parent", and I'm not just talking about books, magazines, and websites, but conferences, seminars, podcasts, schools, medications, therapies, and tutors. Somewhat ironically, this flood of parenting resources corresponds directly to the size of our fear of "getting things right". Parents today are bombarded with (often contradicting) techniques, most of which position themselves as not just wise or helpful, but righteous.

Wherever the line between an overdeveloped sense of parental responsibility and full-blown Seculosity lies, we appear to have crossed it. Many parents nowadays depend on their children for their enoughness, where the child's achievement becomes the parent's justifying story. Human mothers and fathers try to take on the role of the all-knowing, all-seeing, all-protecting Parent. However, this behavior betrays a belief that there is no future for our kids beyond that which we provide for them. Such an astronomical burden is a recipe for breakdown in parents just as much as their teenage kids.

## Chapter 4: The Seculosity of Technology

In the early 1890's, two men in Paris were overheard talking:

"When the bell rings, you get up and answer it?"

"Why, yes. Certainly."

"I see. Just like a servant."

More than a century ago, this conversation was taking place about the early telephone. A man had willingly subordinated himself, ready to be summoned at the clang of the bell. If this was the effect of the early telephone, imagine the influence of the now common "smart" kind.

Back in 2016, I made the tough decision to abandon my smartphone and live with a flip phone. The truth was that I didn't have the self-restraint not to check the thing at every free moment. No notification shall go unchecked. Like many others, I had come to rely on the quick access to the internet for affirmation and distraction it provided: affirmation of my enoughness and distraction from my not-enoughness. However, to be a servant is one thing, a slave another.

The internet, smartphones, and computers aren't inherently good or evil. Innovation simply allows better and easier ways to do things, and we adapt to it. We attach values to how these things are used and experienced, not the things themselves.

The benefits of internet technology—the good it makes possible—are obvious. The liabilities are less so. Those we are only beginning to understand. All those zeroes and ones have created a place where our striving after righteousness can operate day and night. Seculosity comes into play when technology ceases to be a vehicle for chasing enoughness and becomes the actual source of it.

The internet is made up of data, and alas, where there is data, there is measurement. Even the most mundane tasks, when quantified, can become a point of comparison. To chart ourselves (and others) and find out how we're doing. Whether we're doing better than others, whether we are, in the final tally, enough.

Our reliance on technology for enoughness consists of a twofold (and eerily religious) strategy: first to avoid condemnation and second, to pronounce absolution. We use technology to distract us from that which we would rather not feel. It anesthetizes. Screens distract us from our core pain, which is the pain of not being enough, the reality of our finitude.

In addition to distracting us, technology also provides users with the illusion of autonomy. With technology allowing us to achieve momentary liberation from restrictive circumstances, we shake our fist against the Law that tells us we're men and women with limits and dependencies and insist we are Creators. However, the irony is, that our addiction to control ends up controlling us. The cruel irony is, that there's nothing less autonomous than a group of people all glued to their smartphones.

## Chapter 5: The Seculosity of Work

Despite boasting the smallest number of paid days off, the US leads the developed world in untaken vacation days. We clock in some 1,788 hours a year, 120 more than our counterparts in Britain, and 400 more than the Germans. We may think we want to "get away from it all" and we may complain about the non-stop pace of today's economy but these numbers tell a different story. People who have the means and opportunity to take a week or two off every year opt not to.

The question is not so much why we work such insane hours, but why we've come to prefer it. Could it be that our careers provide us with much more than a paycheck? Welcome to what may be our single most enthralling replacement religion, the Seculosity of work.

In the Bible, Saint Paul often takes issues with those who depend on "good works" for their righteousness. Today we've simply subtracted the "good" part. When work becomes the primary provider of identity, purpose, worth, and community in our lives, it ceases to function as employment and begins functioning as a religion. Or at least we try to make it responsible for providing the very things to which we used to look to God. And once work takes that position in our lives, procrastination becomes a mortal sin. To procrastinate is to transgress the most precious of capitalist pieties. It breaks a law that has become, for all intents and purposes, holy: Thou Shalt Produce. A study made in the mid-2000s discovered what anyone who struggles with procrastination all too well: the emotion most commonly experienced with procrastination, the emotion that defines procrastination, is guilt. Most Americans feel acute guilt over "not getting things done." Would the same number admit to feeling guilty about more conventional moral failures, such as lying or cheating? Doubtful.

It appears that productivity has surpassed goodness as our society's highest value, our cultural righteousness is now linked more closely to efficiency than morality. You could say the cult of productivity worships the god of success and performance, and you wouldn't be wrong.

## Chapter 6: The Seculosity of Leisure

One Sunday I received a call from a friend of mine. He was out on his run that morning and wanted me to know that he had passed three gyms with full parking lots, five packed fitness studios, and six nearly empty churches. "Thanks for the report," I said, disingenuously. He hadn't called just to needle his religious friend. We'd had a conversation a few days prior about the SoulCycle phenomenon, which was beginning to grow rapidly at the time. We were both invited by a mutual acquaintance of ours who was an instructor, to come down to the "Soul Sanctuary" and do a class. I was afraid of the soreness it would result in, but my buddy took the leap and immediately got weirded out by the



overt religiosity—and this is coming from a guy well acquainted with fitness fanatics.

SoulCycle may be the most popular fitness company to appeal to the spiritual aspirations of its customers, but they are far from the only one. Americans have been religious about exercise for a long time but in the last decade or so, marketers have made the association quite explicit. Sunday mornings no longer present a choice between church and the gym; the gym now is the church. You pay your tithe, you pass the peace, you follow the same rituals, and sit under the same symbols, maybe even reach endorphin-induced transcendence, what athletes call the zone.

The idea here is not that exercise is somehow bad. Of course not! Cutting out junk food and getting our bodies off the couch and moving can do wonders. There's nothing wrong with wanting to feel physically good, but there's a world of difference between exercise as good for us, and exercise for salvation.

The Seculosity of leisure consists of not just exercise, but all those activities that occupy our downtime: hobbies, relaxation, play, and sleep. The irony is that the sectors of human life that seem far from productivity have been taken captive by the cult of productivity, turning relaxation itself into a venue for score-keeping and self-justification.

Let's take children's playtime as an example. More and more parents and schools now overschedule their kids' lives, enforcing and dictating what's "playtime" and what's not. However, "play", as defined by psychologists, is an activity that is self-chosen and self-directed; intrinsically motivated; and produced in an active, alert, but non-stressed frame of mind. It's not a means to an end, but rather an activity as its reward. In simple words, ordering someone to have fun is a guaranteed way to ensure they don't. The second you attach a desired outcome to play, when it becomes a tactic or strategy for improved performance, it ceases

to be play. It becomes yet another arena for success or failure, another law.

Another example would be meditation (or its more fashionable cousin mindfulness). Various studies of meditation and mindfulness techniques in recent years show a long list of benefits: lower stress levels, deeper focus and clarity, and improved function of the immune system. In short, it's good for you. Its meteoric rise in popularity should indicate to the degree that people feel overwhelmed, worried, and just plain unhappy—as well as the degree to which they are not finding peace in other places, like the church. However, the problem is, that mindfulness has never been more stressful. Apps like Headspace and Calm allow you to track and display the days you've meditated, encouraging users to compete for the longest "streaks." You can sign up for services that ding your credit card \$10 every time you miss a session. In this way, a practice designed to alleviate guilt and anxiety becomes the source of it.

## Chapter 7: The Seculosity of Food

Today, we have more choices of what to eat than ever before. I grew up in a world (and I'm not even that old) where there was no such thing as organic food. You didn't go to the grocery store and make a conscious choice between organic milk and the regular kind. It was milk or nothing. The increased choice may sound like freedom but all too often it translates into anxiety. The implication of the Seculosity of food is clear: eating habits inform our identity, and differences are not morally neutral. There is a right answer to the question "What should I eat?"

The Seculosity of food holds that the cure to our lack of satisfaction and enoughness does not lie in a book or at church but in a different aisle at the supermarket. Find the right ingredient, and you can become who you were meant to be. Stick with the wrong ones and you have only yourself to blame for your unhappiness. Before long we've moved from the piece of food itself being

good or bad to the person eating it being good or bad completing the short slide from morality into moralism.

These days, most of us feel judged for our food choices, and we are right to feel that way because we **are** being judged for our food choices. No wonder we apologize so often for what we eat.

For those caught up in the Seculosity of food, diet is no longer what we put in our mouths; it's a meticulous scoresheet of personal and social righteousness, the measure by which we determine our value and other people's.

The point here is not to suggest that food is unimportant or innocuous. What and how we eat has real consequences, and some foodstuffs are better for us than others. The problem arises when we start to take the phrase "you are what you eat" literally. Our diet choices become our identity, the justifying story of our lives. And as with other areas of performancism, we find that the ladder only gets longer the higher we climb. What promises to deliver health ends up causing the opposite, in the form of eating disorders. The most pathological example is the eating disorder on the rise known as Orthorexia nervosa, a term that means "fixation on righteous eating." The obsessive parsing of which foods are "good" and which are "bad" means orthorexics often end up malnourished. And even if they remain healthy, eating becomes so stressful that their relationships come under pressure and their whole lives become disturbed thanks to this obsession.

## Chapter 8: The Seculosity of Politics

According to every metric available, our society has never been more divided by politics. We are less likely than ever before to have friends who vote differently from us, and more likely to choose where we live based on how our neighbors vote. In the late 50s, when American parents were asked how they'd feel if their child married someone from another political party, fewer

than ten percent said it would be a problem for them. By 2010, this number had more than quadrupled to forty percent. God knows what it would be today.

Nothing about this should come as a shock. Politics is well on its way to becoming the most impermeable social divide in America, surpassing religion, income, and even race. With the possible exception of career, politics has become today's most popular replacement religion, certainly the one with the most forward momentum and cultural tendency. For many, its substitution for Religion has been seamless and hardly noticeable.

It bears repeating that, like every target of Seculosity, politics is a good and necessary part of life. After all, politics simply refers to systems of governance and the power dynamics inherent to them.

The Seculosity of politics becomes a problem when the political becomes not one lens among many for understanding the world (e.g. the metaphysical, the psychological, the spiritual) but the only one. Or the only one that matters. My theory is that political commitment, especially on the left, has become a measure of moral character in the way that religious devotion used to be. Regardless of how we've gotten here, the result is a world in which everything is politicized. Not just how you vote, but how you shop, eat, socialize, and even worship.

Part of what makes politics such an attractive replacement for religion is the community it creates, and the love and acceptance it offers. So fundamental is our need for connection that when belonging isn't readily found in conventional spheres like church, neighborhood, office, or home, we will look elsewhere and anywhere for it. It is no coincidence, then, that politics serves a tribal function for more and more people. Not only do you share an ideological affiliation, but nothing bonds people closer together than a common enemy. However, the problem is, that when we lean on a cause or ideology for belonging, those who belong most will

be the ones who display their views the loudest. Belonging is thus not only conditioned on holding the “right” opinions or beliefs but holding them strongly enough. Soon, any hesitation becomes grounds for rejection.

Where once we had political opinions, now we are expected to have “politics.” It sounds an awful lot like what people in church mean when they talk about someone having a theology. What code dictates your life, and how does it stack up to mine? What they’re trying to figure out is whether or not you belong.

## Chapter 9: The Seculosity of Jesusland

It might come as a surprise (or maybe not) that the same performancism and cult of productivity that has infiltrated other areas of modern life, can also be found in the church. But wait a second. If Seculosity refers to religious energy directed at secular or horizontal targets, why talk about church? You would presume that Religion is exempt from our diagnosis.

The tragic irony is Jesusland (a catchall for the bastardized form of Protestant Christianity that dominates much of the spiritual landscape in the West) is that it often resembles its secular replacements more than the Real Thing. I’m not sure if the former has influenced the latter, or vice versa, but the similarities between our small-r religion and what remains of the capital-R variety are uncanny. You may have noticed that the strands of Seculosity we’ve explored so far operate more or less identically. They cast a vision of enoughness and then beg us to adopt that vision with all our being. If you eat well enough, love well enough, parent well enough, stay busy enough, you will be enough. This is the promise at the heart of what we might call a religion of law, and it applies to every replacement religion under the sun.

The word “law” is a broad one. It spells out both how we should behave and what would happen if we don’t. It’s a conditional proposition: not just do X or don’t do Y, but

only if you do X and not do Y, then you’ll be considered a good citizen. Otherwise, well, you’re a criminal. However, there’s a fundamental problem with all religions of law. Not in the content of the law itself but in the human heart: knowing what to do or be does not give us the ability to do or be those things. As a result, religions of law promise wholeness and peace but ultimately deliver anxiety, self-consciousness, and loneliness.

## Conclusion

### What to “Do” about it

“What to do about Seculosity?” By this point, it should be clear that the abundance of doing—whether that be performing, producing, earning, or proving—is a big part of what’s making life in the 21st century so tough. Regarding the Seculosity in which we are currently drowning, our attempts to engineer our salvation will backfire. I hate to say it, but the only life raft capable of reaching a world drowning in Seculosity will not be inflated with anything we do or don’t do, but what God himself has done and is doing. I often wish this were not the case. Part of me hopes that something suitable floats out there and we just haven’t found it yet.

The solution to our initially appealing but ultimately oppressive small-r religion is not some fresh religion of law or the (theoretical) absence of religion. Our best bet would be a religion of grace, but too bad they don’t grow on trees. If you happen to find one, hold tight to it.

In Christianity’s case, for it to be experienced as a religion of grace rather than law, it would speak about death more often than it currently does. That is, Christians would be just as willing to talk about the hereafter as they are about the here and now. Faith as a means to personal or social improvement would take a backseat to the more transcendent and eternal elements of Religion (of which there are so many). Such a Christianity wouldn’t simply talk about God but to God.



Secondly, a viable Christian faith would follow Christ's lead by focusing its attention on human motivation rather than behavior. Thirdly, a grace-centered Christianity would be fundamentally Christ-centered. Sounds like a no-brainer, but what I mean is that it won't be consumer- or church-centered. A religion of capital-G Grace would hold to Jesus Christ as the central revelation of who God is, and who Christ is, not just in terms of sacrificial love, but in terms of the righteousness and guidance he provides for sinners like you and me.

Finally, the ultimate trouble with Seculosity has nothing to do with workaholism, smartphones, soulmates, tribalism, or even our compulsive desire to measure up. The common denominator is the human heart and its desire to sin. Sin is not something you can be talked out of; it is something from which you need to be saved. And that's where all our narratives and religions break down for good, because no concept or framework, no matter how beautiful or beneficial, can replace a God who saves even those hellbent on avoiding his love.