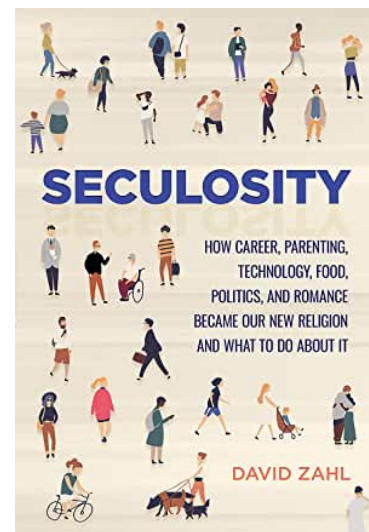


David Zahl, *Seculosity: How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics, and Romance Became Our New Religion and What To Do About It* (Minneapolis, MN, Fortress, 2019).

Religiosity is thriving in the waning days of capital-R Religion, producing a pantheon of false religions. David Zahl, editor-and-chief of Mockingbird, calls this culture-shaping phenomenon *seculosity*. A host of “popular religions-that-aren’t-called-religions” (xx) measure the secular self against a new set of standards. Zahl grasps the idolatrous power of these demanding gods. The secularity of busyness leaves us exhausted, because *Performance Almighty* is never satisfied. The secularity of romance and the *Soulmate Myth* is a recipe for disillusionment.

His cultural analysis hits close to home. He frames these besetting standards of secular spirituality with wit and insight. Insecurity is the product of the *seculosity* of parenting. Distraction and dystopia are the result of technology. The list of false religions and their impact includes the inevitable disappointment that comes from idolizing work. The quest for leisure generates restlessness and a fixation with food feeds soul-famished emptiness. The idol of politics elects ideological divisiveness and an illusion of power.



To be clear, David Zahl does not use the language of *false religions* or *idolatry*. He prefers the term *seculosity* to avoid polemical biblical language. He’s allergic to anything pietistic and he takes care “to reference predominantly non-Religious sources” (xxii). Zahl offers a lively and creative read on the cultural factors shaping the secular self and attempts to do so largely from a secular perspective. He mounts his critique of the false gods without reference to the Creation Mandate or a theology of the person or a biblical view of sexuality. His reflection on the gospel is subtle. It is meant more to intrigue than to explain. There is nothing here on the Sermon on the Mount or the Great Commission. Theology may be the backdrop in Zahl’s critique of culture but it is not the protagonist on the stage. Quoting chapter and verse would ruin the effect.

“Productivity” is the key antagonist in Zahl’s plot. The effort to make something of ourselves and to prove our worth leads ideally to a convincing performance — *enough is enough*. Zahl’s “original sin” is performance-based self-righteousness. He sums it up this way:

“You may have noticed that the strands of seculosity we’ve explored thus far all operate more or less identically. They cast a vision of enoughness and then implore us to realize that vision with forbearance, grit, and hard currency, for the sake of existential reward. 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” (164).

Self-effort is as critical to Zahl's *seculosity* as economic inequality is to Liberation Theology. The radical Law/Gospel critique of culture, like the liberationist's social analysis, focuses on a specific evil that dominates the human condition in a particular cultural context. This evil is leveraged to inspire a spiritual alternative. Productivity is to the existential western self what poverty is to the oppressed people of Latin America.

Readers who share Zahl's critique of culture as I do may be forgiven for believing they have the power to resist the performance trap by opting out of the rat race or by refusing to become obsessed with technology or politics or food. *Seculosity*, as conceived by Zahl, is symptomatic of a far deeper problem of evil than Zahl cares to dwell on. For example the real problem with the *seculosity* of romance is not *The Soulmate Myth* but our culture's pervasive sexual disorientation and rebellion. The real problem in making too much of food or leisure or work or parenting is that we intentionally put other things, other people, and ourselves before God. The peculiar cultural malaise of "not-enoughness" amounts to cultural critique *lite*.

Our depravity bores down into the core of our being making us irredeemable apart from the atoning sacrifice of Christ and his bodily resurrection. Zahl believes in the cross of Christ. He writes, "The cross declares that the guilt and shame we spend our days trying in vain to expiate via sweat and scapegoating is absolved, past, present, and future" (167). It is not until the conclusion that Zahl spells it out for us:

*"What I mean is that the ultimate trouble with seculosity has nothing to do with soulmates or smartphones or tribalism or workaholism or even our compulsive desire to measure up. The common denominator is the human heart, yours and mine. Which is to say, the problem is sin. Sin is not something you can be talked out of ('stop controlling everything!') or coached through with the right wisdom. It is something from which you need to be saved — even when the nature of sin is that it lashes out at that which would rescue it" (191).*

Zahl warns that "this deeper magic" becomes easily co-opted by Christians who in the name of "transformation" turn Christianity into "spiritual performancism" (169). "The *seculosity* of Jesusland seeps in when the church turns into yet another venue to establish our enoughness, rather than the only reliable place to receive it" (168).

Zahl is opposed to the imposition of "religious standards of enoughness." He prefers to nuance "spiritual transformation" as "usually unconscious and apparent to our friends before it is to us" (175). "Put in non-religious terms," he writes, "people only truly change when they no longer feel they have to in order to be loved" (176). The costly grace, cost of discipleship crowd heartedly agree, but I doubt that Zahl is impressed. The biblical truth that grace inspires disciplined, intentional transformation is rejected by Zahl as just another way of smuggling works righteousness into Christianity. He leaves little room for the work of righteousness as highlighted in The Sermon on the Mount and the apostles' letters.

Zahl concludes with a family story about the time his grandfather got caught in a rip tide and almost died. Swimmers in a rip current tend to panic as the current carries them out to sea. Instead of drifting with the current, until they can swim parallel to the shore, they exhaust themselves swimming directly against the powerful current. Grace-centered Christianity knows we cannot save ourselves. Only Christ can save us. We cannot swim against the cultural current without exhausting ourselves and drowning our souls. The analogy is a good one. We need the salvation that only God in Christ can give to us. And this costly grace that saves is the life-transforming grace that sanctifies. We are no longer adrift in a sea of cultural influences. We are in Christ, with all of our frailties and weaknesses, living for Christ and His Kingdom by God's grace and mercy.

“We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? Hebrews 2:1-3