

# SECULARISM AND DENOMINATIONALISM

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27th November 2015 (re-issue of an article dated 20th September 2010)

## SECULARISM

If a secular person is defined as one who does not follow any particular religious faith nor any ideology, least of all a dogmatic one, it follows that since I don't identify myself with any recognized belief system, I can by rights define myself as secular.

I'm not, however, devoid of spirituality - on the contrary – nor am I a fervent skeptic. I do consider it important not to cling unconditionally to my convictions, can eventually prove them to be inaccurate or incomplete. I also know that it's impossible to listen carefully to what others say, and potentially hear new ideas to compare with one's own, when already convinced of possessing the absolute truth, because this would transform a fruitful discussion into a useless alternating monologue; effectively a dialogue among the deaf.

It's difficult learning to live with doubt, but once the habit is acquired, we ask ourselves how it's possible to evolve without it: doubt is the salt that adds flavour to every achievement; it pushes us to conceive and scrutinize our theories – even the most absurd – until we obtain temporary certainties (what we call “models of reality”) that are destined, even the well-founded ones, to be substituted by better models that include the previous ones as specific cases.

In this way personal knowledge, even if comprised of forward and backward steps, can advance overall and achieve a continually clearer vision of reality.

The first and most important doubt regards “original” ideas – that is, those “inventions” that an increasing knowledge of our surrounding reality sometimes leads us to develop. It's very easy to fall in love with one's own original ideas, but it is a serious presumption to expect that one's “inventions” can explain most aspects of reality.

This is a major error committed even by important individuals in all fields of human learning, an error that puts a stop to their progress to the point where they became obsolete, overtaken by others who were not restricted by self-imposed limitations, at least until even these others imposed new limits on themselves in the guise of blind faith in their own “inventions”. This is why in my opinion, before presenting one's own ideas, it would be better to always say (to oneself and others): *Based on what I have learnt so far, and until new facts emerge to the contrary, I believe that...*

Whenever somebody gives birth to a new idea, especially if it is truly original and useful, he/she is justly proud and usually tends to exploit it for fame and/or wealth; to this end the idea is repeated ad infinitum and the originator becomes convinced that not only is this idea correct, but that it is *the most correct*, encouraged by its success.

Consequently the originator becomes ever more reluctant to pursue research into new ideas that may supercede the previous one and integrate it into a broader view. This is an understandably human behaviour, but still in error because it interrupts personal development, even though it smooths the path for those who accept the challenge to “go beyond”. It is the bold originator of the idea who voluntarily rejects the challenge, having suspended his/her progress after its inception.

## DENOMINATIONALISM

Denominationalism (or sectarianism) is the exact opposite of secularism and consists of unquestioned faith in a presumed “truth”, convinced that this does not require proof or validation because it was revealed by either a deity or a very esteemed figure, or simply because it is “my own truth” – the truth claimed by an individual who considers himself better than others, with an often unconscious presumptuousness.

Ever since humans became capable of abstract thought, they have asked themselves three fundamental questions: *Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?* These questions spawned much meditation, the result being a succession of religions, philosophies, ideologies and beliefs thrown up as models of reality, overlapping one another and increasing exponentially over time. Most of them are based on the following premise: *I’m the only one who knows the truth and all others are wrong unless they think like me.* This places people into two categories: those with me and those against me.

This behaviour is seen in European soccer fans, where the dedicated fan blindly believes his team is the only one worthy of devotion and displays contempt towards others in the competition, so much so that some resort to violence against rival teams’ fans. This fanatical supporter sees the physical division of rival fans as unavoidable, and in reply to the question *What team do you follow?* could not imagine an impartial reply such as *I only love a good soccer game and don’t follow any particular team.*

A serious consequence of denominationalism is those who use the “divide and conquer” technique by exploiting people’s weaknesses in order to seize control and convince as many as possible of the existence of an outside entity – with whom they are directly in contact or at least fully understand – that is omniscient and omnipotent, with the power of life and death over everyone. These people act like the entity’s representatives on earth, proclaiming that there are rules that must be blindly followed or else suffer terrible eternal punishment, and only they can judge the purity and compliance of the faithful and their worthiness of eternal reward after death. For reasons that are far from noble, sacredness is substituted by a deity and therefore responsibility is projected onto an external omnipotent entity instead of remaining personal as it should be.

Even when the objective is potentially noble, denominationalism often brings proselytism – the attempt to completely convert others to one’s own beliefs. If this is successful, the authority exercises power over the new converts, if not outright abuse of that power.

With respect to denominationalism one must first of all not fear threats, whether veiled or not, and especially not become seduced by seemingly attractive ideas.

We must never allow ourselves to be led by over-enthusiasm, even if the ideas originate from our own minds, and must put them through rigorous tests (if applicable), because regardless of how innovative and profound they may be, they can never fully encompass reality. It is necessary to discover their limitations, give them their due and try to go further.

Woe betide anyone who stops!

*English translation by Cinzia Evangelista.*