

# Living faith in a secular society

**Mike Ovey, Principal of Oak Hill, introduces the underlying theme of this edition of Commentary: the distinctive challenges Christians face today from secularism**



Disorientation comes in all shapes and sizes. It might be the blow to the head in a minor car collision which leaves you ok on the outside but reeling inside. Sometimes it comes in more subtle but perhaps equally disturbing forms.

One such experience, for me, is looking at the night sky in Australia. When I first moved there, so much was familiar, but I remember looking up at the night sky and finding it vaguely disturbing and dizzying. Then the penny dropped. No Plough, no North Star.

The things I had seen since childhood and which gave me a sense of my bearings, simply weren't there. I couldn't find north anymore from the night sky.

I suspect in some ways a similar disorientation has crept up on Christians in the UK. It's not just the technological change, or the global village, or the Eurozone. Yes, they are dizzying enough to make it seem as though we're in a foreign country. But it's also the sense that, almost suddenly, our culture is one that no longer has a sense of its bearings. The North Star, so to speak, has vanished from its night sky.

Very frequently, and I think rightly, we associate this with the rise of secularism, the religion that gets by by

pretending it isn't one. Like other religions it can have its attractive features, even if they are not saving features. And like other religions, it has distinctive challenges for

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Christians. So our aim in this edition of *Commentary* is to explore some of those features.

Linking them together, perhaps, is the issue of emptiness. Obviously secularism tends to work on emptying the public square of God. But the thing is, if you start emptying something of God, what happens?

The articles in this edition start to pick up some of those themes. Peter Sanlon (page 10) notes the emptying of emotional depth in the 'secular city' and how Christians are called to something better. Kirsty Birkett (page 22) takes up the key theme of how secular rationalism empties human knowing of a key component, namely faith.

Nick Tucker (page 4) looks at how the redefinition of marriage has been happening for many years in our secular culture. Dan Strange and Peter Sanlon (page 19) discuss the emptying out of tolerance as they examine Don Carson's new book *The Intolerance of Tolerance*. My own article (page 16) deals with the emptying out of biblical notions of equality in our allegedly pro-rights society.

David Potter (page 13) starts to fill up what secular humanism empties as he deals with the human value of those with disabilities. Chris Green's book reviews (page 28) pick up the sad picture of a secular writer feeling a need for religion without being able to embrace one, as well as another secular writer who picks up the early career of Muhammad with quite striking courage and clear-sightedness.

That last point is vital. We are right to reject the emptying-out of life that secularism brings. Equally we have to reject false attempts to fill life in and orient ourselves. Only the Lord Jesus is the true North Star.

# Commentary

- 4 **Same sex marriage:  
when chickens come  
home to roost**

Nick Tucker



- 10 **Emotional depth in  
the secular city**

Peter Sanlon

- 13 **Valuing the vulnerable**

David Potter MBE



- 16 **Challenging equality  
Britain**

Mike Ovey

- 19 **Tolerance, intolerance  
and mission**

Dan Strange and  
Peter Sanlon

- 22 **Faith and reason:  
good partners**

Kirsty Birkett



- 26 **A nice, tidy overseas  
adventure**

Charles Anderson

- 28 **Books**

Chris Green