

# Christians Need Not View the Secular World as 'Utter Darkness'

When it comes to Christians' views of secular society, there have historically been two predominant options.

One stresses the radical incommensurability of Christianity and the world—that the Christian view of the world and its values share nothing in common with the secular world. That Christianity is “light” and the world outside is utter darkness. (Many may notice a similar paradigm operative in partisan politics today.) That the most one can say of the secular world is that it has—to use the phrase of St. Augustine—“splendid vices.”

It is a view that has been used by some Christians to justify a retreat from the world, and by the world to justify an exclusion of Christianity from the public square.

The other way of looking at things, favored by most of the Church Fathers in the first millennium, held that there is certainly an essential difference between Christian and non-Christian ways of life, but that there is also much good in the secular world in harmony with Christianity... That Christianity was not so much the abolishment of the world's more commendable good and virtues, but their fulfillment.

I am reminded of this second option during this, the Orthodox Christian season of Lent (yes, the Eastern and Western liturgical calendars are different when it comes to Lent and Easter). For Orthodox, one of the most noteworthy features of the season is the frequent repetition of the ancient [Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian](#) (ca. 306-373), which is usually accompanied by bows and prostrations.

The prayer is unquestionably Christian, and expresses for Orthodox the true purpose of the Lenten fast: to free oneself from the passions, cultivate virtue, and grow closer to God. Yet I cannot help but notice that the prayer also contains many of the same ideals I see valued by secular members of our Intellectual Takeout audience.

Here is its text:

*“O Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of **sloth, despair, lust of power, and idle talk.***

*But give rather the spirit of **chastity, humility, patience, and love** to Thy servant.*

*Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to **see my own transgressions, and not to judge my brother**, for blessed art Thou unto ages of ages. Amen.”*

It’s a small minority of secular people I come across today who *don’t* believe that one should strive to remove from his or her life laziness, pessimism, a desire to dominate others, and purposeless or hurtful speech. Nor do I come across many people who believe that one shouldn’t be sexually temperate, humble, and patient and loving toward others. And, as I’ve pointed out elsewhere, the virtue of focusing on one’s faults rather than those of others is widely acknowledged (if not always practiced) in the modern secular world.

These virtues and values that Christians and non-Christians agree on are some of the most difficult for human beings to realize. And I suppose that raises one of the key differences: that the secular person attempts to attain these these by his or own strength, while the Christian is supposed to realize that he has not the strength to do it alone; that he can only do it *in Christ*.

Nevertheless, the existence of differences—though they be important differences—need not mean that the Christian and

non-Christian worlds are *totaliter aliter* ("totally other") from each other. The Prayer of St. Ephrem serves as but one small example that there are assuredly some shared first principles, which means that there is room for fruitful dialogue.