

# The Changing World

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## THE "SECULAR" TREND IN MAN'S AFFAIRS

A RECENT STUDY reported by the American Council on Education\* points to the "secular" trend in present-day life and apparently concludes that this is the *cause* of much of the delinquency and crime of this period. This view has been expressed by numerous speakers and writers who have been concerned with the problem of cultural breakdown.

Analysis of this situation involves consideration of several questions: To what extent has there been a "secular" trend in the modern period? What does this trend mean in respect to development of a *method*, or new way, of dealing with problematic situations? Should we now retreat from the use of this *method* in the field of personality or character development? Is it possible to adapt our "spiritual values" so as to bring their meaning and use into harmony with the recent "secular" trend?

What is meant by the term "secular?" A dictionary definition includes these meanings: "secular; of or relating to worldly things; unconnected with or uninfluenced by religion." Words may be weasel things, and almost anything can be proved through use of glittering generalities. Nevertheless, if *secular* refers to *naturalistic* concerns and procedures there is ample evidence to support the conclusion that *secular* activities have expanded of recent years. Here is some of this evidence: In medicine there has been a growing reliance upon scientific techniques in diagnosing and treating disease. This expanding use of scientific insights and techniques may be seen in many fields—agri-

culture, industry, criminology, social case work, psychiatry, weather forecasting, public opinion sampling, vocational guidance. In his inaugural address, President Truman threw his weight behind this movement in the words, ". . . we must embark on a forward new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas."

What does this trend mean in respect to *method*? It means that, *more and more, men have come to place reliance upon cooperative human intelligence, expressed through the experimental method as a reliable means of solving their problems.*

Is it likely that our people will go back to an older nonsecular method of promoting character growth in their children? The answer, I believe, is found in the expansion of youth activity programs in schools, communities, and churches.

This new approach to character development goes deep. Psychologists are now pointing out that having children read and talk about "spiritual values"—ideals—is not enough. If it is desired that children live these ideals, they must have adequate opportunities to practice, to live, and experience them so that they come to operate as habits. This, clearly, is an extension of the "secular" trend in the area of human relations—into the area of the "spiritual values."

Is it true that the so-called "secular" trend in modern life is the *cause* of social breakdown? The evidence available seems to point in another direction for the real explanation. The rapid multiplication of new machines has produced social changes

(Continued on page 409)

\**The Relation of Religion to Public Education: The Basic Principles*, American Council on Education Studies, 1947.

where), the Springfield children measured up with the average throughout the country on standardized tests in their knowledge of facts, principles, and fundamental skills, with one exception, the language arts, but not including reading. On the other hand, pupils in the schools were superior in the general area of social living, and the Springfield schools were commended for their job in teaching democratic living and in helping pupils with their life problems. As an interesting sidelight, the survey staff was able to repeat a standardized reading test given in 1931 and the pupils in 1948 made a better showing than did their predecessors seventeen years ago.

The survey staff did feel that the school had neglected the development of understanding on the part of parents of the school and its progress, especially with reference to promotion and grading practices. Too often, criticism of newer educational developments grows out of ignorance of objectives and means to be used in achieving those objectives rather than opposition to the objectives themselves.

Copies of the surveys may be obtained from H. P. Study, Superintendent of Schools, for \$2.12.

### *The Changing World*

(Continued from page 405)

faster than our people have been able to adapt their social arrangements involved in the use of these machines. The fundamental adjustment process that is actually under way appears to be: use of the same kind of *problem-solving method* in meeting their new social problems as was employed in creating the machines that gave rise to these social problems.

If this analysis is sound, then we may expect the recent "secular" trend to go forward—in spite of those who would reverse the tide of modern man's development.

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