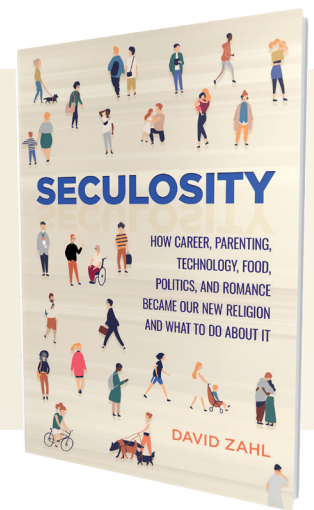




SECULOSITY DISCUSSION GUIDE



AN INTRODUCTION TO SECULOSITY

The word *seculosity* is a combination of secular and religiosity. It's a shorthand that helps us examine how traditional religious aims have not disappeared but intensified in a supposedly nonreligious age. Where once we looked to God and/or clergy for comfort, purpose, belonging, absolution, and salvation, today we seek those same things at the gym, in the kitchen, on social media, in the voting booth, and so on. We are ultimately searching for a sense of “enoughness.”

1. Imagine this scene: a child is told to clean her room before she can go over to a friend's house to play. If you were a parent in that situation, when would the young child's room be clean enough to go to her friend's house? What tasks would you expect her to complete? What cleaning tasks would you *not* expect her to accomplish?
2. Imagine this scene: you are the coach of a professional baseball team, and your team has just acquired an all-star hitter. To afford a new player's salary, at least one member of the current roster must be let go. What are some of the characteristics you're looking for to see who is good enough to stay on the team?
3. Consider a time when you were declared good enough. Maybe it was a promotion at work or a prestigious academic award. Maybe it was in the context of a new romantic relationship or when you lost weight and began to receive extra romantic interest from others. What did it feel like?
4. Consider a time when you were declared not good enough. Maybe you lost out on a business deal to a competitor, or you were passed over for a promotion. Maybe you were spurned by a love interest. What did it feel like?
5. Even though it's well documented that we never quite arrive at enough, the enoughness idea is still a tantalizing goal. What is the prize for arriving at enoughness that drives us to it, even if the goal is impossible?
6. What happens to our peers who are not enough in society? How are they treated in comparison to those who meet our standards of enough?
7. Fill in the blank: I will have lived a good-enough life if I _____.
8. How would you recommend someone be freed of this desire to be enough?



CHAPTER 1: THE SECULOSITY OF BUSYNESS

One of the consequences of secularity is that people search for enoughness in everyday achievements rather than in something transcendent or outwardly spiritual—that is, we begin justifying our lives by what we do and how we perform. The result is that a culture expressing its religious impulse in secular culture will find itself busier and busier with “doing,” because rest and relaxation get in the way of our quest for being good enough.

1. The chapter begins with the description of a Cruella De Vil meme that mocks the breakneck pace of modern life. What other signs or activities have you seen that twenty-first-century life is defined by busyness?
2. There are a number of examples in the chapter outlining the culture of busyness, from the silliness of a Donkey Kong arcade record to the serious issue of college student mental illness. Were you shocked by any of these anecdotes? Did you especially resonate with one?
3. Has anyone ever answered your question “How are you?” with “Busy!” How does that response make you feel? Were you warm and sympathetic to someone’s busy lifestyle or did you see it as a somewhat insincere humblebrag?
4. When was the last time you felt like your life wasn’t busy?
5. Performancism, the idea that we are enough because of how much we accomplish, is at the heart of our busy life. Do you think there’s a link between valuing ourselves based on our accomplishments and our universally busy lifestyle?
6. This chapter links the pressure to perform and the biblical idea of “works righteousness,” where obedience to God’s law earns God’s love and favor. How might works righteousness lead to a life of anxious busyness?
7. What would you prescribe as a remedy for someone who has transferred their “works righteousness” theology to the secular world?

CHAPTER 2: THE SECULOSITY OF ROMANCE

In his 1973 book *The Denial of Death*, psychologist Ernest Becker predicted that as organized religion declined, humans would project those religious impulses onto what he called “apocalyptic romance.” Sure enough, the secularity of romance has now fused our love lives with our quest to be enough.

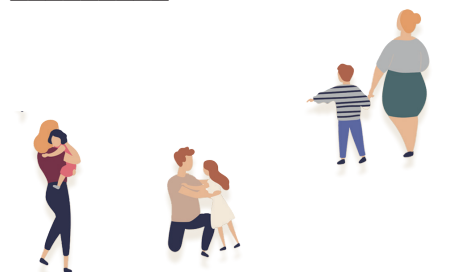
1. If you had to guess, what percent of the music you enjoy is related to romantic love? How about television? Movies?
2. This chapter spends time outlining “the soulmate myth.” Have you ever seen the soulmate myth played out in your world? What did it look like?
3. Have you ever been in a relationship, romantic or otherwise, that was rooted in scorekeeping? Have you ever been in a relationship that was based on each person keeping track of who was more invested? How intimate was that relationship?

4. Have you ever encountered a love story, real or fictional, that didn't involve the soulmate myth? How did that story understand romantic love?
5. Reflect on a time when you were loved in your weakness. How was that love different from what you received in the context of success?
6. Saint John says that God is love, and love does not recoil at weakness. "Saint" Jerry McGuire famously says to his estranged wife "You. Complete. Me." How are these two ideas similar? How are these two ideas different?

CHAPTER 3: THE SECULOSITY OF PARENTING

If there was ever a time when new parents worried about being good enough, it would be our modern era. Whether it's honor-student bumper stickers or parents writing college admissions essays, childrearing has become a treadmill of self-justification and judgment. Sadly, when parents index their enoughness to their offspring's performance, resentment is a foregone conclusion.

1. This chapter names a number of baby-raising philosophies that are popular in the late 2010s. Have you encountered any other childrearing philosophies? What is their strategy for raising a child?
2. One of the big news stories of 2019 was the "Varsity Blues" scandal, which uncovered a secret consultant industry that helped students get into big name US universities through illegal means. What might drive a parent to commit a felony to help their child succeed?
3. Did your parents have a childrearing philosophy they used when raising you? What was it? Were there any parenting books they read that impacted your upbringing?
4. Who do you regard as a good parent? What makes them a good parent?
5. There are a number of ways that the parent-child relationship can provide a sense of enoughness for the parent. List some specific ways you've seen that dynamic play itself out.
6. This chapter highlights the freedom that Emily Rapp experienced as a parent to her terminally ill infant son Ronan. Were you surprised to hear Emily describe caring for her son as "peaceful" and "blissful?" Why or why not?
7. Jesus said, "unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:3). Why do you think Jesus chose the example of a child as opposed to a parent?
8. Finish this sentence: I would be a good-enough parent if I _____.





CHAPTER 4: THE SECULOSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

While technology is capable of solving many different problems, it also tends to create new ones of its own. Technology takes on a religious dimension when it claims to address emotional and spiritual challenges alongside the material ones. Faith in technology to solve the problems of the world is still, at the end of the day, a type of belief, maybe even a kind of devotion.

1. This chapter repeats a handful of bold predictions of future technology, including transhumanism and technosolutionism. What other predictions have people made about the future of technology?
2. The chapter highlights Ruth Schwartz Cowan's observation that labor-saving devices of the twentieth century—vacuums, dishwashers, laundry machines, and so forth—didn't reduce the labor of housekeeping but instead increased the standards for cleanliness. How has technology made life busier or more difficult for you?
3. What's your favorite solution that technology has provided in your life?
4. One of the common accusations against smart technology is that it is distracting. Streaming video, music, podcasts, and other online entertainment saves us from the indignity of boredom. If technology is a vehicle for distraction, what exactly are we distracting ourselves from?
5. The chapter outlines four ways that technology can function in a religious manner: optimization, information, distraction, and affirmation. Which of these are you most sympathetic to? Which of these are you least sympathetic to?
6. Complete the sentence: If only technology could _____, that would solve most of the problems in my life.
7. The chapter ends with the story of Mary and Martha, who play host to Jesus in very different ways, even as Jesus gives each one his attention (Luke 10:38–42). Even without modern tech, Martha still feels the need to prove her busy, distracted labor. When do you see yourself in Martha, and when in Mary?

CHAPTER 5: THE SECULOSITY OF WORK

“Where are you from?” and “What do you do?” are two small-talk standbys. The latter question, about *doing*, gets at the heart of the secularity of work: if we are good enough at our careers, then we are good people. But at the end of the day, the corporate ladder and Jacob's ladder never seem to lead to the same place.

1. The chapter begins by recalling a 1965 congressional hearing on the social implications of a twenty-hour work week, supposedly happening within a few decades. Technology was expected to make work so efficient that the modern work week would only last for three out of seven days. Is that a future you would have enjoyed or a future you would have resented?





2. How are work and identity related? What careers do you think are easiest to integrate with a sense of identity?
3. How do you feel when people ask what you do for a living? Is it easy to answer that question, or is it a question that produces anxiety?
4. In chapter 4, the book suggests that technology can help distract us from the difficulties of life. Where you surprised to hear that, for many, work can function in a similar way? How can work be an effective distraction from the difficult parts of life?
5. Blizzards are one of the natural occurrences that grind work to a halt. Have you ever experienced an outside force put an end to your work, like an unexpected power outage or natural disaster? Did you experience the same kind of freedom that the chapter describes?
6. The parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-6) is disconcerting. The landowner isn't *fair* (by some workers' standards), but he is *generous*. In your own work, have you ever wished someone in charge acted more like the landowner? What does this parable tell us about how God relates to us?

CHAPTER 6: THE SECULOSITY OF LEISURE

The impulse to work hard enough, love well enough, parent well enough extends to leisure too. For many people, the drive to maximize rest and recreation is just as strong as the other ones we've studied. What should, theoretically, provide us with respite from striving can become another avenue of personal achievement and self-justification.

1. The chapter lists a number of ways that utility and enoughness co-opt free time. What are some other ways that rest, play, and sleep have become avenues for productivity instead of simple goods in their own right?
2. Pick a hobby or leisure activity that you enjoy. How might the drive for enoughness start to show itself in your favorite downtime? When does a leisure activity transition from a fun pastime into a marker of goodness and competence?
3. Do you have any hobbies or activities in your life that fit Dr. Gray's five-part definition of play? They must be "(1) self-chosen and self-directed; (2) intrinsically motivated; (3) structured by mental rules; (4) imaginative; and (5) produced in an active, alert, nonstressed frame of mind." Does this definition help you destress?
4. Walter Brueggemann suggests that the Fourth Commandment is the hardest for many Americans to follow. Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
5. Complete this thought: I will be a good person if I use my spare time to _____.
6. Martin Luther says that when we look to "religious exercises" for assurance, we only reap more uncertainty, even hopelessness. Whether you're trying to "keep the Sabbath holy" or optimize your circadian rhythm, do his words resonate with your own efforts?

CHAPTER 7: THE SECULOSITY OF FOOD

Throughout human history, cultures across the globe have given food religious significance. Kosher and halal diets are well known, as is the prohibition against consuming beef in India. Monks eat austerely in their monasteries, and Christians celebrate Communion with bread and wine. In recent years, secular attitudes toward food have begun to mirror and even surpass their sacred counterparts.

1. With the proliferation of food-related media, odds are you have a favorite cooking show or celebrity chef. Who are your favorite culinary personalities? What makes them so appealing?
2. “We feel judged for our food choices, and we are right to feel that way because we are being judged for our food choices” (p. 125). When have you felt judged (or been judged!) for what you ate?
3. What are some of the moral rules that have been placed around food by your family or friends? Do you think those rules are sensible? How have they changed over the years?
4. This chapter highlights Oral Roberts University’s erstwhile program to ensure that students couldn’t graduate unless their Body Mass Index met a certain threshold. What did you make of that story?
5. How would you eat differently if food didn’t function as “a meticulous scoresheet of personal and social righteousness” (p.125)?
6. Jesus fasted a number of times, but many of the most crucial episodes in the Gospels feature Jesus at feasts: the wedding at Cana, the feeding of the five thousand, the sinful woman who anointed Jesus’s feet with her alabaster jar. He could make any meal into an image of the kingdom of God. Through these episodes of abundant food, how does Jesus address contemporary anxieties about food?

CHAPTER 8: THE SECULOSITY OF POLITICS

“If once upon a time we looked to politics primarily for governance, we now look to it for belonging, righteousness, meaning, and deliverance—in other words, all the things for which we used to rely on Religion” (p. 138). Maybe more than any other avenue of secularity, politics has become a realm of impassioned moral arbitration for those involved. And reasonably so—after all, the use of power can decide life-or-death situations, and for large numbers of people. But let’s consider some of the ways that we use political engagement not to promote the general welfare but to manage our image and our guilt.

1. The chapter begins by recapping an episode of the 1990s sitcom *Seinfeld*, in which two characters laughably break off a romantic relationship over political differences. But a poll two decades later shows that these divisions have only sharpened. Have you experienced political affiliation come between you and a friend or family member?





2. How have you seen the realm of politics offer purpose, redemption, or other traditionally religious values?
3. What are some of the consequences when “two competing visions of right” square off? How do the high stakes of the conflict affect the participants?
4. One of the examples of political secularity listed in the chapter is the outrage caused by the death of Cecil the Lion. Are there any other examples of unified moral outrage that you remember from the political sphere of social media? What made them so outrageous?
5. How do you deal with political anger? What are some of the ways you express your frustration with political systems?
6. “*Moral outrage fills a psychological need*” (p. 151). What did you make of Jonathan Haidt’s research claiming that our moral values are based on subconscious and unarticulated stories? Of his six moral foundations, which ones are most attractive to you? Care/Harm, Fairness/Cheating, Liberty/Oppression, Loyalty/Betrayal, Authority/Subversion, Sanctity/Degradation.
7. Political differences obsess us and divide us from one another, but problems in our personal lives tend to override even those differences to gain our attention. That is, our frailty and failure, not our attempts at having it all together, are what open us to receiving help and acknowledging our similarities even to our political opponents. Have you experienced an event that helped you overcome partisan lines for more human connection?

CHAPTER 9: THE SECULARITY OF JESUSLAND

In the book’s last chapter, the ideas behind secularity are examined as they express themselves in American churches. The idea is that the demand to be enough is not extinguished in most churches but heightened and given deep religious significance. The result is an institution that may preach “grace through faith,” but doesn’t practice it.

1. What is the reputation of the church from an outsider’s perspective? Positive or negative and in what ways? Why do you think that is?
2. What relationships in your life are grounded in performance? What relationships in your life exist outside of performance?
3. The church often has a reputation as a place where good people go to get better, as opposed to a place where regular people find forgiveness. Has that been your experience? What did that look like?
4. The chapter holds up both personal piety and social change as avenues for secularity to manifest itself, ways for one to perform and find enoughness. Which one are you most familiar with? What does enoughness look like in the Christian communities you’ve encountered?



5. “The strands of secularity 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” (p. 164). Does this also describe your current religious or spiritual practice?
6. “The secularity of Jesusland seeps in when church turns into yet another venue to establish our enoughness, rather than the only reliable place to receive it” (p. 168). How are “receiving enoughness” and “achieving enoughness” different?
7. Complete this thought: I know I’m a good-enough Christian if I _____.
8. How would your spiritual life change if you always experienced God as being like Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones?

CONCLUSION

“I hate to say it, but the only life raft capable of reaching a world drowning in secularity will not be inflated with anything we do or don’t do, but what God himself has done and is doing” (p. 187). The solution to a world seeking religious significance through secular avenues is to stop seeking and to receive enoughness as a gift instead of a wage.

1. What do you think people enjoy more: paychecks or presents? Why?
2. What kind of venues or outlets in your life operate according to grace? What kind operate according to law?
3. Which of the chapters in *Secularity* affected you the most? Were there any that stood out to you as “close to home”?
4. The theme of enoughness persists throughout the book. Why do you think people feel not enough? What is their thought process or fear that leads them to that conclusion?
5. The chapter suggests that conversations about death are helpful in tearing down secular expressions of religion. Think of some of the topics covered in the book. How does death put these secularities in perspective for you?
6. If humans were judged on their motivations alongside or even above their actions, how might that change the calculus of our moral scorekeeping?
7. How would your life be different if you believed that “nothing that needs to be done hasn’t already been done”?

