

## **A Review of “The Secular Creed”**

© 2023 Daniel H. Chew

**Book:** Rebecca McLaughlin, *The Secular Creed: Engaging Five Contemporary Claims* (Austin, TX: The Gospel Coalition, 2021. PDF)

How should the Christian Church think about the various movements happening in the Western world in late modernity? In her book, Rebecca McLaughlin seeks to address five movements, five claims, in the contemporary American context: “Black Lives Matter” (On BLM and racism), “Love is Love” (On homosexuality and the supposed validity of all love), “The Gay-Rights Movement is the New Civil-Rights Movement” (On Intersectional Political LGBTQ+ movement), “Women’s Rights are Human Rights” (Feminism), and “Transgender women are women” (Transgenderism). McLaughlin attempts to deal with these issues from what she sees as the biblical perspective, and is supported in this endeavor by *The Gospel Coalition* (TGC), which published this book and promotes her work.

In this review, I will summarize McLaughlin’s work, then analyze it according to Scripture. While McLaughlin does take orthodox positions on the various issues, it is my contention that what she writes is not in line with the biblical position, and thus the book is not helpful in dealing with these major issues in Western society from a biblical perspective.

### **Summary of the book**

It is evident from McLaughlin’s book that she sincerely desires to be true to Scripture and to espouse biblical morality and ethics in what she teaches in her book. She wrote this book as an apologetic for biblical Christianity, seeking to call Christians to be loving yet be armed with the truths of Scripture, and for non-Christians to realize that their views on these matters depend on Christianity for much of their moral standing (p. 3).

McLaughlin first addresses the issue of “Black Lives Matter.” She conveys her sorrow over the sin of racism in America’s past and states unequivocally that racism is wrong because all humans of all colors are created in God’s image (p. 8). McLaughlin then points to Moses’ marriage to a Cushite woman (p. 9), the non-Israelite heritage of Rahab and Ruth (p. 9), Jesus’ proclamation of care for the Gentiles (p. 10), the shocking message of the Good Samaritan (p. 11), and care for the Samaritan woman at the well (p. 12) as evidence of multicultural and multiethnic diversity in the Bible. She further points out the first black Christian in the Ethiopian eunuch (p. 14) and the multiethnic heartbeat of the New Testament (pp. 15-17). Thus, she exhorts us to listen to “black voices” as they speak of their pain, and also of their gospel-centered stances. Finally, for the non-Christian, McLaughlin calls them to see that they have no basis for

love across racial lines, and thus they are being against racism “on the basis of unanchored faith” (p. 21)

The second challenge addressed by McLaughlin is that of the slogan “love is love,” a most vapid slogan ever. McLaughlin addresses this by pointing out that Jesus is the Bridegroom coming for His Church, the Bride. Jesus is thus our ultimate lover (p. 32). In response to those positing same-sex love, McLaughlin makes the claim that “the Bible calls us repeatedly to non-erotic same sex love” (p. 37), meaning that God has calls us to a greater love that is non-sexual, superior to that offered by the world. Same sex love, correctly done in a non-erotic manner, leads to “a waterhole of love-filled life in Christ” (p. 39). But that will be death if directed in sexual sin. Along the way, McLaughlin extolls the family of the church as something stressed by Jesus (p. 40), and that Christian community should be given especially to those struggling with same-sex attraction, as Christians show forth the love of God that is far superior to the world’s love.

Thirdly, McLaughlin addresses the political issues pushed by the LGBTQ+ agenda, as they tie the LGBTQ+ agenda to the civil rights agenda. McLaughlin once again expresses sorrow for past white racism, but demurs from the comparison of the American civil rights issue with that of the LGBTQ+ agenda. She points out that Christianity has been about protecting minorities, asserts that those who defended slavery listened too little to the Bible (p. 47), and disputes the “right side of history” argument by pointing out that progressive “Christianity” is shrinking while it is Bible-based churches around the world that are growing (p. 47). She then points out that black Americans are generally more conservative and reject gay marriage (p. 49), thus putting a spanner into the supposed continuity between the civil rights and gay-rights agendas. Lastly, she disputes any comparison between gay rights and interracial marriage, and of being gay and being black. On the latter, she distinguishes between “attractions” and “actions” (pp. 52-3), stating that choosing to commit sexual sin is different from being attracted to someone of the same sex, and even attraction is fluid and not fixed. Lastly, McLaughlin deals with the practical issues, calling for “prejudice” against gay and lesbian people to be rejected and for the Church to embrace them.

Fourthly, McLaughlin deals with feminism and women’s rights. She asserts the equality of men and women, and points out that Jesus has relationships with women that would be considered shocking in the patriarchal context of his time (pp. 66-7). She also showed that the church has almost always historically disproportionately female (p. 69), and that there are things in feminism that Christians can and should affirm (p. 70). She points to the sexual revolution and “free sex” as the “poisoned chalice” for women (p. 73), and attacks abortion as being anti-women, thus feminism in its modern incarnation is to be rejected as being anti-women.

For the fifth issue, McLaughlin deals with transgenderism. She asserts, with many people, that the claim that transgender women are women eviscerates the word “women” of any meaning (p. 84). McLaughlin goes into an excursion with the case of J.K. Rowling and her feud with the transgender agenda and states how politically

charged the issue is. She addresses the issue of intersex and states that intersex comes about “*because of the male-female binary*” (p. 96), then links them to the biblical view of the eunuch, who are embraced in God’s kingdom. For all, McLaughlin points us to the goodness of the body and the resurrection hope in Christ, thus pointing those who may suffer from gender dysphoria to the ultimate hope in the resurrection body (pp. 102-3).

## **An analysis**

McLaughlin is to be commended for attempting to address these major and contentious issues in a way that puts forward orthodox positions on the topic in a loving manner. McLaughlin puts forward the correct biblical position of rejecting racism, homosexuality, the intersectional connection to push the LGBTQ+ agenda, modern feminism and transgenderism. She rightly calls the Church to action in repenting for past sins and addressing the hurts of people.

That said, there is an overall thread throughout the book that undermines the orthodox positions taken in the book, and it is to this that will be looked at in the rest of the review.

### **1. “Black Lives Matter”**

McLaughlin is correct to express sorrow over racism, and it is true that many American churches can do more to repent of racism even now. As a statement of fact, it is also true that listening to “black voices” and the pain of black Christians is necessary. That said, all of this does not really address the main issues and instead serve to create resentment among the different ethnicities, particularly as a supposed rejection of racism swing into anti-white racism in the theory and practice of Critical Race Theory.

When addressing a topic as practical and as political as “Black Lives Matter,” it is of course valid to decry racism in general. But if one wishes to endorse the message of “black lives matter” even if one rejects the organization Black Lives Matter, then one is dealing with the social events surrounding the black live matters riots, George Floyd, Michael Brown, and everything associated with those. To claim, as McLaughlin does, that racism is wrong, and then focus exclusively on anti-black racism, in the context of “black lives matter” is to endorse the narrative of “black lives matter” regardless of whether McLaughlin explicitly states that to be the case.

It is this narrative, never rejected by McLaughlin, that leads to the poison of anti-white racism. McLaughlin allows with one hand what she rejects with the other, in her sin of omission. Indeed, racism is wrong, anti-black racism is wrong, but is anti-white and black supremacist racism acceptable? We are not told. We should listen to black voices, but does that mean we listen to black voices and that other ethnicities just have to “shut up” since they do not have the “lived experiences” of blacks? These are not abstract questions, for they function as the actual praxis of liberals in their practice of “anti-racism,” a racist theory promoting the superiority of blackness and all victim

groups. McLaughlin, by dealing with one side and omitting the other, undercuts her message and vitiates her case for “black lives matter,” as what is seen more than her positive message is her failure to put her rejection of racism into practice.

## 2. “Love is Love”

McLaughlin is correct to point out that Jesus is the fulfilment of our desire for love and that we are called to a deeper love that is non-erotic, and homosexuality as sexual sin is to be rejected. But here we see a subtle assault and undermining of the Christian message about love. First, it is true that Jesus is the fulfilment of our desire for love, but we must strongly state that Jesus’ love is of a totally different kind from romantic love, and that any talk of Jesus as “lover” in the romantic context is to be rejected. As grace does not destroy nature but renews it, the metaphor of Jesus as the Bridegroom is inappropriate to be used for our romantic longings. The Bridegroom metaphor posits Jesus as someone who comes for us so we have communion with Him. The focus is on belonging and fellowship, not on our romantic feelings at all. To put it simply, Jesus is not our lover and does not provide satisfaction for our longing for romantic love. The love and fellowship Jesus gives His people transcends romantic love and so render it unnecessary in the eternal state. To put it even more bluntly, Jesus is not your boyfriend!

Likewise, the love that believers have for each other in the church is similar to that Jesus has for His Bride, in that it is one of fellowship, belonging and provision. It is disturbing therefore to read from McLaughlin that “the Bible calls us repeatedly to non-erotic same sex love” (p. 37). The phrase “same sex,” by virtue of focusing on the sex of the people involved, is geared towards sexuality even if no eroticism is involved. At best, here is a confusion of categories, as if Christian love ought to compete with “same sex love” and outcompete it for the Gospel. But such is a massive categorical confusion. The fact that grace does not destroy or overcome nature means that the natural desire for romance cannot be supplied by making Christian love somehow “romantic.” If one thinks that Christian love can overcome the desire for same-sex romance, one might very well set the person up for disappointment, because that is not possible.

Instead of confusing categories, McLaughlin should have stated that our modern feelings of love are disordered. What should be rejected is the focus on feelings as a valid barometer of truth, and thus feelings are to be subjected under the Lordship of Christ.

“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” (Col. 3:5)

Our feelings are fallen, and disordered feelings are to be mortified. The correct response to same sex attraction is not to put forward Christ as the ultimate lover and the Church as the earthly fulfiller of one’s emotional needs, but to call all to repentance

and faith in Christ first and foremost. Only in mortification and faith is one then able to see Christ as the fulfillment of [non-romantic] love and Christian love as a means by which God can provide temporary aid.

As stated in McLaughlin's fourth chapter, there is indeed a difference between "attractions" and "actions." However, McLaughlin is wrong to imply that "attractions" are merely something that happens to someone. "Attractions" are feelings, and feelings can sometimes be nurtured. Those who watch pornography for example would be more prone to disordered feelings. The response to homosexuality must not be addressed to merely homosexuality, but all sexual immorality. In this light, it is regrettable that McLaughlin only mentions the sexual revolution as it relates to women and abortion, as if the sexual revolution did not in any way contribute to homosexuality and even the formation of same-sex attraction in the first place.

McLaughlin's response to the phrase "love is love" is therefore manifestly inadequate. The way to respond should be to attack its foundation of sexual identity and the sexual revolution that made it possible. Only then can same-sex attraction be addressed, not as a romantic love that be directed "correctly" into non-erotic love, but as something to be mortified along with all sexual sins.

### 3. "The Gay-Rights Movement is the New Civil-Rights Movement"

In her response to the third slogan, McLaughlin correctly breaks the connection created by liberals between the "gay-rights movement" and the "civil-rights movement," and does a decent job breaking arguments for the equivalence of homosexuals and blacks. She is also right to decry prejudice against homosexuals where they are truly present (not where others think they are present).

McLaughlin however makes some questionable assertions in her arguments, and subconsciously imbibes on the idea of progression. While it is certainly true that those promoting slavery listen less to the Bible, it is also true that the issue with slavery is not something one can just assert to be "those who are for slavery do not know their Bibles." It is a failure of systematics, on the sensitive point of one's culture. The issue with application of the Bible in history is that it is not always easy, and McLaughlin's approach seem to partake of that same progressivist approach. Since those promoting slavery are wrong, McLaughlin thinks they obviously must be listening to the Bible less. But that assume that today we listen to the Bible more, a more "enlightened" listening perhaps.

It is far better to question the whole idea of progress in moral matters. We may be more "enlightened" on the issue of slavery, but we are certainly less "enlightened" on the issue of abortion and gender. McLaughlin here missed the opportunity of undermining progressivism, and show that we are not much different from our ancestors after all.

#### 4. "Women's Rights are Human Rights"

In her fourth chapter, McLaughlin correctly shows that Christianity is pro-women. She correctly points out the negative consequences of the sexual revolution and abortion for women.

McLaughlin's embrace of the feminist moniker however shows that the issue of feminism is not fully addressed. Most certainly, we agree with the equality between men and women, and also that not everything the feminists fought for are bad. There is also genuine misogyny in the world. But the problem with feminism that must be dealt with is that of human autonomy, that of rebellion against God, as many feminists have rejected God's designs for women in society, marriage and the home. The problem with feminists is that they reject authority, just like men. But unlike men who generally are punished if they rebel against authority, women today are lauded for rebellion against proper authority. When was the last time any feminist was punished for rebellion? Instead, women are encouraged to rebel against "the patriarchy" (whatever that is), with entitled "feminist icons" supposed to function as the role models for impressionable young girls.

There is certainly nothing wrong with highlighting the worth of women. But a chapter that addressed feminism only by talking about the high worth of women without dealing with the effects of sin and rebellion is insufficient for addressing the feminist movement, which is in many parts a rebellion against God and His design for humanity.

#### 5. "Transgender women are women"

McLaughlin is correct in addressing the problems with transgenderism and its denial of what a woman is. She correctly points out the problem with using intersex as a wedge issue to deny the reality of biological sex, noting that intersex depends on the gender binary for its very definition. McLaughlin also is right in pointing out that the resurrection hope is the ultimate solution for gender dysphoria, and calls for hope amid suffering now (p. 103).

Nevertheless, McLaughlin deals only superficially with the issue of transgenderism. It is most certainly true that one must be compassionate to those who suffer from actual gender dysphoria. But, as when she deals with homosexuality, she does not actually address one main cause of gender dysphoria: the sexual revolution.

Now, it must be said that McLaughlin does indeed address the sexual revolution as being anti-women, but only in the context of free sex and abortion, as if the only problem with the sexual revolution is because of its effects on women! The sexual revolution however is more than that. It is the idea that sexuality is to be open and public, that sex is a mere bodily appetite that should be satisfied, and that one's identity is tied to one's sex and sexual proclivities. All of that opens the way for gender dysphoria, where some people think they are born with the wrong gender. It is of course true that in a fallen world, some people might not conform to cultural gender

expectations, but that would not necessarily lead to the conclusion that one is born into the wrong body unless gender is disassociated with sex and sexuality is taken to be an important aspect of one's identity. McLaughlin is right to point out the case of eunuchs in the Bible, but she fails to note that this makes sexuality secondary in importance.

There will always be people who are non-conforming in gender roles, and thus some would always suffer from gender dysphoria as a result. But the sexual revolution with its fixation on sex adds fuel to the fire, by elevating sexuality to its unholy position. The solution, besides looking to the resurrection, is to reject Western culture's perverse infatuation with sex, and to be less strict on gender expression. If a boy wants to play with a doll, that does not make him a girl. If a girl wants to play with cars and trucks, that does not make her a boy.

The sexual revolution comes with a proliferation of pornography, and it is this that must be rejected as well. Lust begets lust, and it is possible that heterosexual lust over time will result in homosexual lust and even autogynephilia, which can lead to transgenderism. This does not mean that those suffering from gender dysphoria are necessarily porn addicts, but some of them might be. By neglecting the sexual revolution here, McLaughlin fails to address the sexual issues involved in transgenderism that are made plausible due to the sexual revolution. There has always been some people suffering from gender dysphoria, but it is only now that it has become common and mainstream and a drive to normalize this pathology has formed.

I further note here that McLaughlin limits her focus on transgenderism, while she fails to deal with the entire alphabet soup of "genders." Perhaps it is because McLaughlin refuses to see the progression of depravity that leads from feminism to the sexual revolution to the current depravity of the LGBTQ+ cult that her chapter does not and cannot address the actual root issue of sexual depravity, instead focusing on the symptom of gender dysphoria. This however comes at a cost, for her counsel might aid some, but it would fail those who suffer from gender dysphoria because of other sexual sins either their own or that of others. McLaughlin's chapter, while offering compassion and hope, ultimately fails to deal with a root cause of the issue, and so offers superficial balm on the sore that is transgenderism.

## **Conclusion**

As it can be seen, on a superficial level, McLaughlin's book hits all the orthodox points. She rejects racism, rejects sexual immorality including the LGBTQ+ agenda and speaks against abortion. She hits all the right notes, yet upon closer inspection, something is off. That something is a failure to ground all these positions on a biblical worldview, and thus opening space for moral compromise, regardless of whether McLaughlin personally allows for such compromise.

On the issue of race, McLaughlin's approach fails because it does not accurately diagnose or address the problem of racism in America. On the issue of homosexuality and transgenderism, McLaughlin's approach fails because the biblical view concerning sexuality and sexual immorality is obscured for a bare focus on Christian love and mere prohibitions against sexual immorality, while the sexual revolution remains largely untouched. On the issue of women, McLaughlin proclaims the created value of women without addressing the fallenness of women, and thus undermine what Scripture teaches about women.

While we should certainly appreciate McLaughlin's defense of biblical positions on the various topics, the trajectories in her chapters undermine biblical orthodoxy. This is what is so tragic, and why, although this book does say some helpful things, it must be rejected as corrosive to true biblical orthodoxy.