

The Pied Piper of Peoria

How American Culture Can Lure You from God and Weaken Your Faith

Michael Zigarelli

*Once more he stept into the street,
And to his lips again
Laid his long pipe of smooth straight cane;
And ere he blew three notes (such sweet
Soft notes as yet musician's cunning
Never gave the enraptured air)*

*There was a rustling, that seemed like a
bustling
Of merry crowds justling at pitching and
hustling,*

*Small feet were pattering, wooden shoes
clattering,
Little hands clapping and little tongues
chattering,
And, like fowls in a farm-yard when barley is
scattering,*

*Out came the children running.
All the little boys and girls,
With rosy cheeks and flaxen curls,
And sparkling eyes and teeth like pearls.*

*Tripping and skipping, ran merrily after
The wonderful music with shouting and
laughter.*



*... When, lo, as they reached the mountain-side,
A wondrous portal opened wide,*

*As if a cavern was suddenly hollowed;
And the Piper advanced and the children
followed,*

*And when all were in to the very last,
The door in the mountain side shut fast.*

**From "The Pied Piper of Hamelin,"
Robert Browning, 1888**

Meet the Pied Piper of Peoria

My claim is this: Today we in America are in the same predicament as those kids in Hamelin, following the sweet, hypnotic music merrily and obliviously, wandering farther and farther from where we belong. But it doesn't have to be that way. This is an article to help you break free from the guy with the flute.

Let me introduce you to him, this charlatan who steals without the victim ever knowing he's been robbed. The Piper has a fancy name today—"secularism"—but don't let that intimidate you. He's both gentle and familiar. In fact, you've probably known him all your life, at least if you've lived in the United States.

That's because since you were born, he's been around you constantly—in the television shows, at the movie theater, in the media and the music and most of the advertisements you've seen. He's infiltrated our government, our public schools, our universities, our workplaces. Clever boy, he's even found a way into some of our churches!

And like those captivated kids in Hamelin, many of us are spellbound by secularism, following without even knowing we're being led. There's a dark cavern up ahead, too. Lots of folks are already there. It's not too late, but to break free, you need to see the Piper for who he is and for what he's doing.

As We Think, So We Do

Perhaps the easiest way to understand "secularism" is to think of it as a religion, since, like the religions with which you're familiar, it advocates a point of view about God, about right and wrong, about how to live, and about what matters most in life. More specifically, it's the perspective that we can't know much about God, if God even exists, so how we should live is essentially up to us. Issues of "right" and "wrong" are relative concepts, determined by societal norms and laws and even personal preferences, rather than by "God's will." Since the latter is unknowable, it's irrelevant and can no longer be used to guide our lives. So says the Piper, this religion of secularism.

Gradually but ingeniously, the Piper uses various influence mechanisms (television shows, movies, advertisements, music lyrics, the media, the education system, and so on) to seduce us, actually to *indoctrinate* us to adopt that secular point of view for ourselves. Then, as we unwittingly buy-in to the tenets of this stealth religion—as we become indoctrinated without our knowledge or consent—our priorities and behaviors become converts, too. In plain English, we begin to live differently, to live consistently with our new beliefs. The sweet music gets into our heads and then curiously, our feet begin to move, faithfully following the Piper.

Notice how this works: the seduction starts at the *cognitive* level, at the level of our thinking. Then, what guides our thoughts guides our actions. As we think, so we do. It's an almost automatic cause-and-effect relationship.

Obvious, perhaps, but we seldom reflect on this phenomenon, which leaves us vulnerable to secularism's relentless tug. Like the invisible ocean current that slowly pulls us down the shoreline as we mindlessly play in the waves, this invisible *cultural* current of secularism slowly but inexorably pulls us in its direction as we mindlessly go about our daily business. Before we realize it, we're in a different location entirely.

Analogies aside, this may still sound a bit abstract and possibly academic. But it's intensely practical and of immeasurable importance. Let me show you an everyday example of how secularism affects us.

A Glimpse of the Piper in Action

Consider marriage. What exactly is it? How long should the commitment be? Under what circumstances should we break that commitment? Should a couple be married before they sleep together? Before they live together? Before they have children? And what does it mean to be a good spouse? What are the roles of a husband and of a wife? Is it even necessary to have one husband and one wife for the relationship to be a "marriage"?

I suspect that each one of us has an answer for each one of those questions. We maintain assumptions about "marriage" and, even if we don't realize it, those assumptions drive our marital behaviors (and whether we get married in the first place, and how we counsel our friend with the troubled marriage, and how we vote on marriage-related issues, and so on). *But did you ever consider how you formed your perspective about marriage in the first place?* From where did your assumptions come? Surely you weren't born with them.

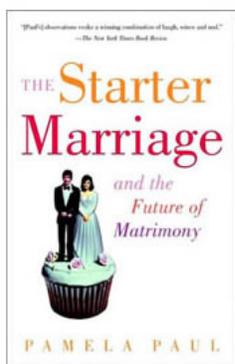
There's more to the answer than just how you were raised and what you saw in your household growing up. That's a part of the answer, of course. But to some extent you have also been *culturally-conditioned* to think a particular way about marriage, for better or worse. And if you're like many people, you're not even aware of the conditioning.

Whether it's from television shows, or books and magazines, or Dear Abby columns, or church teachings, or movies, or Oprah, or that sociology course you took in college, or (especially) your closest friends, or any number of other influencers, your assumptions about marriage—and about almost everything else—may have been shaped by the secular culture in which you live.

Let me show you. Look at the three pictures below, pictures of a popular book, a humorous billboard, and a strikingly blunt tee-shirt. Each communicates a perspective

about marriage, and a rather dim one at that. It's the perspective that marriage is impermanent and disposable ("The Starter Marriage"—like a "starter house"), that marriage entails duplicity and materialism (she says she doesn't want a diamond, buddy, but she's lying to you), and even that marriage is the death of fun and freedom (it's "Game Over" for you, pal).

Now, please understand this: None of these individual messages by itself is likely to change someone's opinion about marriage, but how about a hundred such messages? Or a thousand? Or ten thousand? When we are exposed *for years* to secular messages about marriage, and when those messages are reinforced by the people around us who themselves have internalized them, our own assumptions about marriage may begin to conform to this culture. Our marital behaviors then follow naturally, reflecting this cultural conditioning. Again, as we think, so we do.



The Scientific Community Agrees

I wouldn't be surprised if you're a little skeptical about all this. Paradoxically, we tend not to see these messages because they're all around us all the time, because they're so close to us, because we've been marinated in them our entire lives. It's like the old adage: "If you want to know what water is, don't ask a fish."

Or perhaps you're like I am and want scientific evidence to back up a claim, especially a claim as provocative as "you're being indoctrinated without even knowing it." There's actually a plethora of carefully-crafted research out there to support this linkage between culture and behavior. Representative is this quote: "The overwhelming majority of [cultural researchers] assume explicitly that culture—however defined—is an antecedent to human behavior...At some level, it appears that nearly all social scientists in this field acknowledge that culture can play a crucial role in shaping virtually any aspect of human behavior" (W.J. Lonner and J. Adamopoulos (1997) "Culture as an Antecedent to Behavior," in J.W. Berry et al. (editors), *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, p. 61).

Now, if you've accessed any type of social science research before, you may understand the profundity of this quote. For even a "majority" of social scientists to agree on something is remarkable; when "nearly all social scientists" agree on something, it's *extraordinary*. But that's how clear this culture-behavior relationship is. We've discovered an essential truth here about how the world operates—about how *we* operate—and we ignore that truth at our own peril.

The bottom line is this: Not one of us is immune from the pernicious influence of the Piper, this secular culture that constantly plays its alluring music. And, please forgive my directness, but the surest sign of infection is the insistence that one is not infected.

Like it or not, see it or not, believe it or not, we are continually sold a set of ideas by our secular culture about how to live. About what matters. About the good life. About relationships, parenting, work, money, success, our bodies, the clothes we wear, how to react when someone is inconsiderate on the highway, and about everything else. Exposed daily to dozens of invisible messages, it's normal to be affected by them, even to begin following this Piper, ultimately to enter the cavern of conformity to the very culture in which we live—a secular culture that, as we'll see next, can lure us from God and weaken our faith.

Ten Ways That American Culture Can Lure You from God and Weaken Your Faith

Meet Sam and Michelle. They're your typical, busy, 30-something American couple—good people who are simply going through their day, taking care of one responsibility after another. They're up early, they get their kids off to school, they work hard, run errands, make dinner, help the kids with their homework, and occasionally enjoy some leisure time after that. Consider with me how many times during their day they hear the seemingly-innocuous melody of secularism and how that might affect them. Sometimes the Piper's music is overt and blaring, but usually it's a lot more subtle. Regardless the form, though, it's always calling. Listen for it with me.

The Pied Piper of Pop

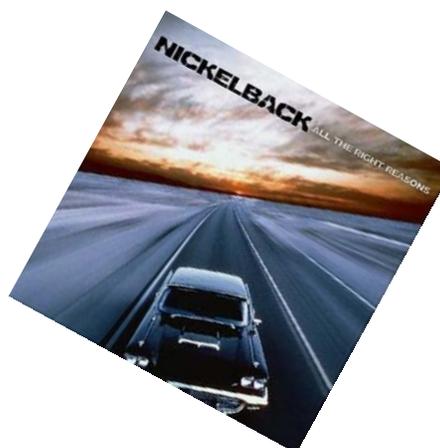
The alarm clock goes off at 6:05. Sam has set the dial to a soft rock station; it's a middle ground between his preference for hard rock and his wife's preference for Top 40. The tune on the radio is a familiar one and it plays for about a minute before Sam flails an arm to silence it:

*Imagine there's no Heaven.
It's easy if you try.
No hell below us.
Above us only sky.
Imagine all the people, living for today.
Imagine there's no countries.
It isn't hard to do.
Nothing to kill or die for.
And no religion too.
Imagine all the people, living life in peace.*



Before Sam's feet even hit the ground, secularism hits him. The lyrics in so much contemporary music assume that God is either not there or irrelevant to our lives. Sometimes the message is obvious, like this John Lennon song. Most of the time, though, it's not, like the song Sam heard on his way to work (when he could choose the station unilaterally):

*I'm driving past your house while you were
sneaking out,
I got the car door opened up so you can jump
in on the run.
Your mom don't know that you were missing,
She'd be pissed if she could see the parts of you
that I've been kissing,
Screamin' no, we're never gonna quit, ain't
nothing wrong with it,
just acting like we're animals.
No, no matter where we go,
'cause everybody knows, we're just a couple of
animals!*



Sam has half of his brain on his 9:00 meeting, the other half on the images conjured up by the lyrics. Another secular seed is planted: If we're nothing more than "animals"—creatures that simply indulge themselves in hedonistic, instinctual pleasures—then ...

This is not a healthy moment for Sam. He might as well feed poison to his marriage; it would have the same effect.

The Pied Piper of Prime Time

Back at the ranch, Michelle has just about gotten the kids out the door to school. In the background is a morning show from one of the major networks, advising Michelle what

she should be wearing this spring—how to look fab on a budget, how to downplay her hips and thighs, what colors will make her look thinner. Michelle's not exactly taking notes; she's not even watching. But it's merely the first such incursion today, encouraging her to obsess about what she looks like.

Later that day, her soap operas normalize revenge, a celebrity chef whips up a decadent dessert, and Oprah weighs in with her New Age guru du jour. For Michelle, the TV's usually just background noise—she's almost always doing something productive around the house during the day. It's incessant noise, though, replete with recurring messages: Beauty is something you buy. So is happiness. You owe it to yourself to have more. Look out for number one, because no one else will look out for you.

...and then there are the commercials.



Oprah: There couldn't possibly be just one way!

Audience member: What about Jesus?

Oprah: *What?* What about Jesus?

Another audience member: You say there isn't only one way. There is one way, and only one way, and that is through Jesus!

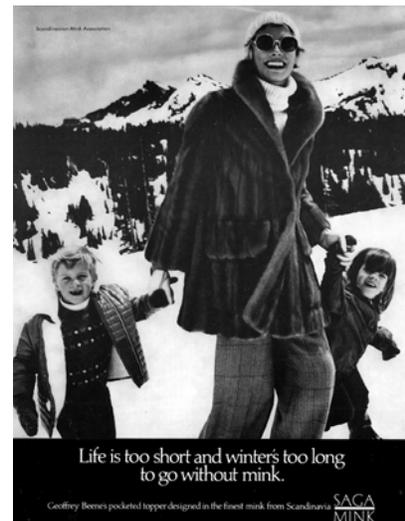
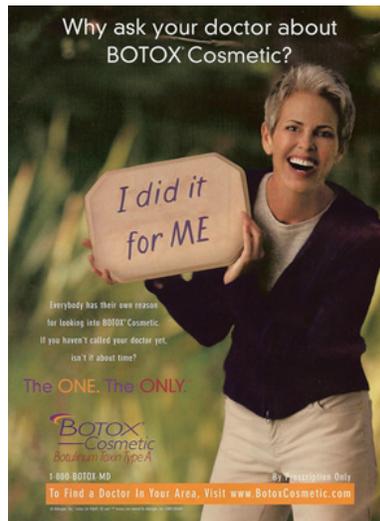
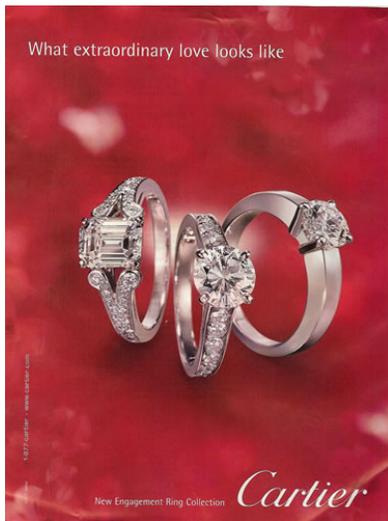
Oprah: There couldn't possibly be only one way with millions of people in the world!

The Oprah Winfrey Show, February 15, 2007

The Pied Piper of Promotions

By one account, “the average American is exposed to 247 commercial messages each day” (*Consumer Reports*, January 2001, p. 8). That's probably a low estimate, given the acceleration of ad placement this decade, but regardless the exact number, this much is true: Sam and Michelle are bombarded daily by print ads, billboards, TV and radio commercials, pop-up ads online, and strategically located logos. And every one of those promotions invites the couple to embrace a particular message or idea.

Consider, for example, the three advertisements (below) that assaulted Michelle within seconds of opening a magazine over breakfast: a diamond ad, a Botox ad, and a fur coat ad. The products are different but the messages are essentially the same: *indulge*. You deserve it; you're worth it; life's too short to do otherwise.



There are plenty of other messages implicit in these promotions, but frankly, Michelle's not pondering any of them. She's simply flipping through the magazine while eating her oatmeal. The house is finally quiet after the morning rush, but the Piper's music remains. He plays softly, unobtrusively, and with no insistence that Michelle listen. He's just there.

But curiously, after years of hearing it, the music stays in Michelle's head, luring her without her knowledge, changing the way she thinks about possessions, and ultimately affecting her decisions—decisions about whether she needs a new car, about how often to eat out, about whether a four dollar coffee is reasonable, about whether the family needs a bigger house, about how much to buy her kids for Christmas, and about countless other purchases.

The Pied Piper of Public Education

Five miles away, the Piper is also regaling Sam and Michelle's kids. They're learning that the first Thanksgiving was celebrated because the pilgrims were thankful. Thankful to whom, though, is classified information. Or perhaps "censored" would be more accurate. "God," it seems, is a four letter word in their public school.

Equally subtle is their science class where they're taught that atheistic, Darwinian evolution is established fact. The teacher is not hostile to other creation perspectives; those perspectives are simply not worth mentioning because they're assumed untrue or at best, unknowable.

Next is their "health" class where they're learning about the proper use of a condom. Teens will be teens, so better to be safe than sorry, you know. "Abstinence" is mentioned as a birth control option, but its cursory treatment in class suggests it's an option that's neither realistic nor endorsed.

There's a Piper's melody—a "worldview," if you will—that transcends the kids' education. It's a consistent message in public schools (and public universities, for that matter) that "God" has nothing to do with history, nothing to do with science, nothing to do with economics or civics or sex ed—nothing to do with knowledge or real life. To be sure, that message is not taught directly to the students; rather it's "caught" indirectly by the students through the teachers' ignoring any connection between God and the subject matter. Stated differently, Sam and Michelle's kids are exposed daily to a *hidden curriculum* at school—a curriculum that teaches, without ever saying a word about God (and, indeed, *by* never saying a word about God), that God is irrelevant.

BIZARRO By Dan Piraro



Sam and Michelle don't realize this, but their kids' public school has become a secular temple. Its high priests are the leaders of the National Education Association (NEA)—the teachers' union, the largest and arguably most influential union in the country. Despite much of its good work over the years to improve teacher working conditions and educational quality, the NEA has also created a system where faith-based perspectives cannot encroach on education, where "God" has no place in the classroom, and where public schools are to be religion-free zones. In fact, the union says so explicitly: "For American education to flourish, religious dogma must neither guide nor hamper the pursuit of knowledge by students and teachers in our public schools" (NEA "Statement in Support of Teaching Evolution," 1994, available at <http://ncseweb.org/media/voices/national-education-association>).

Not surprisingly, then, the NEA has not only compelled its teachers to adopt a secularized curriculum, they've also fought hard to sequester teachers and administrators of faith (and, increasingly, students of faith) from giving any voice to a Christian worldview. Only one flute player is permitted in this school band.

As a result, along with some willing accomplices in the courts and in university schools of education, the NEA has now cultivated a generation of teachers who are loathe to discuss anything supernatural or religious (except perhaps the Crusades and the Inquisition), effectively severing the realm of theology from the realm of knowledge. In the process, they are shrewdly and often invisibly indoctrinating Sam and Michelle's kids, shepherding them daily toward a more secularized understanding of God. The music in this temple is among the most spellbinding in the Piper's repertoire.

The Pied Piper of Pragmatism

Meanwhile on the job, Sam is undergoing a similar kind of indoctrination. God, it seems, has not only been expelled from school, He's been kicked out of many workplaces as well.

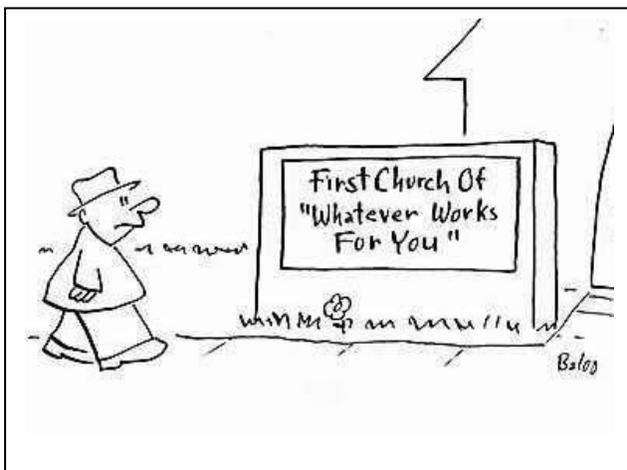
Sam has been socialized by the culture at work. For years, he's understood that his role as a manager is to solve problems, to achieve the goals set before him, to do whatever it takes to move the company forward. How he gets there is generally up to him, but the priority is clear: Get the job done. "That's why we pay you the big bucks," his boss is fond of saying.



*Whizzing past this sign at 50 mph, all you catch is the inviting message of "Pine Straw Free." Only after the customer has stopped in or called (or inspected the sign much more closely) does he realize that it's only the **delivery** that's free. This is a mild form of pragmatism in action—do whatever it takes to get the customer's attention, even if it's deceptive.*

That's a plain and explicit message to Sam and his co-workers. It's the "corporate culture," the normal way of doing things where Sam works, the philosophy of how we do business around here.

And it's a philosophy that has another fancy name—pragmatism—which is actually just a particular form of secularism. "Pragmatism" is the notion that the right thing to do is the thing that "works" to solve the problem, an approach that's everywhere in the American workplace: Whatever gets us market share, whatever beats the competition, whatever gets the customers to buy, whatever keeps our cash flow healthy, whatever gets us investor dollars, whatever gets our employees to work hard – "whatever works" – that's the thing to do. Stated more formally, pragmatism has been called "the cash value of an idea": If it pays (financially or otherwise) then do it, if it doesn't then don't.



Let's be clear about one thing here: Being "pragmatic"—being an effective problem solver—is usually a good thing from a Christian perspective. The difficulty comes when "pragmatic" in the moment morphs into "pragmatism" as a way of life, when it becomes the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong, when it becomes the "default condition" for getting things done, as it is in Sam's workplace. That default—now Sam's personal default—

eclipses other ways of making decisions. Though Sam has only been with the company a couple years, this Pied Piper of Pragmatism has, unbeknownst to Sam, lured him away from a God-centered approach to his work and his leadership, since it's assumed in his work environment that "God" is not relevant to "getting things done."

The Pied Piper of Panache

At around 2:00, Michelle flips through the mail as she walks back up the driveway. The women's magazine echoes the same hackneyed themes from last month: Burn belly fat in two minutes a day; great skin at age 30, 40, 50; try tonight the ancient Chinese secret to better sex. And then there's the ubiquitous celeb du jour peddling the three steps to a happier you. The invisible message resounds: *These are the things that matter in life.*

Just as powerful as the magazine's content is the message sent by the svelte model on the cover. She has perfect teeth, perfect make-up, and a Barbie-doll figure. Without saying a word, she too speaks volumes to Michelle: *This is what it means to be beautiful.*



The Pied Piper of Partisanship

On the drive back from work, Sam listens to some talk radio. He's an idea guy, so he appreciates a spirited exchange of ideas. The host of the show is passionate, eloquent, sometimes humorous, and to Sam, almost always correct. Today's assertions, as usual, resonate with Sam, entrenching him further still into a partisan mindset. Over time, without realizing it, his perspectives on the important issues of the day are correlated more closely with political party than with any Christian beliefs he might espouse. In fact, if pressed, he'd have trouble articulating a "Christian" or "Biblical" perspective on these issues. He's got plenty of opinions, though, and some strong arguments to back them up.

The same is true for Sam's friend at work, but that guy tends to be shaped more by the cable news shows than by talk radio. He listens selectively rather than critically to the talking heads on TV, and comes away just as partisan as he began (equipped with a few more grenades to toss at Sam the next day at lunch). He too habitually follows this Pied Piper of Partisanship, albeit in the opposite direction of Sam. Neither man realizes, though, that he's being led astray.

The Pied Piper of the Press

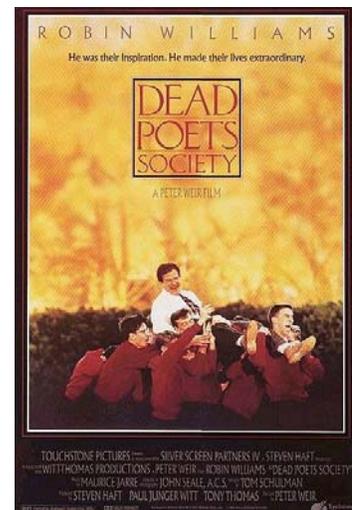
Speaking of the day's news, throughout the day Sam and Michelle are treated by the media to a host of opinion-shaping masquerading as objective reporting. The stories that are highlighted, how they're framed, the word choices, body language, and gestures of the reporters—all of these can convey a particular *point of view*, and many times that's a secular one.

Here's but one instance from today. As Michelle scans the front page of the newspaper, this little blurb catches her eye: "President Obama said he would repeal a Bush administration rule that protected doctors and nurses who refuse to provide a medical service because of moral qualms." A "medical service"? Mere "moral qualms"? Michelle is becoming savvy enough to see this as secular code in the abortion debate. Another way to frame it, she thinks, would be "President Obama plans to repeal a Bush administration rule that protected doctors and nurses who refuse to take an innocent human life because they consider themselves accountable to God."

Michelle's not yet inclined to be persuaded on this issue, but another secular seed is planted by the news media. And over the years, only one of those seeds needs to take root for Michelle's mind to begin to change.

The Pied Piper of PG-13

Sam and Michelle flip on the TV after putting the kids to bed. 250 channels later, they settle on a movie rerun—one of their favorites—*Dead Poets Society*, where Robin Williams plays a private school teacher who uses unorthodox but ingenious methods to inspire his class of 16 year olds. In a classic scene from that film, the teacher invites his students to peruse 100 year old photos of schoolboys who look surprising similar to the current class. His lesson? Like the boys in these pictures, "we are food for worms, lads ... Each and every one of us in this room is one day going to stop breathing, turn cold, and die." Turning back to the pictures on the wall, he asks "Did they wait till it was too late to make from their lives even one iota of what they were capable of? ... You see gentlemen, these boys are now fertilizing daffodils..."



But it's not too late for you, he tells his class in a crescendo. These boys' legacy to you is incisive: "*Carpe diem*. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary!"

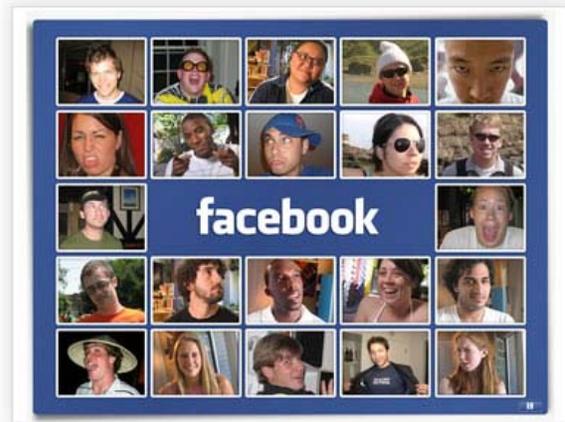
It's a great message, and so powerfully delivered: Make the most of this moment we call "life."

But beyond the brilliant rhetoric, consider the worldview underlying the teacher's lesson. It's a message of atheism. "Make the most of your life because there is no eternity" is indeed a profoundly different message than "Make the most of your life because God has created you and gifted you." Which of these are we to believe?

The moment passes quickly, though, and there's no time for such reflection. With drive-by efficiency, the scene advances a secular perspective of life. Sam and Michelle simply consume it as entertainment and the Piper softly plays on, as he does in so many of the movies on the other 249 channels.

The Pied Piper of Peer Networks

Michelle hops on Facebook for a few minutes before turning in. With all the secular messages all around us all the time, it's no wonder that she hears the echo of that music through her friends. Many of them have been following the Piper for years; in fact, they've been trained to play the music themselves.



One friend comments on Michelle's profile picture, complimenting her for how young she still looks. Another laments an expensive-but-unused gym membership and her rapidly expanding midsection. A third publicizes her new side job as a Mary Kay consultant.

Mindless chatter? Innocuous girl-talk? Just keeping in touch? Sometimes, but notice that yet again Michelle is being bombarded with a secular view of how she should live, of what matters in life, of what her priorities should be. Since so many people on Facebook seem concerned about what they look like—and are taking notice of what Michelle looks like—then perhaps her appearance should indeed be a high priority. Perhaps her self-concept is even becoming *defined* by her appearance. These mere five minutes online have only reinforced the messages Michelle heard earlier in the day from the television and the women's magazine.

The real power in this moment, though, is not the messages themselves, but the *messengers*. It's one thing when a faceless company pitches an idea or worldview; it's quite another when a Facebook friend does it. Our similarity to our peers and our liking of our peers make them among the most powerful influencers in our lives. We don't always follow our friends, of course, but their perspective tends to influence us far more than does the perspective of strangers or salespeople.

Cataloging the Cacophony

By the end of the day, Sam and Michelle have been solicited by dozens of messages, some visible, some invisible, some unique, some recurring. More of the Piper's progeny have joined in the cacophony as well: bumper stickers, advice columnists, comic strips, video games, political speeches, athletes' comments, novels, plays, works of art—the music is inescapable.

The point, though, is that much of this music—this cultural conditioning—advances ideas that deviate *radically* from those of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In just this one day, for example, among the messages that Sam, Michelle and their kids have heard are these:

- The good life is the life of accumulation. More is better. Faster is better. Bigger is better (except for certain body parts).
- Be concerned about what you wear and what you look like. Be thin or at least dress that way. Look younger. Beauty is something you buy.
- The ultimate ends in life are happiness and freedom. You have the right to be happy and to do whatever you want, as long as it doesn't directly hurt someone else.
- Life is short and eternity is uncertain, so you owe it to yourself to indulge.
- Look out for number one, because no one else will.
- The good employee does whatever it takes to get results. "Success" is moving up the ladder, earning more money, and being in charge.
- Enjoy promiscuity but be safe. Abstinence is for losers who can't get a date.
- You belong to yourself and you are accountable only to yourself. Just make sure your conscience is clear and you can sleep at night.
- The good person is the tolerant person, the one who understands that different opinions are equally valid opinions. Live and let live.
- God is unknowable so God is irrelevant. Such beliefs are private and have no place in public policy, education, the workplace, or even polite conversation. Devoutly religious people are arrogant, superstitious, anti-intellectual, gullible, and irrational.

This is just a sampling and this is just one day. Tomorrow it all begins again for this family at 6:05 a.m.

...as it does for us. Each day in American culture, the sweet, hypnotic music of secularism plays continuously, calling us away from God-focused living, away from traditional Judeo-Christian belief, away from a life of sincere, authentic faith. The almost-inevitable result is some degree of *assimilation*—we become a product of the secular culture in which we are marinated daily. Through an osmosis-like process, we adopt many of its assumptions about how we should live, gradually developing new

patterns of thought, feeling, and action that suggest we too are en route to the Piper's cavern.

The Pied Piper of Peoria is luring us from God and weakening our faith. So what are we to do?

Breaking Free from the Piper

In one sense, forewarned is forearmed. Just knowing the Piper is there and knowing what he looks like is an enormous step toward breaking the spell. That's, in fact, the primary purpose of this article—to help us see more clearly this dangerous, invisible phenomenon, this hijacking of our minds and our lives, this brainwashing of believers and non-believers alike. When we see what's going on, we naturally resist the seduction.



But for many of us, awareness won't be enough. It's a necessary but not sufficient condition for freedom. In the busyness of everyday life, we tend to forget about the Piper, leaving us vulnerable once again. So in addition to vigilance, we also have to be *intentional and proactive* about resisting the pervasive pull of secularism.

Surround Yourself with Positive Influences

One way to do this is by leveraging this same cause-and-effect process to our advantage. What I mean is this: If our environment can pull our thinking and behavior in a secular direction, it can also pull them in a sacred direction. What's needed is an adjustment to our lifestyle so that we take in more of the right messages and fewer of the wrong ones.

Influencers like television shows, music, movies, magazines, friends, and so on can be positive as well as negative. Though it's the negative elements we've emphasized up to this point, consider how such influencers can shape our thinking toward godly ends. If we, for example, get in the habit of surrounding ourselves with Christian music throughout the day, that will make a difference. If we watch fewer toxic TV shows and movies and more of the stuff that encourages God-centered thought and action, that too will make a difference. A show that highlights the plight of impoverished kids in Appalachia is better for us than yet another insipid sitcom that normalizes lasciviousness and profanity. Multiply that by a hundred and you'll be in the habit of drowning out the Piper's music with God's music.

Similarly, we might make a practice of downloading Christian-oriented podcasts and books and listening to those during our commute. More broadly, we can make wiser

choices about everything we access on the Internet, as well as about what we read, about the conversations we have, and about the company we keep.

If possible, we might choose Christian education for ourselves and our kids, rather than secular education. We can go to Christian retreats and conferences (professional conferences, marital conferences, etc.). And most importantly, we can spend lots of time at a solid Bible-believing church and with the God whom they serve.

Learn Continuously about the Christian Approach to Everyday Life

You can also reverse the secular brainwashing by making learning a habit—in particular, learning more about what it means to live a godly life, about a faithful approach to marriage, parenting, work, education, money, possessions, success, leadership, sexuality, conflict resolution, and so on. There is a Christian perspective for each of these dimensions of life that often stands in sharp contrast with the secular perspective, but this is not always taught well in our churches or even our Christian schools. As a result, you should become intentional about *self-teaching*, about the spiritual discipline of “study,” about developing a Christian worldview of everyday life.

At the same time, if your church is not teaching about the temptation and influence of secularism, talk to your pastor or elders or deacon board about making this a priority. Much is at stake here, and we are more resilient in community than we are alone, so this simply must be done—even if it means that you are the one who initially teaches about the threat of secularism, freely giving to others information that has been freely given to you.

Be advised, though, that whether you learn individually or communally or both, your learning process will entail a lot of “unlearning” of secular ideas that have deeply embedded themselves in your thinking over the years. And that will further entail fighting some challenging battles within yourself. As we see more clearly that our life and our body is not our own, that our “happiness” is not the main priority, that the good life is not about comfort or convenience or security or freedom to do whatever we want with our time and money and minds, we may be tempted to abandon the whole effort. We may find that we’d prefer to follow the Piper than to follow God. It seems a lot easier and besides that, everyone else seems to be.

That may, in fact, be true. It *is* easier simply to drift with the cultural current than to swim against it. But you are stronger than that. And wiser than that. This is your one and only life and it’s too valuable to spend slavishly following a crowd that is following a thief. Break free, starting today, and head back toward your home. There is Someone there who loves you and who misses you very much.

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