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## Secularity and the Gospel: Being Missionaries to Our Children, edited by Ronald Rolheiser

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*Educating Leaders for Ministry* can serve as a guide to those teachers and administrators who would tackle those challenges.

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## **Secularity and the Gospel: Being Missionaries to Our Children**

Ronald Rolheiser, Editor  
Crossroad, 2006  
\$19.95, 237 pages

Reviewed by Sister Barbara Kane, O.P.

Anyone who has bemoaned the fact that a family member, friend, or student has stopped practicing the faith now has a resource for addressing the problem. *Secularity and the Gospel: Being Missionaries to Our Children* is the fruit of a group of four symposia held in Ottawa, Canada and San Antonio, Texas. The goal of these meetings was to explore the challenge to become “Missionaries to Secularity.” In the first part of the book, Rolheiser defines the challenge and the results of the symposia. A middle section provides sound bites from the meetings. The third section includes seven excellent essays by different authors to support the material in the book.

Rolheiser cautions the reader not to look at secularity as the enemy of God and Church. “While secularity mandates freedom from religion, it also mandates freedom for religion” (p. 41). Secularity has brought many goods even as it has led to the excesses complained about by many today. The reader is challenged to “love the world, even with its moral inadequacies and in its sometimes hostile attitude toward faith and the religion” (p. 43). “The secular world will respond to us precisely, and only, when it first recognizes and feels our love” (p. 46). Rolheiser suggests that the reader use the metaphor of adolescence to describe secularity—a time when traditions and beliefs are questioned, and sometimes, rejected outright. This is a time of growth that one must experience in order to mature into adulthood. It can be difficult personally and for the family but often leads to stronger parent-child relationships

in the end. Seeing secularity as adolescence gives encouragement that reconciliation can one day take place. Rolheiser then discusses an approach to reaching out—with love—to our friends and children who are swept up in this time. “Effective missionaries to and within secularity must help show secularity how it can grow to a new maturity by moving beyond where it is at present...to something new” (p. 66). We do this by modeling Jesus, “letting our lives speak of and give real flesh to truth, justice, peace, love, holiness, and fidelity” (p. 74). Rolheiser concludes with the statement that “our real task is to make the secular world fall in love with God again” (p. 83). He gives hope to parents, teachers, pastors, and friends that if we have the courage to respond to the challenge with trust in God and in love as Jesus did, and if we are willing to leave the outcome to God, God will take care of the rest.

Chapter 4 is entitled “Fragments of our Conversations” and provides a list of 119 statements made throughout the symposia. These are little nuggets to chew on—opportunities for reflection, meditation, and a chance to ponder personal opinions and actions. They are bits of advice: “We must use a renewed imagination to tap into the depth of spiritual hunger that lies at the heart of secularity” (p. 94); moments of comfort: “We come to God more by doing it wrong than by doing it right” (p. 90); and times of challenge: “You can only give away what you have become and transform others to the depth that you yourself have experienced transformation” (p. 89). Each of these fragments provides an opportunity to explore a personal approach to being a missionary to secularity.

The third section entitled “Background Resources” fleshes out the material in Rolheiser’s section. The essays provide historical background, definitions, personal experiences, and theological reflection upon the issue. Downey, in “Consenting to Kenosis: Mission to Secularity,” describes the theological resources that might guide our missionary work. Downey states that the “Kenotic Christ, the self-emptying of God in Christ, the divine self-abandon, is the most apt Christological image for our own day” (p. 124). Jesus emptied himself to live among us as one of us experiencing our own weakness and vulnerability. We are called to model Christ by emptying our preconceived notions of how to evangelize the secular world and to leave behind the idea that we can “save” anyone else. When we reach out we “go with empty hands, willing to receive the gift on offer in the other, even and especially those we are inclined to call ‘godless’” (p. 127). We go out with “respect for difference, patient listening, and confidence” (p. 129). Barron confirms this when he explains that God “doesn’t manipulate, dominate, or wrestle into submission anything outside of himself” (p. 172). We likewise must reach out with “compassion, nonviolent being-for-the-other. To proclaim this vision—with

its political, social, economic, artistic, cultural and indeed cosmic implications—is what evangelization means in the broadest sense” (p. 172). We do not have all the answers but it is not necessary that we do.

Teachers and administrators of Catholic schools will likely experience parents, students, and other teachers who are enmeshed in the secular world. Their view of the purpose of Catholic schools may be limited to academic excellence and a safe environment. However, this view falls far short of the true mission of the school: to bring the truth of the Gospel to the school community. Knowing how to reach out to these individuals will begin the process of evangelization. Schreiter, in another essay, explains that while the Gospel and Holy Spirit are responsible for the actual evangelization, we are called to “create the space or environment in which the Gospel then is able to act” (p. 104). This clearly falls under the domain of education. The background, explanation, and advice will be valuable for teachers and administrators.

This book deserves to be read slowly, thoughtfully, and with an open heart. It does not have all the answers, but does provide a starting point for those interested in spreading the Good News of God’s great love to the secular world. Secularity is presented in a new context; one that challenges the reader to view it in love. Rolheiser and colleagues present a framework for reaching out to loved ones who have rejected their faith and challenges the reader to become missionaries.

The challenge is not an easy one. Making the secular world fall in love with God again implies that we must be in love with God ourselves. We show this in how we love others. Most importantly, *Secularity and the Gospel* provides a new hope that it is possible to be the Good News in a world filled with hunger and longing for God’s love.

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