
A Laodicean perspective on modern-day Western life with reference to its human rights culture

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Abstract

The 'lukewarmness' for which the church in the Western Asia Minor city of Laodicea was blamed was due to the neglect of their faith in the triune God and to succumbing to the temptations of the city's riches. The prophetic nature of the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 3 allows one to look back at the situation prevailing in church life in Laodicea, and to look forward to the current situation in the Western world. The latter reveals that the Western World has also since the 16th century

gradually succumbed to “religious lukewarmness” in the form of secular humanism, a new religious commitment that has found expression in phenomena such as a human rights culture without emphasis on personal responsibilities, declining church membership, and a neoliberal approach to life in general, and to economics in particular.

Opsomming

Die ‘louheid’ waarvoor die kerk in die Klein-Asië-stad Laodicéa verkwalik is, was te wyte aan die verwaarlosing van hul geloof in die drie-enige God en aan die swig voor die versoekings van die stad se rykdom. Die profetiese aard van die briewe aan die sewe gemeentes in Openbaring 3 stel ’n mens in staat om terug te kyk na die situasie wat in die kerklewe van Laodicéa geheers het, en vorentoe te kyk na die huidige situasie in die Westerse wêreld. Laasgenoemde toon dat die Westerse wêreld sedert die 16de eeu ook geleidelik verval het in “godsdienstige louwarmte” in die vorm van sekulêre humanisme – ’n nuwe godsdienstig-lewensbeskoulike instelling wat tot uiting gekom het in verskynsels soos ’n menseregte-kultuur sonder gepaardgaande nadruk op persoonlike verantwoordelikhede, tanende kerklidmaatskap, en ’n neoliberale benadering tot die lewe in die algemeen en in die besonder tot die ekonomie.

Keywords:

Laodicea, Revelation, human rights, neoliberalism, secularism, humanism

Sleutelwoorde:

humanisme, Laodicéa, menseregte, neoliberalisme, Openbaringboek, sekularisme

1. Introduction

The letter to the Laodiceans in Revelation 3:14-22 is one of the seven letters sent to the churches in Western Asia Minor, addressing issues within each congregation. The final letter – to the Laodiceans – was directed to the

“extremely prosperous” church in Laodicea (Godly News, 2025; Guinness, 1988:368), whose faith had grown lukewarm. There was, at that time, not a more prosperous town in all of Asia Minor, but the members of the church “thought they were rich, but ... were spiritually bankrupt”. In a play of words, it could be observed that, although there was a famous medical school in the city that produced eye ointment, the members of this church were “spiritually blind” (Kirk-Gettridge, 2024).

An awareness emerged in the Christian Western world as early as the beginning of the Christian era – as demonstrated by the situation in Laodicea – that people and communities were entitled to respect for their rights, and that these rights had to be formalised in codes. (Such codes had by that time already been in existence, cf. the Code of Hammurabi, dated 1754 BC; cf. Straub, 2021). The name of the classic city of Laodicea (*laos* = people & *dike* = justice or rights) founded in 261-253 BC in Western Asia Minor on the (then) main trade route to current Turkey, shows that the people in that area had by that time already developed a sensibility of the fact that human beings possessed basic rights. In view hereof, the problem on which the research resulting in this article is focused, entails: To what extent does the letter to the Laodiceans embody prophetic perspectives regarding the current life- and world view situation in the Western world?

2. Research method, aim, and structure

The theoretical-philosophical discussion in the remainder of this article is based on our study of the relevant literature, among others, the statutes in which human rights have so far been enshrined as well as views on ethics/morality. This article is the product of the theoretical procedure known as interpretivism-constructivism: relevant facts and information are first gathered, interpreted against the reformational background knowledge and convictions of the authors, and then applied in the construction of a coherent view in line with the following theoretical argument, namely that the letter to the Laodiceans embodies prophetic perspectives regarding the current life- and worldview situation in the Western world, a situation that has in recent times manifested itself as secular-humanism. Secular-humanism is in itself a religious mindset that finds expression in various ways, among others, a dwindling number of Christian believers, a self-centred human rights culture, and a neoliberal approach to life in general, and to the economy in particular. To reach the aim of developing this theoretical statement or thesis, we devote the remainder of the article to the following two issues.

We first attend to the prophetic nature of the letter to the Laodiceans with which we commenced the article and then proceed to a discussion of how the prophecy encapsulated in the letter has found fulfilment in the current Western society.

3. The prophetic nature of the letter to the Laodiceans

In his overview of the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 3, Dake (2007:806) explains the threefold application of the letters as follows:

- The content of the letters consists of a local application, meaning that the seven letters were sent to actual churches situated in Asia Minor in the days of the Apostle John (towards the end of the first century AD).
- Although we learn from verse 20 that Christ is knocking at the church door to “come in”, Nee (1970:95) suggests that the invitation also contains a personal appeal to the individual reader to open his/her heart to the gospel. Hayford (1991:1900) adds that this verse could very well have a connection with Luke 5:9 where the Judge will ultimately stand at the door to reward the righteous and punish the wicked.
- Apart from the fact that these seven letters were historic letters to actual churches, we must bear in mind that the book of Revelation is first and foremost prophetic, informing the reader of what was to come. In this regard Pawson (2007:128) remarks concerning Revelation 3:20, that it is a prophetic word to a church “who has lost Christ” (also see 2 Timothy 3:1-5). As a prophetic book, Revelation focuses on the future as well. The very first verse of the book informs us that its purpose is to presage things which are to take place (in future). This is confirmed in the last two verses of the book, in chapter 22, which state that the Messiah (Jesus) is (in future) “coming quickly” (Bible, 1991). All of this could mean that the content of the seven letters in the book of Revelation is prophetic. It is because of this that various Biblical scholars have suggested that an analysis should be done of the main features of the concept ‘Laodicea’ (“the rights of the people”) as well as of the life and work of the church at Laodicea. All of this seems prophetic with regards to the current situation of societies in the Western world (Hadjiantoniou, s.a.:12; Nee, 1970:13; Lindsey, 1973:27; Jeremiah, 2018:71).

Based on the view that the letter to the Laodiceans at the beginning of the Christian era contains prophetic perspectives for the situation also in 21st-century Western societies, we have attempted to discover the extent to which

the prophecies seem to have been or are being fulfilled in the Western world today. Here is what we discovered:

4. The extent to which the prophecies contained in the letter to the Laodiceans find fulfilment in current Western society

4.1 Secularism: The spirit of our times

A literal translation of the name of the city of Laodicea is “the rights of [the] people (nation)”. This indicates, as mentioned, that the notion of human rights was already acknowledged very early during the Christian era. According to Revelation 3, Jesus Christ, the Author of the letter to the Laodiceans, reminds the members of the church of the meaning of the name of their city and their church and concludes that they have not used their right to practise their freedom to worship Him, and are therefore deemed to be lukewarm in their religion. This was a prophetic warning to Christian believers of all times – not to become lukewarm in their belief and service of the Lord. As will be shown below, this warning has not been heeded in the Western world; many people have forsaken their Christian faith and have succumbed to secular-humanism, a phenomenon that has through the last two centuries found expression in various manifestations, as we will attempt to demonstrate.

Secularism is a form of apostasy (literally the attitude of “standing away from”), freely translated as “falling away from”, in this case, from the God of the Bible and faith in Him and his Word. Apostasy refers to a “deserting or turning from a position or view formerly held” (Jeremiah, 2021:101). Van der Walt (2007:221 et seq.) refers to the apostatic stance of secularism as “the spirit of our times”, also “in the deepest sense a religious conviction”. He sees secularism as “a shift away from the sacred to the mere natural rather than as a removal of the sacred”. In this sense, secularism can be regarded as an alternative religion. Secularism embodies a paradox in that it claims to have abandoned all religions but when closely looked at, is found to replace them with its own secular faith.

In essence, secularism can be seen as an expression of faith in the human being – without the God of the Scriptures. Mainstream religion has lost many of the functions it once had (Fernandez-Armesto, 1996:38): to explain the world, people now resort to science; to control the world, people now have technology at their disposal; to negotiate power, they have democratic

politics, and to achieve prosperity, they now have the market economy, as will be discussed in more detail below (cf. Sacks, 2011:281). Secularism manifests itself in many ways in modern life and existence, among others in the declining numbers of church-going Christian believers, moral relativism, the worship of science, the love of economic and political power (Sacks, 2021:105, 123, 148, 164), and relativism (among others in the form of postmodern thinking) (Frame, 2008:75) – the view that all knowledge and value are historically conditioned and culturally relative, thereby rendering futile the search for enduring, universal norms and values (Mitchell, 2013:16, 24).

It is because of all these secular developments that Naugle (2012:85) concluded that the Christian context of all morality “is now gone” in the Western world. Keller (2015:68) concurs: the secular mindset valorises individual reason and produces people “confident in their own powers of moral ordering”. Religion is not anymore “the incumbent operation, the only large-scale human endeavour designed to capture attention ... over the twentieth century, organised religion, which had weathered the doubt raised by the Enlightenment, would prove vulnerable to other claims and uses for attention”. Despite the promise of eternal life, faith in the West has declined and has continued to do so, never faster than in the twenty-first century. Offering “new consolations and strange gods of their own, the commercial rivals for human attention must surely figure in this decline” (Wu, 2017:27).

The above brings Sacks (2021:12) to the conclusion that secularism has made God and belief in Him and his Word redundant: “All countries and cultures [now] have three basic institutions. There is the economy, which is about the creation and distribution of wealth. There is the state, which is about the legitimisation and distribution of power. And there is the moral system, which is the voice of society within the self, the ‘we’ within the ‘I’, the common good that limits and directs our pursuit of private gain.”

4.2 Manifestations of secularism in the current Western World

4.2.1 The dwindling numbers of Christian believers

Membership of Christian churches has been growing in African and South American countries, while this has not been the case in modern Western societies where a decline in church membership is experienced (Coetzee, 2021:1). Coetzee contends that this has to do with the fact that many a church member “does not show the same vitality and zeal as before and is in danger of abandoning their faith”.

Church membership in the United States since 1937, when 73% of the population were members of a Christian church, dwindled by 2020 to 50% (Jeremiah, 2021:98). Such declining in church membership appears to be the first step towards a falling away from the faith (Coetzee, 2021:1).

Lindsey (1973:56) suggests that the lukewarmness (falling away) in many of the present-day age churches began in the early 1900s when some of the European theologian scholars went on an “intellectual journey” to demythologize the godliness of Jesus to that of a mere man. In Timothy 4:1, Christian believers are forewarned against such deceptive teachings, calling it “doctrines of demons”.¹ 2 Thessalonians teaches that the return of the Lord will not come unless the “falling away comes first”.² As mentioned, the concept of “falling away / apostasy” refers to the actions of those who once confessed their faith in Christ but then turned around to walk away from their faith in him. Jeremiah (2021:94) declared that lately more and more once-professing believers “seem to be losing their first love, changing their minds, and following self-reliance, fame and money”. He added that many others, especially among the millennials,³ describe themselves as “religiously unaffiliated”.

Some commentators surmise that we might find ourselves in the last church era before the return of the Messiah (Hadjiantoniou, s.a.:12; Nee, 1970:13; Lindsey, 1973:27; Jeremiah, 2018:71). This observation ties in with the warning in the second letter to Timothy (3:2-4) that in the last days men will be “lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, ... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God”.⁴

4.2.2 *A self-centred human rights culture*

Westerners are “people in control”. According to Nee (1970:8;86), an analysis of the letter to the church in Sardis reveals that the authority during that church period was vested in the pastor system, while in the case of Laodicea, the authoritarian focus was vested in laymen who focussed on the opinions and customs of people. In the Western world

1 1 Timothy 4:1, 2: Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons.

2 2 Thessalonians 2:3.

3 A person born between the age of 1981 and 1996.

4 2 Timothy 3:2 & 4.

of today, people tend to be independent, autonomous (a law in their own right) and in command of their lives and destinies (in the belief or assumption that they are in control).

Although the slogan of “freedom, equality and brotherhood” that came into vogue during and after the French Revolution (1789-1799) had been proclaimed for many years, it was never taken up in the current systematic international manifestos. From the 16th century on, codes enshrining basic human rights evolved through various ‘generations’, up to the stage where rights are currently not only recognised but formalised in carefully phrased Manifestoes of Human Rights, in many cases also forming part of the constitutions of nations. First-generation rights were civil and political, including the right to form and belong to a political party (De Waal, Currie & Erasmus, 2001 RSA Constitution, 1996, Section 19(1)(a)); second-generation rights were socio-economic such as the right to have access to food and water (De Waal *et al.*, 2001:432); third-generation rights were collective, such as the right to a safe and protected environment (RSA Constitution, 1996: Section 24(a & b)). The Bill of Rights that forms the second chapter of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA Constitution, 1996: Sections 7-39) now entrenches all these rights.

As a result of the devastation of the two World Wars of the 20th century, an urgent need developed for a unified international protocol regarding the “equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family” to create a “foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world” (Patel & Watters, 1994:3). Consequently, during a meeting in June 1945 held in San Francisco, representatives from several countries drafted and signed a charter titled *Human Rights Intent: United Nations Charter*. Three years later, on 10 December 1948, the United Nations’ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was finally adopted and proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations. This can be seen as a groundbreaking event regarding the recognition of basic human rights. On the one hand, this *Declaration* could be seen as a global affirmation of moral common ground among the peoples and the nations of the world, but on the other, as an agreement reached “without theological or ideological justification ... (it) reflects ethical norms defined by common consent amongst nations whose members include the widest possible range of religious affiliations” (Donovan, 1986:372).

The current Western world society finds itself embedded in a secular human rights culture; a culture which has come to fruition in the mid-

20th century. Numerous international human rights Declarations are currently determining how Western society thinks and operates. While the pragmatic value of these Declarations cannot be denied, they are secular in their self-centredness: “My rights” are emphasised, while “my responsibilities and obligations”, as the Christian faith would require, are rarely referred to. This is typical of a secular-humanistic mindset. Sacks (2021:20) correctly argued that the recovery of true democratic freedom will require emphasis on people’s responsibilities as well as their basic human rights, namely the responsibilities of sharing rules in the community and not simply depending on personal choices, caring for others and their interests as well as for ourselves, and providing space not just for self-interest but also for the common good. In his opinion, there is no liberty without morality and no freedom without responsibility; there is no viable “I” without sustaining “We/Us”.

Secularism tends to accommodate a conglomeration of faiths, religions, or beliefs. The United Nation’s *Human Rights Declaration* about religion and religious issues leads one not to make any distinction between different religions⁵ (Patel & Watters, 1994:4). However, for the Christian believer there is but one (triune) God. In terms of Deuteronomy 5:7, a flanged-together kind of faith is forbidden: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Bible, 1991). Acts 4⁶ states that salvation is in *no other* name but the name of Jesus (Bible 1991). In his commentary on Acts 4:12, Hayford (1991:1629) explains the concept “no other” with reference to the Greek word *heteros* (“other”) which means: different; generically distinctive; of another kind; not of the same nature, form, or class. He concludes that “*heteros* denotes a distinction and exclusivity, with no second choices, opinions or options”.

4.2.3 A neoliberal approach to the economy and life in general

The self-centredness and self-serving ethic of secularism find expression in a neo-liberal approach to life and to material possessions. According to Bezprozvanna (2021:13), this ethic comes to the fore in what he refers to as a “monetary identity”, highlighting the need for exploration in the light of contemporary transformation processes. Key

5 The purpose of the United Nations was to “promote and encourage respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion” (authors’ emphasis).

6 Acts 4:12: “Nor is there salvation in anyother, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

elements of the neoliberal monetary identity include individuals who prioritize self-serving approaches where money becomes the ultimate value. Money is the universal standard, eclipsing all other material worth. In today's Western society, monetary identity is portrayed as both global and unstable; it is artificially constructed and primarily supports the profit-driven modern market in a consumer society. In the current Western landscape, money not only enhances objective living conditions but also serves as a means of attaining social recognition.

A neoliberal approach to the economy and life in general harks back to the dangers of "lukewarm affluence" as experienced by the Christian believers in the city of Laodicea. According to Barclay (1959:138), the society of Laodicea was "so wealthy that they did not even need God". This seems to also be the case in affluent Western societies today. Lahtinen (2023: 255) refers to the "postwar affluence among the blue-collar working class" in the wealthy Western society since the 1950s. Turk (2011) observed that "over the past several centuries, the West has emerged as a global leader economically, militarily, scientifically and technologically".⁷ Van Nieuwkerk (2024:13) similarly observed that since the end of World War II in 1945, the world order had been determined by the Western World – an order consisting of a capitalistic world economy made up of a globalised state system (Hadjiantoniou, s.a.:12; Nee, 1970:13; Lindsey,1973:27; Jeremiah, 2018:71), consisting of 193 sovereign states maintaining mutual diplomatic ties and secured by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

Leslie (2016:538), in his analysis of the concept of "coveting" in the 10th commandment, concluded that it is "difficult to imagine anything more foreign to the ancient world than the overabundance of goods and services commonplace among the developed nations of modernity. We live in economies whose vitality depends upon massive scales of consumption across the globe. We are confronted with advertising throughout the day that exploits our sense of need or insecurity, encouraging us ever to acquire more". The irony of the situation, as Runciman (2022:114) noted, is that it appears that capitalism "is a kind of magical force that cannot be controlled by the people who

7 In his online SAGE article Turk argued that "the West was the only civilisation that took advantage of the communications revolution involving cheap paper and the printing press in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and could do so because of its values and ethics. Compared to other parts of the world, the West offered more freedom to its peoples, and its societies were the most vertically mobile".

manage it, that the most successful capitalists don't actually know what it is that they have unleashed", especially after the capital crisis of 2008. According to Runciman, the capitalists have nothing to fall back on except to keep on finding new markets (in the Global South, for instance), or expect the state to deal with a crisis. A neoliberal approach to the economy has several downsides, including that everything has a price, and that prices are fixed by what people are willing to pay for commodities. In a commercial state, most human relationships are mediated not by personal contact but by the flow of money, the availability of commodities, and the creation of debt (Runciman, 2022:62-63).

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that the letter to the Laodiceans at the end of the first century AD not only had immediate meaning for the life and the faith of the congregants of that church but also for the centuries to come. The lukewarmness for which the church was blamed has also manifested in the Western world, particularly after the 16th century. The religious lukewarmness of the present time has taken the form of apostasy, a falling away from the true belief in God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, and in the Bible as the inscripturated Word of God, and of an attachment to worldly institutions such as the state, international relations, human-centred basic rights without responsibilities, declining numbers in church membership and a neoliberal approach to the economy and life in general. There is no easy or straightforward solution to this complex problem apart from stating that humankind should turn away from the secular-humanistic orientation that it has followed for the past five centuries. The word *revelation* means to *disclose* – “to disclose more than what we can see” (Janson, 1984:175). The question remains: Will the secular world ever see to what extent it has lost the way, as presaged in the letter to the Laodiceans? Only time will tell.

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