

On Being a Secular Curriculum

The word secular in its historic form merely referred to something that was worldly, rather than other-worldly, and did not actually refer to religion but to a mundane task. It is derived from the Latin word *saeculum*, meaning “generation”, and referred to things that would be temporal (and therefore not immortal). In recent years the word has come to contain a veritable treasure-trove of hidden meanings and nuances ranging from benign to political to anti-religious. (See [Varieties of Secular Experience by David Eller](#))

We define Wildwood as a secular, inclusive curriculum, meaning we have attempted to build a curriculum that is “worldly” - specific to the world we live in now, and free of religious dogma. We also wanted to create a curriculum that acknowledges the wide diversity of our world both in the present, and in years gone by.

While ‘secular’ may now commonly mean ‘without religion’, it doesn’t — *can’t* — mean ‘to remove any trace of humans that believe in them’.

That isn’t quite possible, or helpful on an academic level, as we would miss so much! Humans are amazing. There are so many incredible things that have been created by people of all backgrounds and cultures, religious and not.

We believe we can acknowledge greatness in art, music, and words even by those who were/are religious, though it may or may not agree with our own spiritual path, because we feel that what we experience and gain through a variety of exposure is *human* expression.

We don’t feel that we’re reading the words of gods in a book that mentions one, but rather **the words of a human influenced by their interpretation of their life and what they see**. And we think that’s ok, so long as these perspectives are offered without the intention of presenting them as “correct” or the only way, or all coming from the same influence - that would be extremely partial and unbalanced. But we believe including a few texts with a mention of ‘God’ or other culturally relevant or religious titles here and there isn’t that. And that’s a huge distinction we’d like to make.

We aren’t recommending religious books, but instead using, reading and seeing

human thoughts, feelings, wisdom, beauty, struggles, imperfections, and passions from a variety of cultural backgrounds and spiritual beliefs, including those of a Christian set, if applicable. We're not purposefully including gods in this effort, but rather, including people.

At its heart, Wildwood strives to offer curriculum from a secular CM standpoint: not favoring or assuming of any spiritual path, while using Charlotte Mason's incredible recommendations and influence.

Wildwood isn't deciding who does or doesn't have beautiful voices or weight based on belief, but *quality*, and we aren't trying to remove or deny the Christian beliefs of Charlotte Mason. When her own words are offered on a subject, they are used because they are the truest path to seeing and understanding this educational method.

Wildwood Curriculum stands for taking an active step away from exclusion and bias, by bringing the work of an amazing educator to everyone regardless of their spirituality (or lack of it). And that's worth working towards.

Above all, we want to create a curriculum that is true to the original vision that Charlotte Mason had for igniting young minds! Within this vision, we have to acknowledge, however, that we do live in a world that historically and numerically still maintains much of a spiritual worldview as well as one with complicated views about inclusivity and ethnocentricity.

So while creating this curriculum, we ran into a dilemma (well we ran into lots, but this one seems to be of concern to many of our visitors!):

For some sections, we could not find enough books that were completely devoid of mentions of god that covered the material we wanted covered, and were also high quality, living books.

So many of our great works and great books reference divinity in some manner. Poetry, art, even Plato reference the gods. Where do we draw the line?

Here's where we stand: While we don't have a hard and fast number, a few poems referring to god or gods in a group of poems that mostly doesn't, is ok. If most of the poems referred to god, then we looked for something else.

For history/science/geography/etc, our very first priority is to find living books.

From these, we choose the ones with the fewest religious references. Sometimes we hit a goldmine and have a plethora of non-religious books to choose from, while others the pickings are slim or even non-existent.

Always our criteria have been “is this a living book, appropriate for the age group, that transmits both the content and feeling we want to convey?”

From a history standpoint, we chose books by authors who did not have a Providential view of history. For science, there are some books that mention “God’s creatures” or even “God created this lovely world for us”, but they still all assume an evolutionary process.

We needed to compromise in some way. Either we had to compromise our Charlotte Mason ideals and develop a purely a-theist curriculum that was not completely living or was not what we felt a Charlotte Mason education should be, or we had to keep to our Charlotte Mason principals and use all living books, even if some of the authors mention their belief in god(s) in one form or another.

There are already several excellent curricula that have taken the former approach. Ursa Minor Learning, A Mind in the Light, and Build Your Library all use strictly non-religious books but are also not pure Charlotte Mason.

We chose the second path — as non-religious as we can make the curriculum, while still staying what we feel is true to a Charlotte Mason education.

If you prefer the former approach, you will be happier with one of the previous excellent choices we mentioned.

We know that some will say that we shouldn’t claim to be a secular curriculum unless every book we use is to their secular standards. However, just as with religion, we believe there are degrees of secularity.

Approximately 90% of the books that we’ve chosen are completely devoid of religious or spiritual references. We do not attempt to interweave a religious viewpoint or experience into the curriculum. There are no books that attempt to convert to a particular religious practice, or push that their religious view is right

while others are wrong.

We understand that for some, this will not be “secular enough”, and that’s ok with us.

When we find living books for the curriculum that contain some wording that reflects the author’s spiritual beliefs, we ask ourselves a few questions:

1. Is the book permeated with a religious viewpoint? Would we say that “it’s just too much”?
2. Does the author deny scientific or historical consensus based on his or her own religious views?
3. Is there another book of equal or higher quality and similar content that is completely non-religious?
4. Are we comfortable using this book in our own homes, or would it require too much modification?
5. Is the author pushing a particular religious agenda?

We are a group of volunteer homeschooling parents who are sharing our work with you free of charge, to use as you wish.

We can’t please everyone. We’ve already heard from people who think we don’t have enough minority choices, too many minority choices, we’re too boy-focused, too girl-focused, too secular, not secular enough, too focused on North America, not focused enough on North America.... We’ve even heard that we’re too CM!

If you want a strict Charlotte Mason curriculum using 100% books that don’t mention “god” in any way, we encourage you to build one and share the results with the homeschooling community. All of the PNEU programmes are available free for viewing at [archive.org](https://www.archive.org), and Charlotte Mason’s volumes are easily accessible both free and for purchase in hardcover and paperback.

Whichever path you choose — using Wildwood Curriculum, Build Your Library, A Mind in the Light, Ursa Minor Learning, or creating a brand new curriculum — we wish you well on your journey bringing a Charlotte Mason lifestyle to *your* home.