

# **Preaching on PURPOSE**

A Divine Renovation Handbook  
for Communicating the Gospel Today

Fr. Alex Colautti, CC  
Fr. Simon Lobo, CC  
Rev. Rob McDowell  
Fr. Christopher Ryan, MGL

# 1

## Culture: The World Today

---

*"Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."*

—Dorothy (*The Wizard of Oz*)

About six months after I (Fr. Chris) arrived at St. Declan's, one of the older acolytes said to me in exasperation, "All you have done since you have arrived is change things!" He was voicing his frustration at several small changes I had introduced to the ministry the acolytes performed. I tried to politely hear him out, but I was thinking, "You ain't seen nothin' yet." I was trying to introduce more important changes both more slowly and more carefully.

St. Declan's Parish, Penshurst, is located in the southern suburbs of Sydney, Australia. It has roughly the same number of parishioners as Saint Benedict Parish, Halifax, the home of Divine Renovation. This makes St. Declan's a large parish by Australian standards. While the two parishes are on opposite sides of the world, I think they have a fair bit in common in addition to their size, much of which is due to the fact that they are both in the anglophone West.

When it came to making changes at St. Declan's, what I didn't fully appreciate at the time was that my brother priests and I in the Missionaries

of God's Love (MGL) had unknowingly made a significant change the moment we arrived in the parish. It was a difference in the way we preached. We didn't realize it was a change because we had not dramatically altered our preaching content or our style, but many parishioners found it very different to their previous experience at St. Declan's and elsewhere. The nature of this change was vividly brought home to me one day as I listened to a testimony at Sunday Mass from one of the moms in the parish who had recently attended the Alpha program (one of the other novelties the MGL had initiated).

Melanie began by saying that she had been baptized as a baby, attended Catholic primary and high schools, gone to Mass each week, attended a Catholic university, possessed a master's degree in Religious Education, and taught religious education in a Catholic high school. She then proceeded to say that she found herself getting more and more angry every time she heard one of the MGL priests preach. I had not workshopped the talk with her and did not know what she had planned to say. So, she had my full attention! I sat up in my chair, waiting to find out where she was going with this. Melanie said, "Week after week, you (pointing to me) and the other MGL priests would get up to preach, and without fail you would talk about God's love being personal, real, and something we could experience in our hearts. And I was angry about this, because I came to realize that I had absolutely no real knowledge of what you were talking about. I had to admit to myself that I did not know what God's love was." I slowly exhaled as Melanie went on to say that her experience of Alpha had decisively changed all of that, as she came to experience the love of God being poured into her heart as she received the gift of the Holy Spirit in a new way (see Romans 5:5).

Melanie did not have the precise theological language for it then, but she was pointing to the way in which we MGL priests seek to consistently articulate the heart of the kerygma: that God's unfathomable, perfect, and unfailing love for the human family was the divine motive for the death and resurrection of Jesus. We experience this love when we encounter Jesus Christ through the power of his Holy Spirit. We believe that the

kerygma lies at the heart of it a lot. (We will unpack this in short, it is the kernel of the

The kerygma does not do enough to rattle it. It has a home in the hearts of the faithful. In preparation, the delivery of the message won't be enough. We must have our proclamation of the Gospel standing this context, with a warning of failing to translate the message because we have been in a hurry to preaching to. We risk losing the listening on another!

In many ways, being in a hurry seeking to know and understand the sense, the context we are speaking to our parishioners in the particular as those people live in the wider neighbourhood. We spend time listening to the needs in the local community. We ever want to reach the hearts of the actual members of the church. We cannot dispense with this if we want to reach the hearts of the actual members of the church.

To understand the particular cultural milieu they are living in which we all live. And to understand that as Pope Francis has marked an era of change, but we have been one of the hearts of the actual members of the church.

---

5. Address of the Holy Father at the Convocation of the Italian Bishops

a significant change the mo-  
nce in the way we preached.  
had not dramatically altered  
y parishioners found it very  
ecelan's and elsewhere. The  
e to me one day as I listened  
he moms in the parish who  
e of the other novelties the

baptized as a baby, attended  
Mass each week, attended a  
ree in Religious Education,  
high school. She then pro-  
more and more angry every  
h. I had not workshopped  
had planned to say. So, she  
iting to find out where she  
week, you (pointing to me)  
reach, and without fail you  
al, and something we could  
out this, because I came to  
e of what you were talking  
now what God's love was."  
at her experience of Alpha  
e to experience the love of  
d the gift of the Holy Spirit

al language for it then, but  
priests seek to consistently  
unfathomable, perfect, and  
divine motive for the death  
s love when we encounter  
pirit. We believe that the

kerygma lies at the heart of all missional preaching, and so we talk about it a lot. (We will unpack the kerygma more thoroughly in chapter 3. In short, it is the kernel of the Gospel message.)

The kerygma does not, however, get proclaimed in a vacuum. It is not enough to rattle it off like a formula and expect that it will then find a home in the hearts of those listening. We must pray for our homily preparation, the delivery itself, and for all our listeners, but prayer alone won't be enough. We must pay attention to the cultural context in which our proclamation of the Gospel takes place. Without sufficiently understanding this context, we run the risk of not truly landing our preaching, of failing to translate the kerygma into language that pierces the heart, because we have been inattentive to the actual lives of the people we are preaching to. We risk broadcasting on one frequency while people are listening on another!

In many ways, being attentive to the context in which we preach is seeking to know and understand the actual people in front of us. In this sense, the context we need to understand is as local and particular as our parishioners in the pews and, even more importantly, as local and particular as those people who are not yet in our pews, those people from the wider neighbourhood whom we are trying to evangelize. We need to spend time listening to our parishioners but also listening to those people in the local community who have no interest in coming to the parish if we ever want to reach them in the future with our homilies. We cannot dispense with this if we want our preaching to strike a chord within the hearts of the actual men and women around us.

To understand the people we wish to reach, we need to understand the cultural milieu they are a part of and the principal features of the age in which we all live. And this age is more complex than many people realize. As Pope Francis has memorably said, it is "not just that we are living in an era of change, but we are living in a change of era."<sup>5</sup> The past 70 years have been one of the hinge points of history, a major turning point in the

5. Address of the Holy Father Pope Francis, "Meeting with Participants in the Fifth Convocation of the Italian Church," (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015).

story of humanity. The last change of a comparable magnitude took place some 500 years ago, with the birth of what we now call the modern world.

One of the ways we might describe this massive cultural shift is that Christendom is over. We can no longer divide the world into Christian countries (the West, broadly speaking) and mission territories (everywhere else, but especially Africa and Asia). The whole world is now mission territory. And just as missionaries of an earlier age sought to understand the foreign culture of the people they were trying to evangelize, we now must better understand our own culture if we are to evangelize Canada, Australia, England, the US, and the other nations of the West anew.

When Dorothy told her little dog that they were not in Kansas anymore, she articulated the fundamental plot of *The Wizard of Oz*: that she and Toto needed to get home. Well, we are not in Kansas anymore either. We are no longer in Christendom, and we cannot go back to it even if we tried. Some people find it tempting to try to return, but we cannot undo the tornado that brought us to Oz. And so, the yellow brick road of mission goes forward, not backward. (This is not to say that we cannot learn from our past, for the path of renewal lies in a genuine retrieval of the ancient Gospel for our time.) Our preaching cannot call for a return to an “old world” (Christendom) that is gone forever. Instead, we must proclaim the Gospel in such a way as to forge a “new world” in which the kingdom of God takes root afresh in the lives of people today. This means that an indispensable part of the missionary task is to understand “Oz” as well as we possibly can. We need to understand the contours and features of our post-Christendom context if we are to fruitfully cooperate with the Holy Spirit’s perennial mission to make all things new in Christ.

Gaining an accurate grasp of our cultural context is not an easy task, and I want to suggest at the outset that it is more complicated than most people think. So, a brief outline of the chapter at this point might be helpful. The chapter is divided into three parts.

The first part tries to provide an adequate depiction of the principal features of our era, especially in relation to the dominant (if frequently implicit) attitudes to religion, spirituality, and the plausibility of Christian

faith today. And so, seems most pertinent among Christians in this decline, but a clarification of people’s belief diagnosis of the problem.

The deeper exploration of the work of the empires and in particular his consumer capitalism, the as well as the digital reason for the decline of moral ideal within our deeply personal decisions by religious institutions.

Furthermore, there that can make the Christian include the impact of belongs to the realm of Christianity is a danger flourish. When we address of successive Church when it comes to getting that the pool table is

The second part of that people of faith have the past 70 or so years to be implausible and powerful and desirable it is not the case that is not that they do not than the God revealed

able magnitude took place  
now call the modern world.  
massive cultural shift is that  
the world into Christian  
mission territories (everywhere  
whole world is now mission  
r age sought to understand  
ying to evangelize, we now  
e are to evangelize Canada,  
ons of the West anew.

ere not in Kansas anymore,  
*Wizard of Oz*: that she and  
Kansas anymore either. We  
o back to it even if we tried.  
, but we cannot undo the  
ollow brick road of mission  
that we cannot learn from  
ne retrieval of the ancient  
all for a return to an "old  
instead, we must proclaim  
rld" in which the kingdom  
today. This means that an  
o understand "Oz" as well  
e contours and features of  
itfully cooperate with the  
ngs new in Christ.

ontext is not an easy task,  
re complicated than most  
er at this point might be

depiction of the principal  
e dominant (if frequently  
ne plausibility of Christian

faith today. And so, we begin part one with the feature of our age that seems most pertinent for our discussion: the decline of belief and practice among Christians in Western nations. "Secularism" is usually blamed for this decline, but a closer look at secularism, and a more accurate examination of people's beliefs and behaviours, is necessary to make a proper diagnosis of the problem.

The deeper exploration of our "secular age" that follows is indebted to the work of the eminent Canadian Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor, and in particular his work *A Secular Age*. While affluence and mass consumer capitalism, the impact of the media and entertainment industries, as well as the digital revolution have all played their part, the deeper reason for the decline in belief and practice is the emergence of a new moral ideal within our culture that considers matters of faith to be a deeply personal decision that cannot be decided in advance for someone by religious institutions such as the Church (or even one's own family).

Furthermore, there are several potent features at work in the culture that can make the Christian faith seem less plausible. These features include the impact of scientism, the widespread belief that religion belongs to the realm of superstition, and the conviction some possess that Christianity is a dangerous influence to be eliminated for people to truly flourish. When we add the impact of our damaged credibility in the wake of successive Church scandals, we are starting well behind the eight ball when it comes to getting a fair hearing for the Gospel. We might even say that the pool table is lopsided, to our significant disadvantage.

The second part of the chapter suggests that it is too simple to suggest that people of faith have walked away en masse to become atheists over the past 70 or so years. It is not just that they have found Christian faith to be implausible and unattractive, but that they have been drawn to a powerful and desirable alternative vision of the good life. This means that it is not the case that so-called secular people are simply unbelievers. It is not that they do not believe, but that they believe in something other than the God revealed in Jesus Christ. We then try to articulate this belief,

which we have called “the secular gospel,” and explain why it has proved to be so attractive to our contemporaries.

The third part of the chapter offers a course of action for preaching in response to the cultural context in which we find ourselves. We will need to avoid the extremes of hostile denunciation on the one hand and uncritical endorsement of the culture on the other. We propose a threefold strategy, consisting first of engaging with the positive features of our secular age and demonstrating that the aspirations and longings of our contemporaries are fulfilled in Christ. The second strategy is a direct rebuttal of the features that hinder people’s reception of the Gospel today, as well as the ongoing need for frank repentance and conversion to restore the Church’s credibility. The final strategy is to critique the inherent contradictions that lie within the secular gospel to show that it cannot ultimately deliver what it promises. This threefold strategy paves the way for our kerygmatic preaching to find a willing home in the hearts and minds of our contemporaries.

## Understanding Our Secular Age and the Challenges It Presents for Preaching Today

---

### The Decline of Christian Belief and Practice in the West

Sometime in 2022, the results of the most recent Australian census were to be published. People were looking forward to it with great interest, because the survey was held during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is thought that this might throw up some surprising insights into Australian society. A completely unsurprising outcome of the census, however, would be a fresh rash of news stories in the popular media indicating that fewer Australians identify as Christian or ever attend church.

Australia is not alone of course. For the first time ever, in 2020, membership at houses of worship in the US dropped below 50 percent of the population, despite being above 70 percent for over half a century, until it began a precipitous drop at the turn of the millennium (“houses

of worship” refers to all religions). This decline isn’t merely a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic by two decades, but rather more than 30 percent of Americans in 2020, compared to another two decades.<sup>6</sup>

The 2014 Pew Religious Literacy Study found that the Church had experienced a decline in membership in any other religious tradition. For example, Catholics in the US for the first time analyzed in the 2014 Religious Literacy Study were close to this ratio of loss.

In Canada, the home of the Anglican Church, the trajectory of decline. In the 1950s, religious worship spaces were the vast majority of them. This is a stunning estimate. This is a stunning decline. The province of Quebec was one of the first to experience this in the 1950’s. In that decade, only 5 percent of the population attended at Mass declined.

Europe is far from immune. The International Social Survey Institute found that of British Catholics have

6. Jeffrey M. Jones, “US Church Membership Drops to Lowest Point in 150 Years,” *NewsGator*, March 29, 2021, <https://news.gator.com/story/2021/mar/29/us-church-membership-drops-to-lowest-point-in-150-years>

7. David Masci and Gregoire Marquis, “The Church Is Losing Members,” *Pew Research Center*, *Fact-tank*, 2018/10/10/7-facts-about-the-church, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/10/7-facts-about-the-church/>

8. Bonnie Allen, “From sacred space to secular space,” *Canadian national heritage group*, “CBC News,” <https://www.cbc.com/news/canada-1.5046812/maintenance-be%20closed%20churches%20that%20works,own>

9. The New York Times, “The Church Is Losing Members,” July 30, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/30/us/politics/church-membership-decline.html>

and explain why it has proved

course of action for preaching  
we find ourselves. We will  
unclarity on the one hand  
on the other. We propose a  
going with the positive features  
the aspirations and longings  
The second strategy is a di-  
ciple's reception of the Gospel  
repentance and conversion  
The third strategy is to critique the  
secular gospel to show that it  
his threefold strategy paves  
a willing home in the hearts

## The Challenges It

### The West

ent Australian census were  
d to it with great interest,  
COVID-19 pandemic, and it is  
ing insights into Australian  
the census, however, would  
media indicating that fewer  
d church.

t time ever, in 2020, mem-  
pped below 50 percent of  
nt for over half a century,  
the millennium ("houses

of worship" refers to *all* religions in the US, not only Christians). This isn't merely a consequence of COVID, as the clear trend preceded the pandemic by two decades. If the trend continues at its current pace, less than 30 percent of Americans will be members of a house of worship in another two decades.<sup>6</sup>

The 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Study found that the Catholic Church had experienced the greatest net loss of adherents compared to any other religious tradition in the United States. "There are 6.5 former Catholics in the US for every convert to the faith. No other religious group analyzed in the 2014 Religious Landscape Study has experienced anything close to this ratio of losses to gains via religious switching."<sup>7</sup>

In Canada, the home of Divine Renovation, there is an even greater trajectory of decline. In the next decade, it is estimated that a third of all religious worship spaces across Canada (9,000 buildings!) will be closed; the vast majority of them are Christian churches.<sup>8</sup> This was the pre-COVID estimate. This is a stunning reversal considering that the Canadian province of Quebec was one of the most Catholic places on planet Earth in the 1950's. In that decade, only 5 percent of the population *didn't* go to Mass. Today, only 5 percent of Quebec residents *go* to Mass. In half a century, attendance at Mass declined from 95 percent to 5 percent.<sup>9</sup>

Europe is far from immune to these challenges, of course. For instance, the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) found that 44 percent of British Catholics have disaffiliated, and 37 percent of these former

6. Jeffrey M. Jones, "US Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," Gallup, March 29, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>

7. David Masci and Gregory A. Smith, "7 facts about American Catholics," Pew Research Center, October 10, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/10/7-facts-about-american-catholics/>

8. Bonnie Allen, "From sacred to secular: Canada set to lose 9,000 churches, warns national heritage group," CBC, March 10, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/losing-churches-canada-1.5046812#:~:text=Shrinking%20congregations%20and%20rising%20maintenance,be%20closed%2C%20sold%20or%20repurposed&text=A%20national%20charity%20that%20works,owned%20buildings%20in%20the%20country>

9. The New York Times, 2018. "Where Churches Have Become Temples of Cheese, Fitness and Eroticism," July 30, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/30/world/canada/quebec-churches.html>

Catholics now identify as “Nones,” or possessing no religion at all. The rate at which people are turning their backs on the faith that they were baptized into is staggering.<sup>10</sup>

It is worth noting at this point that this is a Western problem. In parallel, the Church is growing in places, like Africa and many parts of Asia, that have been most resistant to Western influence. Of course, the fact that the Church is flourishing outside of Europe and other Western nations cannot make us who live in the West complacent. God has not given up on the West, and neither should we. While these and similar statistics are well rehearsed and well known, every statistic of disaffiliation is a person, someone beloved by God, someone for whom Jesus died. This is personal for all of us. We have all seen the numbers of people attending Mass drop away dramatically over our lifetimes. We have seen friends and family members walk away from the faith that means so much to us. We have listened to the cries in the hearts of parents whose children and grandchildren no longer regularly worship. As preachers, but first and foremost as missionary disciples, our hearts should ache for these people who have not yet encountered the saving love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

As preachers, we of course have a great responsibility, but also a great opportunity, to connect with those baptized members who no longer say they believe or regularly attend church—and to also connect with those who have never been baptized. We frequently forget that many of these people are at Mass *sometimes*. It might be for Christmas and Easter; it might be as a birthday present for a parent who wants them to come “just this once”; it might be out of loyalty and love to a spouse or children; or they might wander inside in a moment of personal need. These people are present in our churches. But do we prepare our homilies and preach with them in our minds and in our hearts?

What’s more, if we consistently do preach with them in mind, seeking to engage the questions they are asking, and if we proclaim the Gospel knowing that they are in our pews, then our regular parishioners will also

10. Stephen Bullivant, *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 28.

know that our parishes  
or unchurched family m  
*them in mind* and is add  
people who come each

Our preaching will b  
so many people are no  
faith frequently appears  
of Jesus Christ is both  
heart, we first need an a  
the human condition c  
en, human nature. But  
cultural context. And if  
we preach, we run the  
fewer and fewer peopl  
other messages, other “  
form of “good news.”

#### Whose Fault Is It? Secular

Most priests and comm  
decline of belief and pr  
of “secularism.” Secula  
frequently evades a tru  
into the popular percep  
used to describe the dec  
is now labelled as a “sec  
or identify as Christian t  
get us very far in under  
today in relation to fai  
side the words “secular  
“secularization.” Variou

A few important (if  
our present purpose. It  
from the Church’s lexic

...ing no religion at all. The  
... on the faith that they were

...Western problem. In parallel,  
...and many parts of Asia, that  
...ce. Of course, the fact that  
...and other Western nations  
...cent. God has not given up  
...ese and similar statistics are  
...e of disaffiliation is a person,  
... Jesus died. This is personal  
...people attending Mass drop  
...ve seen friends and family  
...ns so much to us. We have  
...whose children and grand-  
...hers, but first and foremost  
...e for these people who have  
...vealed in Jesus Christ.

...ponsibility, but also a great  
...members who no longer say  
...to also connect with those  
...y forget that many of these  
...r Christmas and Easter; it  
...o wants them to come "just  
...to a spouse or children; or  
...rsonal need. These people  
...e our homilies and preach

...with them in mind, seeking  
...if we proclaim the Gospel  
...gular parishioners will also

...ion in Britain and America since

know that our parishes are places where they can bring their de-churched or unchurched family members and friends, because the homilist *does have them in mind* and is addressing them as well as the regular and committed people who come each week.

Our preaching will be ineffective, though, if we do not understand *why* so many people are no longer coming to church, and *why* the Christian faith frequently appears unattractive to our contemporaries. If the Gospel of Jesus Christ is both the prescription and prognosis for every human heart, we first need an accurate diagnosis of the condition. Theologically, the human condition consists of our beloved and beautiful, and also fallen, human nature. But this theological reality happens within a specific cultural context. And if we are unaware of the cultural context in which we preach, we run the risk of speaking in an echo chamber, addressing fewer and fewer people each time because many have left to embrace other messages, other "gospels" even, that purport to offer a more potent form of "good news."

#### Whose Fault Is It? Secularism, Secularization, or Secularity?

Most priests and committed churchgoers tend to lay the blame for the decline of belief and practice outlined in the statistics above at the feet of "secularism." Secularism is one of those tricky words, though, that frequently evades a truly meaningful definition. If you dig a little deeper into the popular perception of secularism, you often find that it is merely used to describe the decline of belief and practice. For example, Australia is now labelled as a "secular country" because fewer people go to church or identify as Christian than before. So, this definition of "secular" doesn't get us very far in understanding what is really going on in people's lives today in relation to faith. What makes it more confusing is that alongside the words "secular" and "secularism," we also have the concept of "secularization." Various definitions for all three terms are widely in use.

A few important (if a little simplistic) definitions will be helpful for our present purpose. It is important to note that the term **secular** comes from the Church's lexicon. It originally referred to the everyday activities

of people living in the world, as distinct from the sacred realm that was the province of the Church and her ministers.

**Secularization** may be defined as the removal of religion from the public sphere. This process was partly due to the desire to respect people's conscience, so that rather than having their beliefs determined by the religion of their current king, they were able to maintain their own allegiance to a particular Christian tradition (whether Protestant or Catholic).

We could also include within the concept of secularization the identification of the scientific processes that take place within the natural world rather than directly attributing their causality to God. To many today, the Big Bang theory adequately explains the creation of the universe without needing any reference to God's causation. Similarly, the process of evolution by natural selection satisfactorily explains the emergence of human life without requiring divine intervention. Of course, this need not mean that God was not the ultimate architect of these processes. The distinction that St. Thomas Aquinas makes between final and efficient causes is very helpful here. This just means that while God is the ultimate origin and cause of the universe and of human beings, God's creative activity can occur through the more immediate causes of the Big Bang and the processes of human evolution. Of course, some people (for example, Richard Dawkins) consider these efficient causes to be completely sufficient for explaining both the universe and human origins, thereby dispensing with the need for any final cause (that is, God).

When it comes to defining **secularism**, we may employ the widespread popular understanding mentioned above: secularism refers to the decline in Christian belief and practice in Western societies. It is worth noting that concerns about the decline in belief and practice are not exactly new: when Archbishop Roger Vaughan arrived in Australia in 1873, the local clergy expressed their "hope that the education of the rising generation would be protected from the blighting influence of anti-Catholic secularism." The archbishop responded with the declaration that the construction of the first cathedral in Australia and a Christian education were the two

weapons needed to c  
forward to the presen  
cathedral and Austr  
tem, but neither of th  
march of secularism  
The decline of belief  
inadequacy of the arch  
understand secularism  
to the enormous chal

For as we have seen  
is not especially helpf  
decline in belief and p  
might employ a fourth  
Taylor refers to the sh  
over the past 500 year  
in this sense consists,  
belief in God is unchal  
it is understood to be  
easiest to embrace."<sup>12</sup>

One of the really h  
Christian faith has be  
that it is too simplisti  
faith in favour of a do  
come to church. They  
"spirituality" availabl  
some reference to a di  
support from religiou  
atheist, New Ager, agn  
to give us an especial

11. Cf. Patrick O'Farrell, *The*  
revised ed., (Kensington, N  
12. Charles Taylor, *A Secula*  
2007), 2-3.

the sacred realm that was  
removal of religion from the  
the desire to respect people's  
beliefs determined by the  
to maintain their own alle-  
her Protestant or Catholic).  
of secularization the identifi-  
ce within the natural world  
to God. To many today, the  
ion of the universe without  
ilarly, the process of evolu-  
s the emergence of human  
course, this need not mean  
processes. The distinction  
and efficient causes is very  
is the ultimate origin and  
God's creative activity can  
the Big Bang and the pro-  
ple (for example, Richard  
e completely sufficient for  
s, thereby dispensing with  
ay employ the widespread  
arism refers to the decline  
ties. It is worth noting that  
are not exactly new: when  
a in 1873, the local clergy  
e rising generation would  
anti-Catholic secularism."  
n that the construction of  
a education were the two

weapons needed to combat what he called "earth worship."<sup>11</sup> If we fast forward to the present, we may note that Sydney has long had a beautiful cathedral and Australia possesses an extensive Catholic education system, but neither of these responses have proved adequate to address the march of secularism that concerned Archbishop Vaughan 150 years ago. The decline of belief and practice has only accelerated since then. The inadequacy of the archbishop's response challenges us to more accurately understand secularism today so that we can make a more fruitful response to the enormous challenge that secularism presents to the Church.

For as we have seen, to blame our predicament upon secularism per se is not especially helpful, because it tells us next to nothing about why the decline in belief and practice is occurring. Following Charles Taylor, we might employ a fourth term to help us understand what is really going on. Taylor refers to the shift in the conditions of belief that has taken place over the past 500 years as **secularity**. He says that "the shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."<sup>12</sup>

One of the really helpful things to note from Taylor's words is that Christian faith has become one option among many others. This means that it is too simplistic to think that people are opting out of Christian faith in favour of a dogmatic sort of atheism or that they are too lazy to come to church. They can also choose from many other manifestations of "spirituality" available today. These spiritualities may or may not include some reference to a divine being and apparently do not need much, if any, support from religious institutions. What this means is that labels like atheist, New Ager, agnostic, logical determinist, and the like have ceased to give us an especially accurate perception of what someone believes.

11. Cf. Patrick O'Farrell, *The Catholic Church and Community: An Australian History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> revised ed., (Kensington, NSW: NSW University Press, 1992), 177.

12. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Stanford University Press, 2007), 2-3.

What we can say is that secularity refers to a description of the underlying causes of the decline of belief and practice of Christian faith in the West.

So, what are some of the underlying causes? We might reach here for things like Western affluence, the impact of the digital revolution, and so on, but to follow Charles Taylor's argument in *A Secular Age*, people are not just distracted by an overabundance of material possessions or by social media. People today have also been captured—not necessarily consciously, but captured nonetheless—by a powerful ideal that he calls the ethic of authenticity.

### The Age of Authenticity

One of the best descriptions of the ethic of authenticity and, with it, the shift to our present secular age, comes from the Boss. That's right, from Bruce Springsteen.

In his one-man Broadway show (which is also available on Netflix) Springsteen offers an autobiographical tour through his life. He describes his very Catholic childhood during the 1950s in this way: "I lived on Randolph St., with my sister Virginia . . . my parents, my grandparents. . . . We lived spitting distance from the Catholic church, the priests' rectory, the nuns' convent, the St. Rose of Lima Grammar School. . . . I literally grew up surrounded by God."

Springsteen speaks here with nostalgia for his childhood, but also perhaps for a time that has gone—not just because his childhood is long since over but because the world has irrevocably shifted. Can we detect some nostalgia for God here too? I think so, and Springsteen makes this clear in his 2016 autobiography, *Born to Run*. He remains haunted by God, and especially by Jesus, even if he has not fully returned to the practice of his Catholic faith.

As the Broadway show goes on, the Boss identifies what he understands to be the hinge, the revolutionary moment that changed not only his world but the world in which we all live. Cultural critics have often pointed to the tumultuous upheavals that took place in 1968, but for Springsteen it was the appearance of Elvis Presley on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1956 (I

don't think he's quite right then, in a blinding flash . . . just a kid . . . from the south man, who split the world one below your belt . . . and

There's no doubt that y and roll" formed a crucial and that has more or less that while Springsteen thi ("the one below your belt new emotional, affective,

He goes on to say that or want "more": more life, lo more rock and roll (Bruce an explosion of "fun, the r ass-quaking, guitar-playin soul-lifting bliss of a free and all you needed to do t

And with this last sente element of our secular age. been animated by the idea Or to put it another way, v we must each discover in o it, one's own originality is articulating it I am also defi ethic of authenticity and an age. So, our era is best desc when the Boss says that it not just more sex and mo power, and soul, he was na pursuit of the authentic sel

13. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of* 1992), 29.

description of the underlying  
of Christian faith in the West.  
es? We might reach here for  
of the digital revolution, and  
ent in *A Secular Age*, people  
e of material possessions or  
a captured—not necessarily  
powerful ideal that he calls

authenticity and, with it, the  
the Boss. That's right, from

s also available on Netflix)  
through his life. He describes  
os in this way: "I lived on  
parents, my grandparents. . . .  
church, the priests' rectory,  
nmar School. . . . I literally

or his childhood, but also  
cause his childhood is long  
ably shifted. Can we detect  
nd Springsteen makes this  
e remains haunted by God,  
ly returned to the practice

ntifies what he understands  
changed not only his world  
itics have often pointed to  
968, but for Springsteen it  
d Sullivan Show in 1956 (I

don't think he's quite right here, but he's not exactly wrong either): "But then, in a blinding flash of sanctified light [came] a human being, and just a kid . . . from the southern sticks, but [who was also] a new kind of man, who split the world in two. Suddenly a new world existed . . . the one below your belt . . . and above your heart."

There's no doubt that young people's embrace of "sex, drugs, and rock and roll" formed a crucial part of the change of era that began in the '60s and that has more or less continued to gain pace ever since. But notice that while Springsteen thinks the new world possesses a sexual dimension ("the one below your belt"), this new world "above your heart" is also a new emotional, affective, and even spiritual reality.

He goes on to say that ordinary people like him and his generation would want "more": more life, love, sex, hope, truth, power, soul, and of course more rock and roll (Bruce is a rock star, after all). Elvis' performance was an explosion of "fun, the real kind. The joyful, life-affirming, hip-shaking, ass-quaking, guitar-playing, mind-and-heart-changing, race-challenging, soul-lifting bliss of a freer existence." The "world . . . had changed . . . and all you needed to do to get a taste of it *was to risk being your true self*."

And with this last sentence Bruce has landed upon the most important element of our secular age. The cultural revolution we have experienced has been animated by the ideal that every person must become their true self. Or to put it another way, we all have our own way of being human, which we must each discover in order to be our true selves. As Charles Taylor puts it, one's own originality is "something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it I am also defining myself."<sup>13</sup> Charles Taylor calls this ideal the ethic of authenticity and argues that this is the defining characteristic of our age. So, our era is best described as the Age of Authenticity. This means that when the Boss says that it is by risking being our true self that we discover not just more sex and more rock and roll but also more life, love, truth, power, and soul, he was nailing the *zeitgeist*, or the spirit of our age. This pursuit of the authentic self lies at the heart of the secular gospel narrative.

13. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 29.

## The Quest: Spirituality in the Age of Authenticity

It's striking that as the Age of Authenticity has progressed, the decline of religious belief and practice has accelerated. In fact, one explains the other. When the ethic of authenticity is transposed to the region of faith, I am and must be free to continue in, or reject, whatever faith tradition I may have been raised in. I must also be free to adopt a different faith tradition or opt for no religious faith at all. A particular answer to the question of what I believe cannot be decided in advance for me by a church, the Bible, my school, or even my own family.

When people describe themselves as spiritual but not religious, they are invoking the ethic of authenticity, although they are unlikely to be doing so consciously. They are rejecting institutional expressions of faith because these appear to be imposed upon them from without, whether that is by the Church, a Catholic school, or even their own devout family of origin. The "spiritual but not religious" are opting instead for a personally chosen spiritual path, free from institutional mandates on how to live and the (frequently implicit) beliefs that underpin someone's lifestyle choices.

It follows that institutions possessing strong notions of external authority, such as the Catholic Church, will struggle to gain traction in the Age of Authenticity. All is not lost, however. Some people will be drawn to the Catholic Church, her practices and the spiritualities she offers. But this will happen only if the Church's beliefs and practices *resonate*, if they speak to the individual whose quest for his or her true self has led them to explore what the Church has to offer. It will also mean that increasing numbers of people who are churchgoing members will also adopt non-Christian spiritual practices.

When the ideal of authenticity is transposed to the spiritual dimension of life (however one may understand the term "spiritual"), it means that people will look for beliefs and practices that speak to their sense of self, that resonate with their conceptualization of their identity. Not everyone in a secular age will value the spiritual plane or even acknowledge it, but Charles Taylor calls those who do "seekers."

Seekers may be looking for a sense of and shapes the world (offer) or for a less global and tentative but nevertheless find personally helpful. As practice because it resonates with. This explains the enormous yoga, which many say the need to consciously accept or Hinduism, in these ex-

An important implication of the world is divided into believers and adherents to other world. These labels have been emerged as every seeker meaning and significance likes to call it.

The myriad array of spiritual effect of making each of doubt. In an earlier time, he or she would appear to different lifestyle to someone faith. In our secular age have been erased. The new are now friends and family appears indistinguishable belief about God, then this spiritual convictions some. This presents us with a challenge (young people) today are they know too many "go-

It also presents us with a mate, our faith, a truly e-

city  
as progressed, the decline of  
n fact, one explains the other.  
l to the region of faith, I am  
whatever faith tradition I may  
pt a different faith tradition  
r answer to the question of  
or me by a church, the Bible,

al but not religious, they are  
ey are unlikely to be doing so  
expressions of faith because  
without, whether that is by  
own devout family of origin.  
ead for a personally chosen  
ites on how to live and the  
meone's lifestyle choices.

ong notions of external au-  
uggle to gain traction in the  
Some people will be drawn  
he spiritualities she offers.  
iefs and practices *resonate*,  
for his or her true self has  
ffer. It will also mean that  
hgoing members will also

l to the spiritual dimension  
"spiritual"), it means that  
speak to their sense of self,  
their identity. Not everyone  
r even acknowledge it, but

Seekers may be looking for an all-encompassing answer that makes sense of and shapes the whole of their lives (which all the world religions offer) or for a less global concept of spirituality that is much more partial and tentative but nevertheless speaks to them and which they are likely to find personally helpful. As we have seen, they like this or that spiritual practice because it resonates with them and their personally held sense of self. This explains the enormous popularity of practices like mindfulness and yoga, which many say they derive a spiritual benefit from without feeling the need to consciously adopt the entire religious worldview (Buddhism or Hinduism, in these examples) from which these practices originate.

An important implication of this is that we cannot assume that the world is divided into believers and unbelievers, or even between Christians, adherents to other world religions, atheists, agnostics, and New Agers. These labels have been exploded by the plurality of options that have emerged as every seeker pursues his or her own individual path toward meaning and significance—or to experience “fullness,” as Charles Taylor likes to call it.

The myriad array of spiritual stances now available to people has the effect of making each of those possible positions contestable or open to doubt. In an earlier time, an atheist appeared almost exotic to believers; he or she would appear to have very different morals and live a very different lifestyle to someone from a family espousing traditional Christian faith. In our secular age, though, many of these differences appear to have been erased. The non-believer is no longer an exotic “other”; they are now friends and family members. And so, if much of their lifestyle appears indistinguishable from my own, except for our belief or non-belief about God, then this may well have the effect of rendering my own spiritual convictions somewhat fragile or at least more tentatively held. This presents us with a challenge as preachers, for fewer people (especially young people) today are resolute and steadfast in their beliefs, because they know too many “good people” who do not believe as they do.

It also presents us with an opportunity, though, because in such a climate, our faith, a truly evangelizing community, and our preaching, can

encourage at least some to consider or reconsider the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (Most will not have heard the actual Gospel and will have instead rejected some caricature of Christianity rather than the real thing, but the actual real thing will be addressed in chapter 3).

### But We Are Not All Seekers

There is a further consideration to be aware of. There will be people in our pews who display little evidence of the “seeker” dynamic in their lives. The first group of these people are the generation before Bruce Springsteen (sometimes called “the Builders” or “the Greatest Generation”; they are in their 80s and 90s today). They watched their children (the “Baby Boomers”) wrestle with and often abandon or radically reconfigure their faith, as Springsteen has, in the transition to the Age of Authenticity. While the Builders have lived through the same set of changes as their children, which their grandchildren and great-grandchildren now experience as normal, the Builders have experienced it very differently and have rarely felt the need to seriously question their faith commitment.

A second group of non-seekers may belong to Springsteen’s generation (the Baby Boomers) or to the following generations (Generation X and Millennials). Some of them may have come from highly religious families; the transmission of faith from one generation to the next has taken place unproblematically for them. These people are regular churchgoers, and they cannot seriously envisage being anything other than Catholic. This group will be a very small percentage of their generation.

A third group of non-seekers may be first- or second-generation immigrants from non-Western nations who happily accept both God and the Church’s authority and perhaps appear baffled by the questioning of faith that their peers engage in. These people are coming from Catholic cultures such as the Philippines or substantial Catholic subcultures like Kerala in India, and so it’s almost as if they are coming from a Christendom subculture in which Catholic faith is the taken-for-granted, unquestionable view held by the majority of the people they interacted with in their countries of origin.

While they are a minority of people are often the most committed members of congregations. Moreover, to one or more of these people, we are often tempted to preach only to them (in some cases literally) preachers who do not understand the mentality of the seekers in our pews and are the most committed parishioners. They do not shrewdly engage with the Gospel in such a way that they are able to share of the love of God revealed in the Gospel.

### Four Roadblocks within the Church

Perhaps the diagnosis of the Church is more optimistic than you would expect. The faith in Western nations is still strong and honour the quest many are pursuing. It is *relevant* (gasp!) to those who are seeking.

First, that is not what I am saying. I am saying that we will not be able to understand the seekers if we do not. This is no easy feat when we are in the possible positions concerning the quest. Here, we will have no hope of understanding and promises of the Gospel.

But once we understand the quest, the God revealed in Jesus Christ, the quest? Well, yes . . . and it is not everyone’s religious or spiritual quest. Their belief systems more often than not. In years, this does not mean that the faith and other expressions of the quest are not relevant.

Consider the Gospel of Jesus  
Gospel and will have instead  
ner than the real thing, but  
pter 3).

There will be people in our  
dynamic in their lives. The  
before Bruce Springsteen  
reatest Generation”; they  
d their children (the “Baby  
radically reconfigure their  
Age of Authenticity. While  
f changes as their children,  
children now experience as  
differently and have rarely  
commitment.

to Springsteen’s generation  
rations (Generation X and  
m highly religious families;  
to the next has taken place  
regular churchgoers, and  
other than Catholic. This  
generation.

or second-generation im-  
pily accept both God and  
ffled by the questioning of  
are coming from Catholic  
Catholic subcultures like  
oming from a Christendom  
a-for-granted, unquestion-  
ey interacted with in their

While they are a minority in the broader population, these three groups of people are often the most present, vocal and active members of our congregations. Moreover, as preachers it is quite likely that we belong to one or more of these non-seeker groups which means we might be tempted to preach only to non-seekers. The result will be that we are (in some cases literally) preaching to the choir because we have not tried to understand the mentality of the seekers who *are* regularly (even weekly) in our pews and are the spouses, children, colleagues, and friends of our most committed parishioners. Unless we try to sympathetically and shrewdly engage with their worldview, we cannot hope to proclaim the Gospel in such a way that it finds them receptive to the saving message of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

#### Four Roadblocks within the Culture to Faith Today

Perhaps the diagnosis of our cultural context to this point reads more optimistically than you were expecting, given the precipitous decline of faith in Western nations. It could sound like we preachers just need to honour the quest many are undertaking and try to make the Gospel more *relevant* (gasp!) to those who are looking for it to speak to them.

First, that is not what I (Fr. Chris) am saying when I suggest we need to understand the seekers and their adherence to the ideal of authenticity. I am saying that we will need to *begin* by entering into their worldview. This is no easy feat when it is characterized by an exponential plurality of possible positions concerning faith or spirituality. Yet, if we do not begin here, we will have no hope of engaging those listening with the claims and promises of the Gospel.

But once we understand this, isn’t it then just a matter of proclaiming the God revealed in Jesus Christ as the ultimate end of every person’s quest? Well, yes . . . and no. While the fragility and contestability of everyone’s religious or spiritual convictions means that individuals change their belief systems more readily now than at any time in the last 1700 years, this does not mean that it is a level playing field between Christian faith and other expressions of faith or spirituality. As we have already

seen, inherent in the ideal of authenticity is a rejection of institutions that would impose belief and identity upon someone. To someone steeped in this ideal, the Catholic Church systematically violates the self-determining nature of the project to discover one's true self. This means that the fullness of Catholic faith is far from the easiest position to adopt from the incredible array that is available to our contemporaries.

But it is even more challenging than this. That's because there are strong currents within the culture that skew the whole culture and everyone within it toward a rejection of the transcendent, in general, and of Christian faith, in particular. These currents lie below the surface; they are not immediately evident as concepts that can be identified and challenged. They appear to many people today as "the way things are," and they make Christian faith harder to ascribe to. What makes these currents so powerful is that they are seldom consciously held, but instead lie as unexamined assumptions that appear to be unquestionably self-evident. For our preaching to be effective, we need to identify these currents and specifically challenge them as they present significant obstacles to people's faith at the present. Three of these roadblocks—**scientism and the exaltation of disengaged reason, religion as superstition**, and the **Christian faith as dangerous**—lie more or less submerged within the culture as barely articulated assumptions. The fourth roadblock is the visible tip of the iceberg (to mix one's metaphors!), because the **Church's witness to Christ has been deeply compromised** by our dramatic failures to live out his Gospel of love. Let's briefly examine each of these in turn.

### Scientism and the Exaltation of Disengaged Reason

The first current is a faulty, but dominant, epistemology or understanding of how human beings know things. Objective disengaged reason (à la René Descartes) is exalted as the safest and most reliable form of knowledge. At its extreme, this results in scientism, which holds that *only* the empirical method of verification arising from the scientific method is a reliable source of knowledge.

A slightly less extreme view of what we truly know can be held that cannot be empirically verified. From this perspective, beliefs are inherently subjective. The impact of this screens out the possibility of truth that cannot be empirically verified in the realm of subjective belief.

### Religion as Superstition

A second current arising from the history of science is that history is really a coming of age. The status of a child is elevated to the status of a child. As science has revealed the truth about superstition. This conceptualization of who are too afraid to see the truth. Faith is a child's belief in such things. The more we know what science has revealed and that each human being is blind chance after chance. This broader coming of age is surrounded by God and the whole story, so be sure

### Christian Faith as Dangerous

Perhaps the previous roadblock is but basically benign. However, the legacy of Christian faith is dangerous. A few tributaries of the Church's moral teaching are certain (especially sexual morality) is powerfully fuelled by

rejection of institutions that  
one. To someone steeped in  
y violates the self-determin-  
ue self. This means that the  
iest position to adopt from  
ontemporaries.

s. That's because there are  
w the whole culture and ev-  
anscendent, in general, and  
vents lie below the surface;  
s that can be identified and  
day as "the way things are,"  
cribe to. What makes these  
onsciously held, but instead  
p be unquestionably self-evi-  
d to identify these currents  
ent significant obstacles to  
oadblocks—**scientism and**  
**igion as superstition**, and  
e or less submerged within  
s. The fourth roadblock is  
metaphors!), because the  
**ply compromised** by our  
ove. Let's briefly examine

ason

temology or understanding  
isengaged reason (à la René  
iable form of knowledge. At  
olds that *only* the empirical  
ntific method is a reliable

A slightly less extreme but more popular version of scientism is that what we truly know can be arrived at from "facts" or "data," and everything that cannot be empirically established belongs to the realm of "beliefs." In this perspective, beliefs are a category of knowledge, but they are utterly subjective. The impact of this exaltation of disengaged reason is that it screens out the possibility of knowing God at all, because God's existence cannot be empirically proven. And so faith is at best relegated to the realm of subjective belief and at worst dismissed as fantasy and illusion.

### Religion as Superstition

A second current arising from the first is that humanity's progress through history is really a coming-of-age story in which religious belief is relegated to the status of a childish relic that humanity has outgrown now that science has revealed the Christian story to belong to the realm of superstition. This conceptual current views believers as an ignorant minority who are too afraid to shrug off the comforting illusion that faith gives them. Faith is a child's fairy tale, and intelligent adults no longer believe in such things. The more mature adult decision is to courageously accept what science has revealed, which is that the universe is indifferent to us and that each human being is the product of not just blind chance but blind chance after chance after chance. Bruce Springsteen's story fits this broader coming of age story perfectly as he exchanges a childhood surrounded by God and family for Elvis and a guitar (although this is not the whole story, so be sure to watch the whole show).

### Christian Faith as Dangerous

Perhaps the previous roadblock considers religious belief to be misguided but basically benign. However, some go further and consider both the legacy of Christian faith and its current manifestations to be intrinsically dangerous. A few tributaries feed into this current. The first contends that the Church's moral teaching and practice violates the human rights of certain (especially sexual) minorities. It is perhaps clear by now that this is powerfully fuelled by the ethic of authenticity, for if someone decides

that his or her identity is at least in part defined by his or her sexuality or gender, then the Church's teaching will appear not just as a rejection of certain behaviours or a lifestyle but as a rejection of the person and his or her sense of self.

Another element is the argument that Christianity's belief in an afterlife devalues the significance of ordinary day-to-day life. The beauty, meaning, and importance to be found in the everyday is dismissed by believers in their focus upon heaven. At its extreme, this line of reasoning contends that people of faith neglect their own welfare and happiness now because of their focus upon eternal life.

A final element sees faith as an exercise in coercive power. This perspective considers the Church to be manipulative and controlling, which is repugnant to the vision of freedom entrenched in the ethic of authenticity. When Bruce Springsteen says in his Broadway show that the "powers that be" would have shut the revolution down or "signed it up real quick" (that is, co-opted it for their own purposes), he is likely thinking of the coalition of institutions that were committed to maintaining the status quo. Of course, this status quo includes the Church. Perhaps our contemporaries have learned from Christopher Hitchens that "religion poisons everything," but the claim that religion is a power trip has more potent proponents in philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault. Most people will not have read these authors themselves. Rather they will have absorbed the narrative of religion as power trip through all sorts of stories and symbols within the culture. To many, it won't appear as an argument at all but as an unchallengeable articulation of "the way things are."

### The Church's Compromised Witness

We need to humbly acknowledge that the critique of Christian faith as dangerous, outlined above, is not without foundation. Minorities of many kinds have been victimized by both religious and political powers in the name of Christian faith. Poor preaching has undoubtedly so stressed our eternal destiny that the significance and implications of the Gospel for our world has been undervalued. This has resulted at times in an inexcusable

tolerance for poverty and  
And both willful and un-  
play within the Church  
its misuse of authority  
the absolutely horrendous

When faced with the  
the sanctimoniousness  
rank betrayal of the in-  
it is small wonder that p  
witness. This is not, of c  
impact of scandals both  
that we start with this in  
there are now many peo  
ple in our pews) whose  
engendered by the dram

While it is true that in  
toward all institutions,  
for these counter-witne  
rents described above, t  
is not implicit but is in  
many in our culture tak  
earn back that trust and  
especially by the way w

### On the Secular Gospel the Gospel of Belief

The Appeal of the Secular  
An Alternative Vision of

We have briefly surveyed  
get a hearing amidst son  
However, while large nu

defined by his or her sexuality appear not just as a rejection of the person and rejection of the person and Christianity's belief in an afterlife day life. The beauty, meaning, is dismissed by believers in a line of reasoning contends and happiness now because

in coercive power. This per- sive and controlling, which is ed in the ethic of authenticity. y show that the "powers that signed it up real quick" (that kely thinking of the coalition ntaining the status quo. Of Perhaps our contemporaries freligion poisons everything," as more potent proponents and Michel Foucault. Most selves. Rather they will have p through all sorts of stories on't appear as an argument of "the way things are."

critique of Christian faith as ndation. Minorities of many and political powers in the ndoubtedly so stressed our eations of the Gospel for our d at times in an inexcusable

tolerance for poverty and material suffering on the part of Christians. And both willful and unintentional ignorance of the power dynamic at play within the Church has directly led to the plague of clericalism and its misuse of authority in ways stretching from the relatively minor to the absolutely horrendous.

When faced with the hypocrisy of people in the Church, whether it is the sanctimoniousness of the pious mother with the cruel tongue or the rank betrayal of the innocent and vulnerable by members of the clergy, it is small wonder that people find little that is attractive in the Church's witness. This is not, of course, the whole story, but we underestimate the impact of scandals both little and large at our peril. We have to realize that we start with this impediment in place every time we preach because there are now many people (even the deeply faithful and faith-filled people in our pews) whose default stance toward the Church is suspicion engendered by the dramatic failure of our credibility.

While it is true that in the Age of Authenticity, this suspicion is directed toward all institutions, this does not absolve the Church from her guilt for these counter-witnesses to the Gospel. And unlike the first three currents described above, the compromised nature of the Church's witness is not implicit but is instead the first and default explicit recourse that many in our culture take toward the Church today. We need to patiently earn back that trust and respect again and again by the way we speak and especially by the way we act.

## **On the Secular Gospel: Not the Good News of Unbelief but the Gospel of Believing Otherwise**

---

### **The Appeal of the Secular: An Alternative Vision of the Good Life**

We have briefly surveyed the ways in which preaching today struggles to get a hearing amidst some powerful opposing currents within our culture. However, while large numbers of people over the past 70 years or so have

abandoned Christian faith, it was not solely because Christianity's belief system became untenable for them. They also needed to be drawn to an attractive, alternative vision of the good life: "the secular gospel." This new "gospel" is still deeply indebted to Christian faith, but its overtly Christian origins have been largely excised over time. There are at least three very important elements to this alternative vision: **the ethic of authenticity**, **the ethic of universal altruism**, and **the value of ordinary life**.

We have already discussed the appeal of the ethic of authenticity at some length. In our secular age, this ethic is allied with an **ethic of universal altruism**. When Bob Geldof and his rock star celebrity mates held the massive Live Aid concerts in the 1980s to raise funds for famine-ravaged Ethiopia, he did not appeal to Christian motives when asking for people's generosity. Instead, Geldof asked the ordinary Australians, Canadians, Europeans, Americans, and others watching to give financially to the cause on the basis of their shared humanity with those suffering Africans. If that seems like an obvious reason, and one that would inspire any person of any faith or no faith to give, then that powerfully indicates the pervasiveness of the ethic of universal altruism.

The foundation for such altruism lies in the Christian ideal of *agape*, or self-giving love. It is grounded in the vision, presented in Genesis, of Adam and Eve being made in the image and likeness of a self-giving God and therefore having an intrinsic and inviolable dignity. It flows from Jesus' parables such as the Good Samaritan and the separation of the sheep from the goats, often quoted by Mother Teresa (see Matthew 25). The so-called universal human right to food, shelter, and clothing, so self-evident to people today, is really a product of Christian faith. The secular gospel preaches human dignity and the ethic of universal altruism without recourse to its Christian origins.

A third value that people find attractive today is a strong appreciation of the **value of ordinary life**. The origins of this value also lie in Christian faith, particularly in one of the key thrusts of the Protestant Reformation. Over and against the perception that the Catholic Church prized the "otherworldly" vocations of the clergy and religious, the Reformers asserted that

the kingdom of God was t  
work. In a secular age, th  
intimate relationships—b  
finds meaningful. Cut off  
valued not as a site of end  
because it is a place wher  
being human. At one extr  
"posts a win" at work or a  
having a great time. At th  
relationships matter and  
contribution to the world

The combination of th  
of ordinary life meant th  
in large numbers from th  
*away* from faith: they we  
attractive. Think here a  
life-affirming, mind- and  
against his Catholic chil  
of being free and alive ra  
religious upbringing.

This is not to say that  
forces of affluence and m  
taking people away from  
are at the same time un  
tension with the less obv  
authenticity, and ordinar  
all the things in Springst  
more life, love, sex, hop  
a price tag (although m  
all of these things). Not  
doesn't require one to b  
has to have "enough," th  
one's "best life" alongsid

because Christianity's belief  
so needed to be drawn to an  
the secular gospel." This new  
faith, but its overtly Christian  
There are at least three very  
in: **the ethic of authenticity,**  
**the value of ordinary life.**

ethic of authenticity at some  
with an **ethic of universal**  
star celebrity mates held the  
se funds for famine-ravaged  
ives when asking for people's  
ary Australians, Canadians,  
to give financially to the cause  
se suffering Africans. If that  
uld inspire any person of any  
indicates the pervasiveness

the Christian ideal of *agape*,  
on, presented in Genesis, of  
likeness of a self-giving God  
able dignity. It flows from  
and the separation of the  
er Teresa (see Matthew 25).  
l, shelter, and clothing, so  
uct of Christian faith. The  
e ethic of universal altruism

lay is a strong appreciation  
is value also lie in Christian  
the Protestant Reformation.  
blic Church prized the "oth-  
the Reformers asserted that

the kingdom of God was to be found in God, family life, and an honest day's work. In a secular age, these are transposed to become an appreciation for intimate relationships—both romance and friendship—and in work that one finds meaningful. Cut off from its origins in Christian faith, ordinary life is valued not as a site of encounter with God but as important in and of itself, because it is a place where I may articulate and so define my unique way of being human. At one extreme, this value is pointed to every time someone "posts a win" at work or a photo (with a filter!) to social media of their family having a great time. At the other extreme is the laudable sense that my key relationships matter and are worthy of my care and attention, as does my contribution to the world through work that I find intrinsically significant.

The combination of the ethics of altruism, authenticity, and the value of ordinary life meant that when people began to abandon Christian faith in large numbers from the 1960s on, it wasn't just that they were walking *away* from faith: they were opting *for* a way of life that they found more attractive. Think here again of Bruce Springsteen's eulogizing of joyful, life-affirming, mind- and heart-changing fun. He is not pitting hedonism against his Catholic childhood but is instead choosing a particular way of being free and alive rather than submitting to the constrictions of his religious upbringing.

This is not to say that a certain kind of hedonism—driven by the twin forces of affluence and mass consumer capitalism—hasn't played its part in taking people away from church. But many so-called secular people today are at the same time uneasy with consumerism. That's because it sits in tension with the less obvious but nonetheless powerful ideals of altruism, authenticity, and ordinary life to which people today ascribe. Notice that of all the things in Springsteen's vision of a richer, fuller life, which includes more life, love, sex, hope, truth, power, and soul, only rock and roll has a price tag (although mass consumer capitalism will try to commodify all of these things). Note also that the secular conception of a good life doesn't require one to be rich, but it shuns material poverty because one has to have "enough," through a personally satisfying job to be able to live one's "best life" alongside one's intimate others. Furthermore, the ethic of

altruism also pulls against the mindless acquisition of goods and services as the obligations of caring for the poor and suffering clamour for attention.

The attractiveness of these three secular values of authenticity, altruism, and the value of ordinary life mean that simple denunciations of secularism, hedonism, and capitalism are unlikely to gain much ground among the seekers when we are preaching. It's not that sins such as pride, greed, and selfishness are not at work in people's lives. They are, of course. But the failure to see these sinful behaviours is due not just to the blindness to sin that sin brings but also to the fact that our contemporaries are believers in an alternative view of what makes for a good life.

### The Secular Gospel

The alternative vision of the good life that secularism proposes requires a certain kind of faith, too, because people who adhere to it are putting their trust in an alternative "good news" or "gospel" that they find more compelling than what they know of the Christian Gospel. What this means is that secularism is not a mere absence of belief. It is a *different* belief system, a different narrative that people have chosen to live by. And what makes this really tricky is that the secular gospel is, *at first glance*, not radically dissimilar from the Gospel of Jesus. That's because the secular gospel is grounded in the vision of the human person that lies at the centre of the Christian Gospel. It's just that all the bits about God have been cut out of this new creed.

So how might we more precisely define the secular gospel? As far back as 1963, sociologist Thomas Luckmann argued that because faith (and what we would now call spirituality) was a private matter, the resultant lack of a unified worldview led individuals to determine for themselves what provided ultimate meaning and significance in life. He does not call it the ethic of authenticity, but authenticity is writ large here nonetheless. The result, according to Luckmann, was a new "invisible religion" that was focused upon personal autonomy, self-development, and self-realization.<sup>14</sup>

14. Thomas Luckman, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*, (New York: MacMillan, 1967), 89-90.

Since the early years of the 20th century, the major form of religion in America is now "moralistic, therapeutic individualism." Christian Smith, MTD has colonized the imagination in favour of a creed in which the individual who benignly assists people in their program of self-realization is the central figure.

Luckmann's invisible religion is a private matter. Given what we know, it is not clear how many instances a person could have. It is not clear how many can also now see there is a need to determine the place of the individual in that there are as many different ways of living.

The content of the secular gospel is to say something about the good life while respecting that there are many different ways of living. We might say that the secular gospel is a private matter.

*I am to look to myself for the good life. I achieve this by my own efforts. My own efforts enables me to live a life that is more intimate others than I am. It's self-fulfilling. My obligation extends only to myself. My true self is my own. I may well have a religious dogma, but I will not fully be myself. I will not challenge to myself. I will not by my religious dogma. I will not own personal values.*

15. Christian Smith and M. Denton, *Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 10.

tion of goods and services as  
fering clamour for attention.  
lues of authenticity, altruism,  
ple denunciations of secular-  
o gain much ground among  
hat sins such as pride, greed,  
ves. They are, of course. But  
ue not just to the blindness  
at our contemporaries are  
es for a good life.

cularism proposes requires  
who adhere to it are putting  
gospel" that they find more  
Christian Gospel. What this  
nce of belief. It is a *different*  
have chosen to live by. And  
ular gospel is, *at first glance*,  
sus. That's because the sec-  
man person that lies at the  
all the bits about God have

secular gospel? As far back  
ed that because faith (and  
private matter, the resultant  
determine for themselves  
nce in life. He does not call  
writ large here nonetheless.  
"invisible religion" that was  
ment, and self-realization.<sup>14</sup>

Since the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Christian Smith has argued that the major form of religious or spiritual identity among young Americans is now "moralistic, therapeutic deism," or MTD for short.<sup>15</sup> According to Smith, MTD has colonized and supplanted traditional Christian faith in favour of a creed in which God acts as a divine butler or cosmic therapist who benignly assists people's individual pursuit of happiness through a program of self-realization.

Luckmann's invisible religion and Smith's MTD have a fair bit in common. Given what we have seen though about the explosion of possible stances a person could take in relation to God, faith, and spirituality, we can also now see there is more than one secular gospel. When we recall that the ethic of authenticity requires me to individually and uniquely determine the place I will assign to faith or spirituality in my life, it seems that there are as many possible options as there are seekers.

The content of the secular gospel can thus appear elusive. But we can say something about the common elements that characterize this new faith while respecting that the secular gospel possesses many manifestations. We might say that the secular gospel goes something like this:

*I am to look to myself to discover my own original way of being human. I achieve this by a process of self-discovery, or even self-creation, which enables me to live out my understanding of a good life with self-chosen intimate others and by undertaking work that is personally meaningful to me. It's self-evident that I'm to be kind and decent to others, and this obligation extends to those who are suffering through no fault of their own. My true self can be damaged or obscured by the actions of others. I may well have to cast off external binding commitments (such as religious dogma, moral dictates, and racial and gender stereotypes) to fully be myself. There's no place in the secular gospel for any interior challenge to my quest for authenticity: a guilty conscience induced by my religious upbringing must be shucked off for me to realize my own personal vision of a fulfilling life. At the same time, this process*

*of self-realization may, but in no way has to, involve my personal exploration and engagement with the spiritual dimension of life, however I choose to understand spirituality, be it in relation to religious institutions or otherwise.*

Of course, the poets say it best, and The Boss has already put the secular gospel better than any prosaic definition possibly could: people today want “more”: “more life, love, sex, hope, truth, power, and soul.” They want the “joyful, life-affirming, mind- and heart-changing bliss of a freer existence,” and the way to attain this is “to risk being your true self.”

As preachers, we ignore the secular gospel at our peril. We are not trying to evangelize people who no longer believe in God or who never have. We are trying to reach people whose minds and hearts have been won by the proclamation of a rival good news. And this proclamation is all the more powerful because it is so subtle; it doesn't really look like anyone is preaching it. It's become so obvious and self-evident that it seems like it is in the air we breathe. But when we have been given the eyes to see it, the secular gospel is proclaimed everywhere: in movies and music, in self-help manuals, in personal development mantras, on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, or the social media platform of your choice. The secular gospel is being proclaimed by almost everyone! In other words, most people are not simply adherents of the secular gospel; they have been mobilized to become its preachers as well. And for the most part, they do not even realize they are standing on the proverbial soapbox.

## **Between Denunciation and Endorsement: A Strategy for Preaching in a Secular Age**

---

### **On (Not) Dismissing the Quest for Something Spiritual**

As you read all of this, you might be inclined to think that the ideal of authenticity, the non- or even anti-religious nature of the spiritual quest, and the secular gospel that I have just described sound deeply problematic. It may appear that the notion of authenticity seems dangerously subjective,

likely to over-emphasize the therapeutic. For example, in the name of finding themselves they “just weren't feeling it.”

An example of this is the book *Love by Elizabeth Gilbert*, which describes how she found herself after her first marriage. She enjoys *la dolce vita* in Italy and then on to Bali, and Indian experiences to discover oneself (Does it do?), that's because the book shows that it is a powerful chord, even if it is. So, it's undoubtedly a nation can bring some local bookstore.

It's true, too, that it is so well when it is compared to Carmelite spirituality. Authenticity too easily while a true presentation of God's authority in our power of the Church. The quest can be readily in are restless until they undertook a spiritual the devastating effects

The rite of admission too: the would-be poet while the abbot calls “God,” and is then granted a final “seeker” is Zaccaria

...y has to, involve my personal  
...spiritual dimension of life, how-  
...ity, be it in relation to religious

...ss has already put the secular  
...sibly could: people today want  
...wer, and soul." They want the  
...ging bliss of a freer existence,"  
...our true self."

...el at our peril. We are not try-  
...ve in God or who never have.  
...and hearts have been won by  
...l this proclamation is all the  
...esn't really look like anyone  
...self-evident that it seems like  
...been given the eyes to see it,  
...; in movies and music, in self-  
...tras, on Facebook, Instagram,  
...r choice. The secular gospel  
...other words, most people are  
...they have been mobilized to  
...most part, they do not even  
...oapbox.

## ...ment: A Strategy for

### ...g Spiritual

...to think that the ideal of au-  
...re of the spiritual quest, and  
...ound deeply problematic. It  
...ems dangerously subjective,

likely to over-emphasize the place of feelings and to be overly focused on the therapeutic. For example, people can justify walking out on marriages in the name of finding oneself or discard beliefs and practices because they "just weren't feeling it anymore."

An example of this was the wildly successful 2006 memoir *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert, in which the author goes on a quest to discover herself after her first marriage ends. Her journey takes her to Italy, where she enjoys *la dolce vita* before heading to India to discover her spirituality and then on to Bali, Indonesia, in an attempt to integrate her Italian and Indian experiences. If this sounds like an awfully privileged search to discover oneself (how many people can walk out on their lives as she does?), that's because it is. But the immense popularity of the book among women shows that its core premise—to find one's true self—struck a powerful chord, even if few people could emulate Gilbert's path exactly. So, it's undoubtedly true that at its most trivial, the quest's final destination can bring someone no further than the self-help section of their local bookstore.

It's true, too, that being "spiritual but not religious" doesn't stack up so well when it is compared with the richness of Benedictine, Ignatian, or Carmelite spirituality. But I don't think we are going to displace the ideal of authenticity too easily in our culture, nor do I really think we should. For while a true presentation of the Catholic faith will always need to speak of God's authority in our lives (for Jesus Christ is Lord) and of the mediating power of the Church (for she is the sacrament of Christ's salvation), the quest can be readily identified in Saints such as Augustine ("Our hearts are restless until they rest in you, O God") and Ignatius of Loyola, who undertook a spiritual quest while lying flat on his back recuperating from the devastating effect of a cannonball on his knees.

The rite of admission into a Benedictine monastery captures the quest, too: the would-be postulant stands behind the door to the monastery while the abbot calls out, "What do you seek?" The postulant replies, "God," and is then granted entrance into the cloister. Perhaps the original "seeker" is Zacchaeus, whose search for the God of Israel led him

to the leafy branches of a sycamore tree to get a glimpse of Jesus (Luke 19:1-10). In other words, we can and should affirm the legitimacy of the quest in people's lives, even as we must patiently accompany them, as their search may take them to places and positions that we are tempted to write-off as trivial or shallow.

Similarly, I think we dismiss the secular gospel at our peril. It may seem to us that it is a pale, debased version of Christian faith. This is, of course, true, and it will be important to explain to people that much of what they believe and value is far more indebted to Christianity than they realize. But simple denunciations violate the ideal of authenticity, for it is when people are loudly and sharply told that a particular stance is wrong that they are most likely to reassert their right to determine their own stance without reference to an external authority (such as the Church or you as a preacher).

Furthermore, as we try to face up to the reality that our proclamation of the Gospel does not occur on a level playing field, in which every position gets an equal hearing, we can be reduced to lamentation about the unfairness of this situation and the problems it creates. We might even be heard remarking that in the light of all this, it is no wonder that fewer and fewer people are coming to church.

A tempting option here may be to pit Christian faith against the culture, painting the latter as inherently evil. If this is our take, then we will likely engage in lots of denunciations of immoral behaviour and nostalgically pine for a supposed earlier age in which the culture was "more Christian." But if earlier eras were so filled with faith, then how did it all fall apart so quickly in recent memory (within Bruce Springsteen's lifetime)? It is not so much that our age is a "post-Christian" era as a "post-Christendom" era. It is "post-Christendom," in that the culture no longer brings people to church, and the moral framework of our society has been broken off from its Christian foundation. But no culture is post-*Christian*, for there is no culture in which Christ is not present. The Holy Spirit is at work in every culture and in the lives and hearts of people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

Our post-Christendom culture can be sure, as policies and laws and morals, for example. This affects our mission, in some ways. Christendom to explain the same worldview as us. It's tougher now, when the people do not share some of our most basic basis of society or the values.

In an important sense, the Church. In the first three centuries possessed a similar diversity. This situation is also significant that the Christian Gospel can continue to decisively shape the origins of some of our contemporary rights, the equality of all people on the basis of a shared humanity. Some people want to dismiss respect for difference but, in the dignity of the human person they do so.

Part of the challenge that the pre-Constantinian world was to be good news to our contemporary already familiar with the Christian something new in the way of a third-century inhabitant of many have of Christianity in the of the true nature of Christ.

Perhaps the most important is the idea that religion tells us how to be a good person with

get a glimpse of Jesus (Luke  
affirm the legitimacy of the  
tiently accompany them, as  
positions that we are tempted

ospel at our peril. It may seem  
stian faith. This is, of course,  
people that much of what they  
Christianity than they realize.  
of authenticity, for it is when  
particular stance is wrong that  
determine their own stance  
(such as the Church or you

reality that our proclamation  
ing field, in which every poe  
ed to lamentation about the  
s it creates. We might even  
s, it is no wonder that fewer

ian faith against the culture,  
our take, then we will likely  
behaviour and nostalgically  
culture was "more Christian."  
hen how did it all fall apart  
pringsteen's lifetime)? It is  
era as a "post-Christendom"  
ure no longer brings people  
ociety has been broken off  
is post-Christian, for there  
he Holy Spirit is at work in  
people from every tribe and

Our post-Christendom culture brings significant losses to our society, to be sure, as policies and laws are enacted that are contrary to Christian faith and morals, for example. The post-Christendom culture also negatively affects our mission, in some respects. It was almost certainly easier in Christendom to explain the Catholic faith to people who basically shared the same worldview as us but who had not yet encountered Jesus. It is tougher now, when the people we are trying to evangelize increasingly do not share some of our most basic presuppositions concerning the moral basis of society or the value of religious faith.

In an important sense, though, this is not exactly a new situation for the Church. In the first three centuries of Christianity, the Roman Empire possessed a similar diversity in beliefs and outlook. Having said this, our situation is also significantly different from pre-Constantinian Rome, in that the Christian Gospel and its ethic have permeated our society and continue to decisively shape it. This is true even if the deeply Christian origins of some of our contemporaries' most cherished ideals (like human rights, the equality of all people, and the need to care for the suffering on the basis of a shared humanity) are becoming increasingly obscure. Some people want to dismantle this Christian foundation in the name of respect for difference but, ironically, they appeal to the Christian ethic of the dignity of the human person (shorn of its Christian language) when they do so.

Part of the challenge that our age presents when it is contrasted with the pre-Constantinian world is that the Gospel does not initially appear to be good news to our contemporaries. Many people today think they are already familiar with the Christian faith and so it doesn't appear to offer something new in the way that it would have appeared to a second- or third-century inhabitant of the Roman empire. But the understanding many have of Christianity is frequently a caricature, a misunderstanding of the true nature of Christian faith.

Perhaps the most important element of the most common caricature is the idea that religion tells us how to be good, but now we can figure out how to be a good person without any reference to God. The right things to

do are supposedly self-evident. People don't realize that these things are self-evident because of the way in which Christian morality has permeated the culture, even if the Christian foundation of this morality is removed.

The common caricature of faith can also include a distorted concept of salvation. This distortion can take different forms, but the most common variant reduces Jesus to a mere moral exemplar who teaches us how to live. More darkly, the caricature can include a profound misunderstanding of the Cross, in which the Father is portrayed as a cosmic child-abuser requiring, and even delighting in, the death of his own Son. The kerygma needs to be proclaimed in such a gripping and accurate fashion that people are able to distinguish these grotesque caricatures from the awesome and beautiful reality of God's saving action in Christ.

As preachers we can also go to the opposite extreme of hostile denunciations, by attempting to accommodate the Gospel to the popular secular mindset. There are some temptations here, too, because there is much to affirm and even celebrate in the Age of Authenticity. The ethic of authenticity opens up a world of possibilities that we now take for granted but which were unheard of a relatively short time ago. For example, not so long ago the son of a baker would have had little option other than to become a baker. And the baker's daughter would have had even fewer possibilities available to her. And while we might lament the loss of some elements of an ostensibly Christian society, we should acknowledge that the Church was far from at her best when she had the power to coerce belief through an alliance with the State.

As Catholics, we can and should strongly affirm the way the ethic of authenticity guarantees freedom of religion, and we may appeal to this ethic when such freedoms are challenged by legislators. It ought to be obvious, though, that to affirm elements of the culture cannot mean a wholehearted, uncritical endorsement of the Age of Authenticity. There are too many powerful currents at work that illegitimately diminish the plausibility of Christian faith and, furthermore, champion moral positions that both denigrate the human person and undermine the common good.

Our challenge as preachers is to reach people's minds and hearts in their quest for authenticity of mind, heart, and action.

### The One Who Seeks Shalom

If outright rejection of the Gospel is what should our strategy begin with a genuine engagement with the seeker. The first task is to identify and understand the pain present beneath the seeker's quest for "more" (as per Bruce Springsteen) to hear their longings, aspirations, and will hear themselves better. We are able to offer the Gospel if we know our soul are God's gift to us. The presence of the Holy Spirit is the key.

As Christians, we know that "fun" is joy, which is a result of God's loving presence. The "soul-lifting bliss" of the Gospel is through the liberation of the soul on the Cross. Having discovered the "bliss," to the ecstasy of the deepest aspirations are pointing this out in as many ways as possible.

How are we to approach the secular project that says the quest for discovering one's true self is the quest is in no way for Ignatius of Loyola, and the dynamic in the tradition.

... realize that these things are  
... Christian morality has permeated  
... of this morality is removed.  
... include a distorted concept of  
... forms, but the most common  
... plar who teaches us how to  
... profound misunderstanding  
... ed as a cosmic child-abuser  
... of his own Son. The kerygma  
... accurate fashion that people  
... tures from the awesome and  
... rist.

... te extreme of hostile denun-  
... Gospel to the popular secular  
... too, because there is much  
... authenticity. The ethic of au-  
... hat we now take for granted  
... time ago. For example, not  
... had little option other than  
... would have had even fewer  
... ght lament the loss of some  
... we should acknowledge that  
... he had the power to coerce

... affirm the way the ethic of  
... and we may appeal to this  
... y legislators. It ought to be  
... the culture cannot mean a  
... Age of Authenticity. There  
... illegitimately diminish the  
... e, champion moral positions  
... dermine the common good.

Our challenge as preachers is to *engage* with the seeker dynamic in people's minds and hearts and show them how the Gospel is the goal of their quest for authenticity, even as Jesus also calls them to a conversion of mind, heart, and action.

### The One Who Seeks Shall Find: Engaging with the Ethic of Authenticity

If outright rejection and unqualified acceptance are to be avoided, then what should our strategy as preachers be? It seems to me that we have to begin with a genuine and even sympathetic attempt to understand and engage with the seeker worldview that we have been examining. The task is to identify and articulate the ways in which the desire for God is present beneath the seeker's longing for "fullness" (as per Charles Taylor) or "more" (as per Bruce Springsteen). In this way, our congregations will hear their longings, aspirations, and dreams being articulated by us. They will hear themselves being described to themselves. And we will then be able to offer the Gospel truth that real life, love, hope, truth, power, and soul are God's gift to us in Jesus Christ accessed through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

As Christians, we know that the true name for the Boss' "real kind of fun" is joy, which is a fruit of the Holy Spirit that we experience when God's loving presence is manifested in our hearts. And we know that the "soul-lifting bliss of a freer existence" can only ultimately be found through the liberation from sin, evil, and death accomplished by Christ on the Cross. Having died with Christ, we are also raised with him to the "bliss," to the ecstasy even, of communion with God. Our contemporaries' deepest aspirations are fulfilled in Christ. Part of the task of preaching is pointing this out in as compelling a way as we possibly can.

How are we to approach the self-determining, self-realizing part of the secular project that says that the path to fulfilment lies in the journey of discovering one's true self? As we have already seen, the seeker dynamic or the quest is in no way foreign to Catholic faith. Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, and Francis de Sales are important examples of this dynamic in the tradition, but they are by no means outliers. It is part and

parcel of the pilgrimage to faith that people must undertake. Our task here as preachers is to affirm the quest and then demonstrate that we discover our true self, our deepest identity, in and through a relationship with Jesus Christ. The preacher's *initial* engagement with the search for one's true self is a remarkable way to *then* enter into the proclamation of the kerygma.

Similarly, if the fundamental project of the Age of Authenticity is to discover what it means to be truly human for me, then the preacher's task includes showing how Jesus reveals not only who God is to us but who we are to ourselves. As paragraph 22 of *Gaudium et Spes* puts it so beautifully: "Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals us to ourselves and makes our supreme calling clear." The path to realizing our deepest humanity lies in a life lived in imitation of the most fully authentic human being, Jesus Christ. The preacher must also show that while the fulfillment of our humanity in Christ is common to us all, it does not compromise the God-given uniqueness of each one of us. In this, the deepest aspirations in the secular gospel are fulfilled in Christ. When the kerygma is preached in light of these prevalent hopes that exist in our cultural context, it will more readily find open minds and hearts.

#### Removing the Cultural Roadblocks to Faith

We cannot, however, merely demonstrate how the inherent logic of the ethic of authenticity is most fully and deeply fulfilled in Christ. We must make two other responses to the secular gospel. First, we have to address the currents in our culture that serve as powerful obstacles to the credibility of Christian faith today. Second, because the secular gospel is a rival gospel offering an alternative faith, we also need to show that the secular gospel cannot deliver what it promises.

At a minimum, we have to be able to speak—respectfully, politely, but without equivocation—about the inadequacy of scientism and the validity of forms of knowledge other than the empirical, especially the knowledge that arises from encounters with real people. The popular exaltation of disengaged reason has been utterly discredited by thinkers

such as Martin Heidegger. The simplest rebuttal of scientism is that no one lives by disengagement. Truth lies beyond the empirical. The person who subscribes to scientism must ultimately be exposed as a fraud or the firing of neurons. How does anyone truly live? We would quickly see the falsification of what it is to be human.

It is also important to be dispensed with as we grow able to listen to someone showing that smart people (but perhaps especially those doing a talk in a pub setting) have objections to faith through a question they liked to mention to their boyfriend, and she later learned an important step in her life, which of my zinging and she didn't remember anything responded to questions to leave her intellect at the door. It was only an initial step in the following week that she had and then was given an opportunity for real conversion of life.

We also need to be able to speak of positions that deem it necessary about the hot-button issues and unpopular line. We need compassion and love, with

must undertake. Our task here is to demonstrate that we discover truth through a relationship with Jesus, not through the search for one's true self. The proclamation of the kerygma in the Age of Authenticity is to show that for me, then the preacher's task is to show who God is to us but who we are. *In et Spes* puts it so beautifully: "The mystery of the Father and Son makes our supreme calling clear." This calling lies in a life lived in imitation of Jesus Christ. The preacher must show that humanity in Christ is common to all, and that the uniqueness of each one of us. The secular gospel are fulfilled in the light of these prevalent hopes and that we more readily find open minds

show the inherent logic of the Gospel fulfilled in Christ. We must show the Gospel. First, we have to address the powerful obstacles to the Gospel because the secular gospel is also need to show that the

—respectfully, politely, and with the adequacy of scientism and the empirical, especially the real people. The popular line is discredited by thinkers

such as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Michael Polanyi. The simplest rebuttal of scientism, though, consists of pointing out that no one lives by disengaged reason alone. We have ways of knowing that lie beyond the empirical method's reach. For example, someone who subscribes to scientism must hold that the experience they have of love must ultimately be explained by recourse to evolutionary processes and/or the firing of neurons and chemical reactions within their brains. But does anyone truly live like this is all there is to the act of falling in love? We would quickly see someone who does so as guilty of a terrible distortion of what it is to be human.

It is also important to counter the line that faith is a fairy tale to be dispensed with as we grow up. For some seekers, this is as simple as being able to listen to someone speak intelligently and sensibly about faith or showing that smart people from all manner of professions and disciplines (but perhaps especially the sciences) are people of faith. I remember doing a talk in a pub some years ago in which I tried to address common objections to faith through a Q&A session, where people could pose any question they liked to me. A young woman had been brought there by her boyfriend, and she later explained to me that the conversation had been an important step in her return to the practice of her faith. I wondered which of my zinging arguments had sealed the deal, but she said she didn't remember anything I said. It was the calm, thoughtful way that I responded to questions that made it clear to her that she did not have to leave her intellect at the door to become a disciple of Jesus. The pub talk was only an initial step for her, though. It was the kerygmatic retreat the following week that changed her life, as she heard the Gospel proclaimed and then was given an opportunity to respond with faith; she experienced real conversion of life.

We also need to be able to speak meaningfully about the constellation of positions that deem Christianity to be dangerous. It's not easy to talk about the hot-button issues where we as Catholics hold an uncomfortable and unpopular line. We need to be able to speak about these issues with compassion and love, without compromising on the truth. We especially

need to be able to find the value that people with an opposing point of view are holding on to. We can often affirm the value or positive intent they are defending without agreeing with where their line of reasoning has taken them. For example, those who advocate for euthanasia rightly want to spare people pain and suffering. We can affirm that original positive intent in our listeners and then show that Christian faith offers a fuller and richer response that better safeguards the value and dignity of the human person. We also need to be able to present Catholic teaching in a way that demonstrates that the realization of our full humanity is grounded in our shared dignity in being made in the image and likeness of God. It is so important that we do not denigrate people who hold opposing views, even when those views are inimical to God and to the common good. We may not always leave people convinced of our perspective, but we do want those listening to remember that our disagreement did not mean we disrespected or diminished them. For more on how to preach on hot button topics, see chapter 9.

While we know the allegation that a commitment to Christ diminishes the value of ordinary life is untrue, we ought to acknowledge that the critique is not without some justification. The popularly held view that Christian faith teaches you how to be good so you go to heaven when you die is also a caricature, but this caricature originates with Christian preachers. There are a thousand ways to demonstrate the contrary by pointing out the ways in which faith requires a deeper investment in the life of the world today rather than reducing this world to a kind of celestial airport lounge or a waiting room for heaven. We can point to multiple moments in Jesus' teaching where he stresses the importance of our actions in this world or to the dogmatic teaching that our decisions for or against God in this life have eternal implications for our ultimate destiny.

The hermeneutic of suspicion that considers Christian faith to be a manipulative exercise of power over others is not so easy to dislodge. In a very real sense, all the words in the world will not convince someone who has bought into this argument that the full truth is otherwise. What is required is the patient exercise of love, a profound commitment to

exercising our leadership with the simplicity of life that in our actions have to speak here.

We can address and then show that these currents present themselves to the surface of these currents to the surface depths. Once made explicit. Such an exercise does not assist those who have not still find themselves working against these obstacles.

### Critiquing the Secular Gospel

Finally, it is also important in which the secular gospel deliver. When we as preachers delivering a smack-down of people who in good faith to illustrate the inherent it proves ultimately insufficient.

We don't have space to one example will serve to brief monologue at the 2 that captures a massive delivery says to the star-studded Carrey. When I go to sleep two-time Golden Globe winner shut eye." Here, Carrey's identity is that he has worked even when he sleeps. But something of the relentless

16. Jim Carrey, "Speech At The 13, 2020, YouTube video, 1:50, 1

le with an opposing point of  
the value or positive intent  
where their line of reasoning  
advocate for euthanasia rightly  
e can affirm that original pos-  
that Christian faith offers a  
wards the value and dignity of  
to present Catholic teaching  
tion of our full humanity is  
e in the image and likeness of  
ite people who hold opposing  
to God and to the common  
nced of our perspective, but  
at our disagreement did not  
For more on how to preach

mitment to Christ diminishes  
ht to acknowledge that the  
he popularly held view that  
o you go to heaven when you  
inates with Christian preach-  
ate the contrary by pointing  
investment in the life of the  
to a kind of celestial airport  
point to multiple moments  
rtance of our actions in this  
decisions for or against God  
ultimate destiny.

ders Christian faith to be a  
s not so easy to dislodge. In  
will not convince someone  
ull truth is otherwise. What  
profound commitment to

exercising our leadership in humble service, and a commitment to a simplicity of life that indicates we do not possess ulterior motives. Our actions have to speak here far more than our words ever can.

We can address and thereby remove the roadblocks within the culture that these currents present. In an important sense, this involves bringing these currents to the surface, for they lie implicit within the culture's depths. Once made explicit, they can then be calmly and gently refuted. Such an exercise does not only serve the seekers in our midst: it also assists those who have made an initial commitment to Christ but who still find themselves wondering, and at times unsure, when they run up against these obstacles.

### Critiquing the Secular Gospel

Finally, it is also important to demonstrate that there are all sorts of ways in which the secular gospel, while promising so much, ultimately fails to deliver. When we as preachers speak to these problems, we are not delivering a smack-down of the culture. We are also not trying to denigrate people who in good faith ascribe to these positions. Our purpose here is to illustrate the inherent contradiction within the secular gospel and how it proves ultimately insufficient.

We don't have space to address all the ways in which this occurs, but one example will serve to illustrate the point. Comedian Jim Carrey's brief monologue at the 2016 Golden Globes is a brilliant piece of satire that captures a massive difficulty within the Age of Authenticity.<sup>16</sup> Carrey says to the star-studded crowd, "I am two-time Golden-Globe winner Jim Carrey. When I go to sleep at night I am not just a guy going to sleep. I am two-time Golden Globe winner Jim Carrey going to get some well-needed shut eye." Here, Carrey tells us that one of the crucial elements of his identity is that he has won two Golden Globes and that this defines him even when he sleeps. But then in a single sentence Jim Carrey tells us something of the relentless, never-ending search for a sense of self in this

16. Jim Carrey, "Speech At The Golden Globes Awards 2016," Cognitive Leap, December 13, 2020, YouTube video, 1:50, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vR6P\\_i7UEew](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vR6P_i7UEew)



eam just any old dream, no sir,  
be winning actor Jim Carrey.”  
I would be enough, it would  
s terrible search . . . for what I

ccating smile, and it is deeply  
redible pressure that the ideal  
o work out what will uniquely  
everyone else’s sense of self.  
terrible burden. They can feel  
om the bewildering array of  
in order to define themselves.  
e of never being enough just  
e Age of Authenticity is that  
omental task that takes place  
ly notes, it extends well into  
of authenticity by becoming

ing the quest for the true self  
elling the movie stars in front  
rds.” He then punctures that  
ew just our solar system (say,  
human beings nor any aspect  
e. Then he again declares that  
huge.”

ge story is that our maturity  
ous belief due to our better  
Science tells us that human  
ness of the universe, and the  
one hand, the secular gospel  
r true self is uniquely signifi-  
immensity and indifference  
duces each and every one of

us (even two-time Golden Globe winner Jim Carrey) to epiphenomena, to soapy bubbles in a black sky. Each human being is important as never before in human history and at the same time is without consequence in the grand scheme of things.

The secular gospel cannot resolve this inherent contradiction. And Carrey knows this. After skewering the pretensions not just of the people in the room but also of all of us in a secular age, Jim Carrey moves on to introduce the nominees for the next award at the Golden Globes.

Part of our task as preachers is to name the secular gospel’s contradictions for our congregations because they highlight the dilemma they face in the modern age. When we can name what people are experiencing back to them, and in the process perhaps articulate it in a manner that they may not have thought much about, we do two things. We grab their attention, and we prime them for hearing the true Gospel which better explains the human condition and its aspirations as the real solution to the internal contradictions people experience. We call this solution salvation.

How might the kerygma be proclaimed off the back of Jim Carrey’s dissection of our human experience? There are many possibilities here. I would first suggest that the Gospel tells us that the deepest dimension of our identity is not something we have to achieve but is rather God’s gift to us in Jesus: because of Christ, we are adopted, beloved daughters and sons of God. Identity is received, not achieved. The relentless search, the constant anxiety that we are never enough, is resolved in the security we find in the unconditional and unfathomable love of God.

A second element would be to say that what the Christian faith narrative presents to us is a creator God who is greater than the universe he has made. The universe is not pitilessly indifferent to us, because God has made it, and his loving creation of us also grounds the deep sense we have of our significance. People can and must decide if they find this to be plausible, but it does not possess the inherent contradiction present in the secular gospel’s simultaneous valuing and depreciation of our significance.

In sum, our preaching needs to embrace a threefold strategy of engagement, rebuttal, and critique. Within this, we will positively articulate

the nature of the quest that seekers have embarked upon and then point out the ways in which that quest finds its fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ. We will remove the roadblocks that lie within the culture by refuting the claims of scientism, by demonstrating that Christian faith cannot be equated with superstition, and by showing that a more adept proclamation and undertaking of Christian faith are not a threat to human flourishing or a cynical exercise in power. We must also demonstrate that the Gospel is the true source of genuine human flourishing and renounce all misuses of the Gospel that have betrayed its fundamental message of true life, love, and peace for all people. As St. Irenaeus puts it, “the glory of God is the human person fully alive.” Or, as Jesus tells us, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Finally, it is important that we gently but firmly point out that the secular gospel possesses inherent contradictions that mean it is a belief system that is unworthy of men and women’s full allegiance, however attractive it might initially appear.

This threefold strategy is an integral part of missionary preaching in a secular age. It prepares the way for a true and authentic proclamation of the kerygma to take place and for it to be expressed in language that captures people’s attention, so that the Holy Spirit may find genuinely (even authentically!) receptive hearts and minds.

## **Conclusion**

In *Divine Renovation*, Fr. James Mallon wrote that the epochal change in our culture requires us to change our pastoral practice to place our parishes on a more missionary footing.<sup>17</sup> Foremost among these changes is a change in the content and style of our preaching. But the principal argument of this chapter has been that if we do not first seek a more accurate understanding of the culture, we will be ill-equipped in our efforts to fruitfully proclaim the Gospel to our contemporaries.

17. James Mallon, *Divine Renovation: From a Maintenance to Missional Parish*, (Toronto: Novalis, 2014), 60.

It is impossible to describe the potential significance for our culture of several important insights. In the end, we conclude, a brief recap of what we have seen can be helpful. The chapter begins by holding secularism responsible for the decline of Christians in Western nations. It is a culturally shorthand for that decline. It is a circular argument that does not take into account the cultural context. We then see how the complex of cultural forces that have made secularism as a more helpful category.

For Taylor, the defining characteristic of the modern era is what he calls the ethic of authenticity. It is not until he uniquely realize his or her own identity that it so memorably, the path to authenticity requires the courage to be your true self. In the end, if spirituality, it takes on a more resonant expression of being. It is a call to people to embrace the Christian struggle to be heard because it is allergic to overt external influences.

In addition to this, we see how hidden within the culture: the decline of its epistemological foundations. It is a spread perception that Christianity is not worthy of intellectual respect and is not worthy of intellectual respect (and perhaps especially in the power and manipulation. It is an implicit and is arguably the most compromised witness as a result of its decline.

Having identified these forces within the culture, we then



Christian faith over the past 70 years. They were also opting for a new belief system, with its own convictions about what constitutes a life of human flourishing. This secular gospel is deeply grounded in, but should not be identified with, Christian faith, as its Christian origins have been both consciously excised by some and forgotten by many others within our culture. The secular gospel offers a sort of salvation: a this-worldly fulfillment as I “live my best life” with my intimate companions and make a meaningful contribution to the world through the work I do. While the shallow end of this pool looks like adherence to self-help gurus, at its noblest are figures who have made the world a better place through a deep commitment to the ethic of universal altruism.

The secular gospel and the way of life it engenders is deeply attractive to many today. Preaching requires us to engage with its highest aspirations and affirm the genuine nature of the journey that seekers undertake when they go looking for the freer existence that it promises. Preaching in this context also requires us to refute the cultural roadblocks and embrace a posture of humble service and love and to willingly engage in communal repentance for the failures (both small and great) of our church and ourselves to fully live out the fullness of Jesus’ teaching.

Finally, we saw that the secular gospel possesses inherent contradictions. The posture it asks us to take is to affirm the quasi-transcendent value of each person’s unique quest for authenticity against the backdrop of an indifferent universe that rejects any ultimate meaning or value for our lives. This position is incoherent, in the end, as Jim Carrey unswervingly pointed out to us. Our preaching must gently, lovingly, but clearly point out these contradictions. It must also show how the Christian Gospel gives us a better foundation for our convictions about the dignity and worth of each person than the secular gospel does.

It is through our deployment of this threefold strategy of **engagement**, **rebuttal**, and **critique** in our preaching that we can establish a context for the proclamation of the kerygma. It is of course through the power of the Holy Spirit that the kerygma strikes a chord in people’s hearts and moves them to a response of faith and conversion of life. But we ignore

at our peril the cultural co  
The words we speak must  
listening, and those words,  
are all heard in and through

We may find ourselves a  
point, which is why it is in  
and how we convey the co  
Church history. As large cu  
adjusted: not by altering t  
but by addressing both the  
is delivered. As a Church,  
In fact, we must. The nex  
Church history to examin  
that we might be equipped

They were also opting for a new  
about what constitutes a life of  
deeply grounded in, but should  
as Christian origins have been  
gotten by many others within  
of salvation: a this-worldly  
intimate companions and make  
through the work I do. While  
ference to self-help gurus, at  
world a better place through a  
altruism.

engenders is deeply attractive  
ge with its highest aspirations  
that seekers undertake when  
it promises. Preaching in this  
al roadblocks and embrace a  
willingly engage in communal  
and great) of our church and  
us' teaching.

possesses inherent contradic-  
firm the quasi-transcendent  
enticity against the backdrop  
imate meaning or value for our  
, as Jim Carrey unswervingly  
ly, lovingly, but clearly point  
w how the Christian Gospel  
ations about the dignity and  
el does.

fold strategy of **engagement**,  
t we can establish a context  
of course through the power  
chord in people's hearts and  
ersion of life. But we ignore

at our peril the cultural context in which this proclamation takes place. The words we speak must resonate within the minds and hearts of those listening, and those words, the stories we tell, and the Gospel we proclaim are all heard in and through the cultural lenses each person possesses.

We may find ourselves a little daunted by the scope of the change at this point, which is why it is important to realize that the style of preaching and how we convey the content have not remained the same throughout Church history. As large cultural shifts have taken place, the Church has adjusted: not by altering the fundamental proclamation of the kerygma but by addressing both the language and the way in which that message is delivered. As a Church, we have done it before, and we can do it again. In fact, we must. The next chapter will take us on a brief tour through Church history to examine just how this has taken place in the past so that we might be equipped to make a similar shift today.