



CENTRE FOR MISSIONARY LEADERSHIP

A work of the Missionaries of God's Love

The Sociocultural Context for Mission in Aust/NZ II

Theological Foundations 6

Inspire us to give
generously of
ourselves, so that
people may be drawn
into the mystery of
love, and experience
the fullness of life.



Re-cap of Last Week's Lecture

- Mission does not happen in a vacuum, but in a specific cultural context
- Understanding the sociocultural context is important then for mission to be fruitful
- Charles Taylor suggests secularity as a key to understanding our time: this is the conditions of belief today (that especially make faith one option among many and not the easiest to believe)
- The ideal of authenticity shapes our time – we all have our own, unique way of being human – we live in the Age of Authenticity
- Which makes the question – who am I? vitally important. Identity is a dialogical reality though
- Spirituality in the Age of Authenticity – religious or spiritual practices must speak to me, and it takes the form of a quest
- Means that there are a supernova of possible stances that someone may take in relation to spirituality/faith
- Those who have undertaken the quest may be described as seekers (in contrast to dwellers)



Outline of Tonight's Lecture

- The Fragility of Belief
- 3 Ways in which the Culture makes it Harder to Believe
- The Secular 'Gospel'
- The Church's Response to date: Shouting Louder or Passive Acceptance
- An Alternative Response: Engaging with and Critiquing the Secular 'Gospel', in order to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus



The Fragility of Belief ... and Unbelief



3 Ways the Culture Makes it Harder to Believe in Christ

- Scientism and the Exaltation of Disengaged Reason
- Religion is Superstition
- Christian Faith is Dangerous



1. Scientism and the Exaltation of Disengaged Reason

- Scientism: only that which can be verified through the scientific method is a reliable source of knowledge
- Facts vs beliefs: only the former can be relied upon. Beliefs are utterly subjective
- Disengaged Reason: from Rene Descartes only that which is verifiable can be true



2. Religion as Superstition

- Human history is a coming-of-age story:
 - Religions belongs to the age of childhood and immaturity.
 - Humanity has now grown up, and we should put away superstitions (fairies, Santa, and Jesus).
 - Individuals should also grow out of religious faith as they grow up.



3. Christian faith is Dangerous

- Not necessarily a majority report, but influential and pervasive
- According to this perspective:
 - The Church's moral teaching violates the rights of certain (especially sexual) minorities
 - Belief in heaven devalues the significance of ordinary life
 - Faith is an exercise in coercive power



The Secular 'Gospel'

- Secularism is not the absence of belief. It is a different belief system
- It's not so much that people do not believe today ... it is that they believe in something else
- People believe in an alternative ideal
- The ethic of authenticity, the ethic of universal altruism and the value of ordinary life



The Secular 'Gospel' (continued)

- Has its roots in Christian faith
- 1963 Sociologist Thomas Luckmann: invisible religion – focused upon “personal autonomy, self-development and self-realization”.
- 21st C. Sociologist Christian Smith: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism



The Secular 'Kerygma'

I am to look to myself in order 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, but self-reflection and personal development can assist me to discover the best version of me so that I might live my life to the full. This process of self-realisation 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).



Engaging with the Secular Gospel The Church's Response to date:

- Shouting Louder (explaining more clearly)
 - Denounce the secular gospel as a debased version of Christian faith.
 - This is true, but unhelpful – violates the ethic of authenticity
- Accommodate the Gospel to the secular mindset
 - Things to affirm about secular modernity
 - But big challenges for faith too



An alternative: Engagement

- Engage with the seeker worldview – identify and articulate the ways in which the desire for God is present beneath the seeker's longing for fullness or more
- Then we are able to point to the Gospel as the fulfilment of those desires for more
- Engage with the self-realization of the secular project too: that we find ourselves in Christ, and by giving our lives away in love



Critique: Two Contradictions within the Ethic of Authenticity



Two Contradictions

- Realizing my true self is an exhausting, never-ending search for my identity
- The importance of me in the age of authenticity vs the 'cold fact' of an indifferent world

Tackling the Opposition to Faith within the Culture

- Addressing the inadequacy of scientism
- Challenging the coming-of-age abandoning of faith narrative
- Christian faith is dangerous ... but not in the way its critics mean. It ought not be an exercise in power
- Christian faith as the guarantor of the ultimate value of ordinary life.

Telling a More Compelling Story

- So the task before us in proclaiming the Gospel in a secular age is:
 - Moving beyond simple denunciations
 - positively engaging – where are the points in the narrative that are consistent with faith and finding the search for God that lies beneath them
 - Critiquing – where are the limitations in the story, and the obstacles to faith
 - Then out-storying the secular ‘gospel’ with the story of Jesus Christ (the kerygma)

Key Takeaways

- The sociocultural context for mission is important
- People are in very different locations in relation to faith – seekers, dwellers, nova effect etc. And we need to take account of this.
- Secular people are believers – they just believe something other than Christian faith
- Our task: to engage with, critique, and ultimately out-story the secular story.

For more on this Topic (Last week and this week)

- See Chapter 1 in *Preaching on Purpose*
- The other articles in the classroom