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## Religion and Secularism

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### 7. Secularization and Contemporary Catholic Mission

#### A Constructive Proposal

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#### Abstract

The context of rapid secularization provides a particular challenge for contemporary Catholic mission in and to Western cultures. This article considers how wise discernment and compassion toward persons living in a secular age may provide a starting point for Catholic mission today. It also explores how the Church might renew its own self-understanding in a way that allows it to reveal the beauty of Christ to the world. Looking to the work of Catholic philosophers and theologians such as Charles Taylor and Hans Urs von Balthasar, the author proposes some ways in which the Church's conceptions of church and world might be refigured for fruitful mission to Western cultures in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Keywords: Catholic Church, mission, secularization, Charles Taylor, Hans Urs von Balthasar

## Vatican II: The Context for Renewing Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The Second Vatican Council, the ecumenical council in which the Catholic Church conscientiously grappled with the reality of the modern world, is often considered to be the single most important event in the modern life of the church. This council, which took place over four years in the 1960s, famously brought about the Mass in the vernacular rather than in Latin and broadened the concerns of the Catholic community to include those of Catholic laypersons, non-Catholic Christians, and religious others. To many, Vatican II signaled a profound breath of new life and hope as the church opened herself up to the pluralism and variety in the world rather than remaining entrenched in a fortress-like mentality against all things modern. This same council also proclaimed that the church is “missionary by its very nature.” Yet after Vatican II, while dialogues between Christian churches and dialogues with other religious traditions opened up, it seemed as though sharing the gospel with energy and joy was profoundly lacking in western Catholicism on the whole, even as mission was acknowledged to be intrinsic to Catholic identity and ethos. Has the drive toward openness to the world and the other somehow eclipsed or confused the missionary imperative of the church? Moreover, in light of the pervasive secularity of our present age, is it still possible to take seriously the duty to proclaim the gospel while being attentive and respectful of the radically pluralistic and at times non-religious environment of the contemporary globalized world? If so, how would this stance look? How, in particular, does Catholic mission look in the context of secularized North American culture? While Pope Francis has done much in recent years to render mission central to Catholic identity once again, it still remains the task of every local church across the globe to consider how mission looks in its particular context. To that end, we will consider the work of Canadian social and political philosopher Charles Taylor and eminent modern European theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar for potential insights into the question of mission within contemporary secular Western cultures.

### Charles Taylor and Hans Urs von Balthasar: Reflections on Modern Identity, Secularization, Church, and Personhood

Charles Taylor, an esteemed Catholic philosopher who has written profoundly on modern moral selfhood and secularization in the West, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, one of the great Catholic theologians of the modern period, may show us how to proceed. Despite their significant theological differences, they have each reflected on Catholicism and modernity; Taylor has focused on Western modernity and secularity, and Balthasar on Catholicism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If one were to fashion a hermeneutic lens out of their respective bodies of work on modern moral selfhood, secularization, Catholic theological anthropology and Catholic ecclesiology, as the present author has done elsewhere, one might find that they comprise a useful framework for how to approach Catholic mission in a secular age. In particular, a constructive proposal for contemporary Catholic mission in western societies such as Canada and the United States might include the following in its approach:

1. A focus on the secularity of contemporary western societies as a descriptive fact to be approached with discernment and compassion, rather than a focus on secularism as an ideology to be condemned.

2. A shift from understanding the Catholic Church primarily as a hierarchical institution to seeing the church as a community committed to the formation of authentic persons, or saints.
3. An emphasis on the gospel message as a proposal of deep friendship with Christ as the key to authentic, fulfilled existence.

These three shifts in understanding secularity, the church, and the church's evangelizing message have the potential to invite people to consider anew the meaning of Christianity and the hope it holds for them. Together, these ideas come together as a *missiology of accompaniment* to all who seek God – particularly those on the margins and those who have felt marginalized by the church or society – and a call to become a church committed to the formation of saints whose lives radiate the love of Christ in an unmistakable and compelling manner.

### Rethinking Secularization

Some have contested the subtle distinction between secularity and secularism. However, despite the fact that they are often inextricable in reality, there is a conceptual and rhetorical difference between secularity and secularism: it is the difference between taking a descriptive tack and a normative tack on the issue. Once one names something an -ism, an ideology, it becomes difficult to look upon it with charity and discernment, the latter of which is precisely the approach to secularization that Taylor takes, and for which he has been praised from many quarters.<sup>1</sup>

Rather than roundly critiquing the ideology of secularism and proclaiming how damaging it has proven to contemporary faith – though undoubtedly it has been damaging – Taylor takes the approach that today we live in a world where most people take for granted that the here and now is all we have (2007: 12). Most individuals in Western societies today believe that there is nothing beyond the historical, temporal, physical world, and transcendence is, at most, a profound personal experience (2007: 507-13). This is what Taylor calls “the immanent frame,” and he invites his readers repeatedly to consider the question of whether it suffices for a truly desirable life (2007: 311, 507).<sup>2</sup>

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor traces the development of a secular turn of mind over the past five hundred years. Rather than taking a merely idealistic approach to this charting, Taylor covers history on the ground, social movements and developments alongside intellectual ones. One of his ultimate assertions in mapping the development of secularity in the West is that religious faith is still a viable option today (2007: 427-37, 728-34), and one that a modern person in the West may choose without feeling as though he or she has forsaken or compromised his or her intellectual integrity in doing so. Taylor shows that secularity is not simply a feature of our world that we should take for granted but is something that requires interrogation and careful understanding (2007: 3).

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<sup>1</sup> James Heft, Gregory Baum, and D. Stephen Long are among those who have underscored the charity with which Taylor approaches secular culture.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout *A Secular Age*, Taylor raises the question by mentioning the refrain to the Peggy Lee song, “Is that all there is?” to describe the kind of interior sense of unfulfilled longing that many people living in a secular age face.

Taylor is also clear in stating that he aims to mount an argument against a certain set of interlocutors. Rather than the prevailing narratives in secularization theory that Taylor calls the subtraction stories of secularization (2007: 1-22) – that is, when we become modern, we naturally shed religion, which is merely a kind of childish holdover from the past and a psychological crutch of sorts – Taylor seeks to show that secularity is not simply a default and benign fact of our cultures in light of the scientific revolution but that it is, rather, the product of a long line of decisions made by and unintended historical consequences of those decisions, such as the Protestant Reformation and the Romantic Expressivist movement. Some may understandably contest the degree to which he lays the blame for secularization at the feet of the Reformers; nonetheless, this is part of Taylor's narrative. He undertakes this historical excavation of the development of secularity to serve his larger goal, which is, arguably, to find a way to make room for faith again in late modernity. Indeed, Taylor wants to suggest that is neither naïve nor defeatist nor dishonest to have faith in a secular age, though, it is challenging and complicated.

In examining the phenomenon of secularity, Taylor observes that many people in the West today feel, in general, a certain way about faith and religion – indifferent and dismissive, at the least – with a sense that there is nothing remarkable about this way of thinking, and that it is in fact the only way to think if one is truly self-reflective and honest. Taylor aims to turn that understanding on its head and to show that secularity is actually an option that has been centuries in the making, and to not interrogate it is to allow it to determine one's approach to faith in an unthinking manner (2007: 12-14). If we transpose Taylor's insight to the domain of contemporary Catholic mission, the church might take the approach of trying to understand the secularity of the modern western world, even if and even as she may develop a genealogy that challenges it.

Additionally, a hermeneutic of charity towards the world rather than suspicion is an important element of the encounter between the church and the world. Rather than begin mission with a critique of where the world falls short and assertions that the church alone can help the world avoid hellfire and brimstone – this is, of course, a hyperbolic presentation of some traditional forms of missionary approach – it seems necessary today to start with a humble affirmation by the church of the face of God in the world already. Sacramentality,<sup>3</sup> a principle of Catholic theology which emphasizes the goodness of creation, calls one to seek the good in everything that exists, including secular society. In this way, a Taylorian approach to mission in a secular age exemplifies the Catholic principle of sacramentality.

Nonetheless, compare this with narratives that emphasize the fallenness of the world and one will see that both are important truths about the reality which we inhabit. Although Taylor is the phenomenologist, he seems, ironically, to need another thinker, such as Balthasar, to flesh out the other part of phenomenal reality, its brokenness, and how the church may help heal the brokenness of the world.

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<sup>3</sup> Sacramentality is the church's way of naming grace perceivable in the world, apart from formally recognized sacraments, the latter of which vary in number from one church to another and are often described as the expressly visible signs of God's invisible grace.

Taylor is not simply positive about the modern world however, and this discerning approach to the cultural values of western modernity is a further element of Taylor's work that is helpful for renewing Catholic mission in a secular age. *Sources of the Self, The Ethics of Authenticity*,<sup>4</sup> and *A Catholic Modernity?* to name a few of Taylor's key works, are helpful in framing a picture of the modern moral soul: since Taylor is well-known to be a leading interrogator of modernity, one might approach him as a cultural anthropologist of modern selves in the West, a diagnostician of what in secular modern persons and societies the church may affirm and celebrate, and what she may challenge.

Taylor's many accounts of modern persons in the West today include the following praiseworthy features: i) profound benevolence and desire to improve the human lot through the pursuit of justice, ii) an affirmation of ordinary life, and iii) an ethic of authenticity. Taylor observes that the degree of charitable giving to strangers that occurs today is unparalleled in the history of humanity (2007: 371). He notes that there is also a deep affirmation of ordinary life, which came about through the Reformation's rejection of holiness as the purview of religious elites only and widened the option of sainthood to include and be available to everyone, religious and married, non-clerical workers alike (2007: 370-72). Finally, the ethic of authenticity, while it can lead to a radical and reductionistic subjectivism and relativism, can be, in its best sense, an approach to life that calls one to live truthfully and creatively, appropriating tradition rather than simply adhering to it without critical engagement (1991: 13-30).

While an approach of humble understanding and discernment may be some of the advantages of a Taylorian approach to mission, some have also charged Taylor with being too sanguine about the goods of modernity: do the gains indeed outweigh the losses? Is the modern, secular world as worthy of affirmation as Taylor seems to suggest it is? On the other hand, in addition to an openness to understanding secularity, and helping to name the good that may be found in secular societies and persons, Taylor also helps the church to discern the ways in which secular societies suffer. The malaises he diagnoses famously include radical subjectivism, instrumentalism in thinking, and political atomism (1991: 1-12). These, arguably, give the church something to address, something to heal, and something to identify as the suffering of the world to which she should offer pastoral care, and be in solidarity in the struggle against, rather than stand in judgment of.

But even with a keen awareness and ability to name the limits and losses that attend the transition to modernity, Taylor can only take the project of remaking Catholic mission so far: as a western philosopher writing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, he does not launch into a full proclamation of the gospel or articulate a theology of mission for today. Indeed, he is quite critical of the traditional emphasis on the scriptural injunction to "Go, and make disciples of all nations" (1999: 14), and some have argued that he couches his Catholic values rather too deeply in his work (Kerr: 136-58; Marsden) to even very effectively clear the ground for a theological partner to complete. It is arguable that his critique of church authority undercuts the point he makes in his earlier hermeneutic work that underscores how much

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<sup>4</sup> In Canada, and as listed in the bibliography, *The Ethics of Authenticity* is published under the title *The Malaise of Modernity* (1991).

broader frameworks and horizons shape the very individuality that we feel we have the freedom to express (Chau: 88-94). Despite all these critiques, however, Taylor's attunement to the complexity and existential tensions within modernity around religion ("cross-pressures") make him an invaluable dialogue partner on the subject matter of mission in a secular age.

The attempt to understand how to do mission in a secular age would benefit, finally, from Taylor's assessment that organized Christianity itself contributed to the process of secularization in the West. Had Christianity been truer to its core belief that God is Love, and less driven to what Taylor considers code morality (2007: 497-504), perhaps Western societies would not have leaned into secular atheistic humanism in the way that they have. On this point, Taylor begins an implicit critique that Balthasar drives home, which is that in order for the Church to have the moral authority that attracts modern Western persons to become her members, she must first show herself to be embedded in and overflowing with the life of Christ. In other words, there is a call for mission to begin with conversion within the heart of the Church herself, and as this conversion makes itself visible, the Church will reveal the moral authority that ably accompanies persons and calls for obedience in a way that disrupts and trumps the individualistic quest for authenticity. As Balthasar asserts in the title of one of his most notable books, "Love Alone is Credible" (2004).

In short, the Catholic Church could learn from Taylor to begin with an approach of humility and curiosity toward secular societies and to ask, "What is secularity?" rather than "Down with secularism!" It could move into a mode of questioning that Saint Ignatius of Loyola made famous, namely, "What is the good that is in what is being expressed by the other?" Catholic missiologists and the Catholic Church have recognized for some time now that the church does not simply bring God to peoples who have never experienced or known God before, but also finds God in societies already. This is certainly true of Western societies as well, who are better subject to new evangelization or re-evangelization rather than original evangelization. This hermeneutic of charity should be attended by a discernment of what is there in the culture that is a seed of the gospel as well as what is in need of transformation.

### **Refiguring the Church and the Meaning of Personhood**

If what Taylor provides is a helpful approach to contextualizing secularization in Western cultures, Balthasar is instructive about how the church should understand herself as she orients herself in mission to a secular society. Simply put, Balthasar's ecclesiology and his anthropology complement and supplement Taylor's philosophy of secularity in some key ways.

According to Balthasar, the Catholic Church has many aspects and many forms of self-understanding and identification. In *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*, one of many of Balthasar's works on the church, Balthasar examines the key constellation of persons surrounding Jesus: Peter, James, John, and his mother Mary. From each of these he draws out a dimension of the church: the Petrine dimension of the church is the hierarchical, structural aspect of the church, the Jamesian dimension is the law of the church, the Johannine aspect is the church as love, and the Marian aspect is the church as humble handmaiden of the Lord, who is simply open and disposed to the Lord. The burden of the aforementioned work is to underscore that the church in its institutional and hierarchical mode is a necessary profile of the church. The hierarchical institution is not, however, the most fundamental identity of the

church for Balthasar. While the church's structure is part of the essential nature of the church, the most basic and important profile of the church is that of humble servant. Balthasar takes this from the model of the person of Mary, whose person epitomizes what it means to be the humble handmaiden of the Lord. In Mary's humble and total receptivity to the will of God, Mary gives birth to the life of Christ in the world (1992: 351-60). The church is called to do likewise.

Balthasar, then, may be said to help the Catholic Church today to see that she is called to do three things: first, she needs to recognize that her most basic relationship is with Jesus Christ. For her to be truthful in her existence, she needs to dwell in contemplation and in prayer, on the will of the Lord and the call of Christ. Only in attending to Jesus Christ will the church live out her true nature, which is neither ultimate nor independent. In fact, Balthasar would go as far as to describe the church as parasitic on Christ – that is, the Church receives her very life from Christ (1992: 355). The example of Mary, who humbly waits on the Lord and is disposed to do His will, is the Church that loves unsparingly and, in this way, effectively evangelizes in a secular age.

The church that lives her life from the foundation of a deep and unwavering union with Christ is the church that lives according to the reign of God, which is a vastly different reality from that of the immanent frame. The church, God's people, is called to witness to the revealed truth that God's freedom makes human freedom possible rather than competes with it, and God's desire is to bring all that exists into union with God, that is, with Love itself. Time and human relationships have a different texture when lived in the context of total self-giving love: life is not about self-preservation or competition, but communion and service. If Taylor helps to flesh out the sacramental dimension of Catholicism in a secular age, Balthasar provides a fresh vision of how the Catholic Church may live up to its call to be prophetic (1991, 1992, 1996). Finally, as the church models humble receptivity to God and a life of communion and service, she begins to shift from a sense of herself as hierarchical institution primarily to that of a body that transforms all her members to become radiant with love, authentic – that is, a communion of saints (see Balthasar 1996).

Balthasar's anthropology also aids the quest to chart out a vision of Catholic mission for today's individualistic society driven by self-expression. According to Balthasar, a person becomes who they truly are in and through having an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ (1990: 302-11). It is only in being vulnerable to the call of Christ that one discerns and receives who one truly is. Balthasar believes that it is only in relation to Christ that one receives one's ecclesial mission, one's sense of how to be of self-giving service with and for others in a sustained and committed way (1992: 263-82). Balthasar underscores his conception of ecclesial personhood with the example of Peter: Simon, who was formerly Simon the fisherman, becomes Peter, the head of the church, only in and through responding to Christ's invitation and receiving his vocation to lead the people of God (see Balthasar 1986).

### **A New Shape for Catholic Mission: Supporting the Quest for Authenticity**

In a secular world where so many people search and struggle to find the meaning and purpose of their lives, the church needs to propose her one true and singular response to those concerns and desires: Jesus Christ. While social justice and life issues are parts of her mandate, the church is unique and distinct from other humanitarian institutions and organizations in

proposing Christ as the heart of her work. If we consider the image of the church as humble servant and, additionally, the malaises of modernity that encompass a striving for authenticity, Balthasar contributes clarity to the shape of Catholic mission by showing that the church needs, then, to become a community that journeys with people in their desire to find their true selves.

Nor is this a foreign or obscure conception of the church's mission. The church is called to make her members holy; that is the goal of discipleship. One could say that "holiness" is the church's word for authenticity. One's true self is who one is in Christ and who one can be in Christ. Thus, a possible shape for contemporary Catholic mission is that of a church retrieving her task of forming saints, of making disciples. When the church takes up the challenge of formation again and welcomes and supports anyone and everyone who is on a quest to be their most authentic self, the church will become an attractive witness to faith and an effective missionary community of faith anew. This formation and support means concretely helping people with their families, their friendships, their work, their leisure, and their patterns of consumption, and striking the delicate chord of unconditional love that involves prophetic guidance.

While these are some of the ways in which Balthasar fleshes out the Christological center of mission, it is arguable that his theology is limited, particularly on the point of properly attending to the fact of religious diversity. Balthasar tends to be dismissive of other religions, crafting in some instances, in *The Glory of the Lord*, for example, a sweeping meta-narrative of how all the great world religions can be understood as mere precursors foreshadowing and culminating in the true religion of Jesus Christ (1982: 483-511). So, while Balthasar may provide a certain clarity on the point of the content and heart of Christian mission, Taylor may be the one to help Balthasar to nuance his idea of mission in the concrete.

The above proposal for contemporary Catholic mission today may be summarized as proposing support for the quest for authenticity and enabling persons to see that it is Christ who makes truly loving persons and truly authentic persons. According to Balthasar, only God can tell a person who he or she is. Even the most loving fellow human being – Balthasar names one's mother as an example – cannot give another their mission (1992: 205-7). That rests with God alone. The degree to which the Church can invite and foster friendship with God is the degree to which the Church faithfully lives out her mission. Paradoxical though it may seem, transforming the world requires first the inner transformation of the Church. It involves replacing habits of arid judgment with habits of loving discernment. It includes expressing an affirmation of the goodness of the desire to be authentic, as well as a challenge to the claim that a secular worldview, with its emphasis on time "unmoored from higher times" and immanence, will get one there. While not a comprehensive tactical strategy for how to shape mission for a secular age, – indeed, living out the gospel call to mission can never be achieved through following a strategy, – a focus on Christ, persons, modern virtues, modern struggles, compassion, discernment, and time is, at least, a place to begin.

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