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Ministering in the midst of competing worldviews

Trevor O'Reggio



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Our society finds itself awash in the sea of secularism, drifting amid waves of meaninglessness. Permanent, trustworthy intellectual and spiritual moorings seem a thing of the past. Relativity has replaced constancy and certainty, and change seems to be the only constant. In an ever increasing number of minds, God is reduced to nothing. He is no longer a personal, all-powerful transcendent being, but a mere influence.

The eternal verities that once undergirded our society are now cast aside as outdated myths and legends that have nothing to say to us. Consequently, people are increasingly in search of themselves. But having cast aside divinely revealed truth, the search has become fruitless.

Loneliness stalks the population and is most present and persistent in our cities, where the population is densest. Husbands and wives may live together for years, apparently unable to fulfill the need for companionship in one another.

A naturalistic worldview has replaced the theistic. The famous American astronomer Carl Sagan asserts, "The cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be."¹

Humans are now considered as mere complex machines whose personalities may be explained in terms of the interaction of chemical and physical properties. History is

seen to be a series of purposeless events, or just cycles of action with no definable destiny.

Right and wrong are no longer grounded in the personal character of an unchanging God. Truth is simply what humans think, feel, and perceive.

Secular humanism is now the preferred religion. It is the prevailing and the underlying orientation governing what is taught in many of the schools and universities of our time. While this humanism affirms principles deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, it vehemently denies the verity of the Source of these ideas. Its embrace of a broad, conflicting pluralistic spectrum of outlooks allows for all points of view. But then those embracing such contradictions are naturally forced to ask themselves how they should integrate the confusing, contradictory world of ideas that result. Obviously all contradictions cannot be reconciled. It is no wonder the modern human suffers from a kind of permanent spiritual schizophrenia.

Sweep of secular worldviews

The *Secular Human Manifesto* audaciously asserts, "We find insufficient evidence for belief in the existence of a supernatural; it is either meaningless or irrelevant to the question of survival and fulfillment of the human race. As nontheists, we begin with humans not God, nature not deity. Nature may indeed be broader and deeper than we now know; any new discoveries, however, will but enlarge our knowledge of the natural. . . . But we can discover no divine purpose or providence for the human species. While there is much that we do not know, humans are responsible for what we are or will become. No deity will save us; we must save ourselves."²

Another pervasive philosophy or outlook on the rise is the New Age perspective. Together with naturalism, it is influencing and displacing traditional religion. Stanley Krippner, a scientist in the Dream laboratory of Maimonides Medical Center in New York, writes: "The New Age . . . is a mindset whose time has come. Most who believed parapsychic events were either fact or a distinct possibility were convinced by personal experience, not by research. For some reason, today many people are having experiences that they interpret as paranormal. . . . More and more people are having [convincing, influential experiences through] meditation,

hypnosis, and psychedelic drugs. More and more people are paying attention to sleep and dreams. All these experiences provide fertile ground for paranormal events."³

The New Age worldview is here. In spite of advances in technology and science and the pervasiveness of Naturalism on our society, humans now thirst for the supernatural and the paranormal. There is a desire for an altered state of consciousness.

The New Age philosophy declares that everything and everyone has the "god essence" within them. All that is needed is a change of consciousness to awaken that inborn divinity.

New Age theories have infiltrated the major fields of learning, entertainment, and even sports. In the field of psychology and psychiatry we find Aldous Huxley, Stanislav Graf, John Lilly, and Timothy Leary. In sociology and cultural history we have George Leonard and Theodore Roszak.

William Irwin Thompson's books *Passages About Earth* and *At the Edge of History* are laced with New Age theory. In anthropology we have Carlos Castaneda's books *The Teachings of Don Juan*, *A Separate Reality*, and *Journey to Ixtlan*.

In the health field, especially in holistic medicine, New Age theories now dominate. In the movie industry the work of Stephen Spielberg in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and George Lucas's *Star Wars* series are just a few examples of New Age philosophy.

One of the most colorful and enduring movie stars of our time, Shirley MacLaine, is an ardent proponent of New Age doctrine. Her books, *Out on a Limb*, *Dancing in the Light*, and *It's All in the Play* have sold millions of copies, testifying to the public's appetite for New Age philosophy.

Speaking relevantly to a secular world

As a Seventh-day Adventist minister I sometimes feel overwhelmed by the contemporary challenge to speak with credibility, relevance, and effectiveness to a person who may have

been affected by just one of the two orientations we have briefly exposed so far.

I find myself tending to speak only to people of my own worldview. I know I have a responsibility to engage others, but sometimes I don't know how to communicate so that what I say has the kind of impact I want.

In my own struggle to speak meaningfully to the secular mind and be relevant in an age of skepticism, I am putting forth a number of proposals as a starting point: (1) My message must be timeless and universal; (2) I must speak to people's deepest needs everywhere; (3) I must answer the ultimate questions that everyone struggles with; (4) I must present God as the fulfillment of the deep void of the human heart and the only One who can bring stability, peace, security, and love into human life; (5) I must point out that the continuing pervasiveness of war, riots, racism, poverty, and other forms of evil in our world is proof enough of the failure of what is merely human; (6) My life must be exemplary. I must live out Christ's ministry, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and speaking hope to the hopeless; and (7) I must commit myself to the moral education especially of the young so that they can carry on the legacy of truth to the next generation.

Wrestling with ultimate questions

People of all ages have wrestled with the "ultimate questions": Where did I come from? (origin); what am I doing here? (purpose); and where am I going? (destiny). Since the dawn of time, philosophers and teachers have tried to answer these questions, and sometimes their answers touch on various aspects of the truth, but they still prove limited, inadequate, and insufficient.

People are still searching for meaning, purpose, and destiny. Every generation approaches this quest in a different way, but the quest is always absorbing. This is where my ministry

becomes especially relevant.

First, if I have been called to provide some satisfying answers to these questions, I must fulfill that calling. If I have been called to provide answers to these questions in the lives of the people, I can begin by picturing a humanity created in the image of a loving God who is transcendent, all powerful, omnipotent, yet ever present and deeply caring. This will go far in satisfying many in their desire to know their origin.

If I can effectively portray the fact that we were all created for the glory of such a God, and that He has a plan for each life, including theirs, and that He is coming back for them, perhaps that will help to answer their questions of purpose and destiny.

In whatever form and fashion I do it, I know that I must do it in order to be relevant and meaningful in the faith I share with the world in which I find myself and do my ministry.

Second, I must commit myself to be God's witness in this world. Sproul said it best: "Our job is to make the invisible reign of Jesus visible. The world is shrouded in darkness. Nothing is visible in the dark. No wonder that we are called to be the light of the world. Every single one of us has a mission. We have all been sent to bear witness to Christ. That means simply that we are all missionaries."⁴

As Harvey Cox said so eloquently in his book, *The Secular City*, the "church is not a building, a budget, a program, an organization. It is a people in motion, an 'eventful movement' in which barriers are being struck down and a radically new community beyond the divisiveness of inherited labels and stereotypes is emerging . . . the real job of . . . churches . . . is to discern God's reconciliation is breaking in and identify themselves with this action."⁵

As Jesus came to us in the flesh, so we must exhibit a special kind of incarnation ministry to the world. We must feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, comfort

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the grieving, bring hope to the despairing, and encourage the faint of heart. Our power and relevancy is not really found merely in well-articulated doctrinal tenets of theoretical faith but in lives lived to the fullest, motivated by love, and poured out in unselfish service for the humanity about us.

Embracing the world, not worldliness

The desire to maintain relevance does not mean a blindly conforming to the world or irresponsibly accommodating the prevailing philosophies of those I'm trying to reach. But I live in this world, and I cannot escape the reality of this.

Our task is to escape not the secular, but secularism. We simply must embrace the world without embracing its worldliness. We must not attempt the absurd task of syncretism, where some Christians have tried to combine Christianity and secularism.

Sproul is correct when he says, "The root concepts of Christianity cannot be unified with the root concepts of secularism. If we seek to breed them the result will be a grotesque hybrid. It will be sterile, like a mule, powerless to reproduce. If we seek to effect a synthesis between radically conflicting world views, we must inevitably submerge one into the other. The result of such bastardization can be neither Christianity nor secularism. If a Christian buys into secularism his world view is no longer Christian. If a secularist buys into Christianity he is no longer a secularist."⁶

Our relevance must be grounded in the changeless and eternal principles of the revelation of God in the Bible, whose climactic revelation is, of course, the Word made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. The special revelation of God as revealed in Scriptures is our primary source.

In one of his classes, theologian Edward Heppenstall once said, "There is a God, but more than that He is a good God, loving, kind, and merciful. Secondly, He has revealed Himself to me." That simple knowledge and experience is to be our ever-burgeoning starting point.

Are we relevant today as preachers in the modern age of secularism? Do we have that capability? Absolutely! Because human beings still need God as they did from the moment time began.

In spite of our repeated denials and the suppression of our spirituality, we have a need that only God can fulfill. No wonder Augustine said "Thou has created us for thyself and our souls shall not find rest until they have found you." People everywhere still want to know a God they can love and trust. God, their Creator, has written this upon the fiber of our being.

My role, then, as a minister and as a preacher is to present the message of a loving God in word and deed in such a way that people will see His reality and their need of Him and come to Him for the fulfillment of that need.

The relationship between relevance and authenticity

Bringing meaning and relevancy to an unbelieving world demands that I live an exemplary life. There must be no cognitive dissonance or superimposition of non-integratable values. There must be no gap between what I say and what I do. As far as possible, my stated and practiced values should be the same. My life should follow the model of Jesus Christ Himself, as closely as possible. My religion must be authentic, believable, and creditable.

A sermon lived is better than one preached. A sermon is never actually proclaimed unless it is accompanied and authenticated by an authentic Christian life. The fact is that such authenticity or personal integrity has easily as much to do with the perceived relevancy of our proclamation

as a logically and theologically sound presentation of the gospel.

In order to accomplish this, I must jealously guard what Gordon McDonald calls "my inner world" in his book, *Ordering Your Private World*. "There is a great need for this especially among those who engage in the Lord's work. I don't want to have that sinkhole syndrome, where everything in the outside looks good but the inner core is empty, devoid of God's presence. I want to come to the point in my life where the development and maintenance of a strong inner world becomes the most important single function of [my] existence."⁷

Anne Morrow Lindbergh in her book, *The Gift from the Sea*, said it beautifully: "I want first of all . . . to be at peace with myself. I want a singleness of eye, a purity of intention, a central core to my life that will enable me to carry out these obligations and activities as well as I can. I want, in fact, to borrow from the language of the saints—to live 'in grace' as much of the time as possible. I am not using this term in a strictly theological sense. By grace I mean an inner harmony. . . . I am seeking perhaps what Socrates asked for in the prayer from the *Phaedrus* when he said, 'May the outward and inward man be at one.' I would like to achieve a state of inner spiritual grace from which I could function and give as I was meant to in the eye of God."⁸

The power of a Christian life well lived will cause even the most determined atheist to consider the possibility that there may be a God after all, even when he or she cannot be swayed by rational arguments. ■

- 1 Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), 4.
- 2 <<http://www.americanhumanist.org/about/manifesto2.html>>
- 3 Stanley Knappner quoted in W. James Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 159.
- 4 R. C. Sproul, *Lifeviews* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1986), 38.
- 5 Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), 226.
- 6 Sproul, 38.
- 7 Gordon McDonald, *Ordering Your Private World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1984), 25.
- 8 Anne Morrow Lindbergh, *The Gift from the Sea* (New York: Pantheon, 1955), 23, 24.