Faith in Culture

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Abstract

This article, working within a sociological framework, discusses the issues and challenges arising at the church-culture interface, which are of central importance for ecclesial credibility, many of which came up in the 2012 Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization. It suggests that, while there are evident problems with postmodern culture, the key problem lies within the Church itself, in the disconnect between contemporary modes of cultural production and the dominant mode of transmission of the Christian faith. The remedy would be a presentation of the gospel and an ecclesial witness that is deeply respectful of individuals searching for authentic ways of living and that invites and enables them to find in a renewed church the path to true freedom.

Introduction

The 2012 Synod of Bishops in Rome on the issue of the New Evangelization located the nub of the problem of the transmission of the faith at the church-culture interface. The fact that this was the first synod to re-visit the theme of a previous one – that of 1974 and Paul VI's *Evangelii nuntiandi* – and that the current Year of Faith repeats that declared by Paul VI in 1967, could be taken as acknowledging that something in the Church's relationship with culture isn't working. The preparatory documents were very precise about this. The new evangelization is a distinct pastoral response, different from first or *ad gentes* evangelization, and it addresses a particular historical situation: 'primarily the Christian West . . . the baptized in our communities who are experiencing *a new existential and cultural situation* which, in fact, has imperilled

their faith and their witness' (*Instrumentum Laboris* [IL] n. 86 – my italics).[1]

That there is a crisis enveloping the Church at the present time is a truism – although it's perhaps wise to keep a sense of perspective, as in the comment attributed to the Scottish composer James MacMillan that 'the Catholic Church has been in crisis ever since the cock crowed twice'! But how the 'crisis' is to be understood and inter-preted can vary greatly, both sociologically and pastorally. This article explores the various interpretations and examines the challenges, the difficulties and the ambiguities in order to assess the realism – the sociological chances – of suggestions as to the path to the future.

The article is in three parts:

- How the faith-culture crisis affects the Church – a descriptive section
- The deep character of the crisis – an analysis
- The ecclesiological shape of a response – looking to the future

Part 1

Strangers in the land: ecclesial effects of the faith-culture crisis

What the crisis puts in question is the capacity of the Church as it currently exists to be an effective witness to the gospel before today's culture. The Church's credibility is at issue. The crisis, in other words, is first of all *ecclesial*. Indeed, Cardinal Schönborn of Vienna said bluntly some months ago that the present form of the Church is passing away and that an entirely new kind of Church will be needed in the future.[2]

Some might still hold, however, that the cause of the crisis is simply the 'enemies of truth' – be they outside or within the Church. But that kind of embattled stance – blaming the culture essentially – is hardly convincing given the long history of resilience by churches and individual Christians in the face of political and cultural opposition and persecution. It is, nevertheless, an easy and comforting register to lapse into. I recently read a homily by a conservative-leaning bishop denouncing 'the false wisdom of the age'. But then, recognizing the allure of that wisdom, he commented rather mournfully: 'While the rulers of this age persuasively tell stories, we tend to issue documents, full of truth, but unread.' He was saying more than he probably

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[1] 2012 Synod *Instrumentum laboris*, available at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20120619_instrumentum-xiii_en.html

[2] *The Tablet*, 21.01.12, p. 27

intended, because his comment reveals a large part of the problem – the problem of cultural disconnectedness.

This disconnect came through in the synodal documentation when it spoke of 'the eclipse of God' . . . the "interior desert", an image used by Pope Benedict XVI to represent the current human condition which is caught in a world that has virtually eliminated from view any question of God' (IL n. 86). There's no doubt that what's bearing in on the Church at present is unprecedented. To put it at its starkest, the new situation is that for the first time life without God is a realistic cultural option *for whole societies*, and even – it can be imagined – for the whole world. 'Imagine no religion; it's easy if you try'. Of course, we're not there yet. Neither theoretical nor practical atheism has quite brought about the death of God, but it has made God seem mortal! The phenomenon of the 'new atheists' (Dawkins *et al*) is remarkable not for its intellectual challenge but for the purchase it has in the culture. These antagonists surf a wave of deepening public scepticism and aversion to religion. And it's quite clear at the societal level that the old myths, the old narratives drawn from the Scriptures no longer hold power; they no longer stir the imagination across the generations; they've lost cultural resonance and died; and we can read the melancholy tale in Callum Brown's *The Death of Christian Britain*.[3]

But, it would be an exaggeration to claim that the silencing of the question of God is absolute – certainly not in the interior of the Church, but not in the culture either. It's easy to point out the contra-indications: the still faithful practice of many; the burgeoning in parts of the country, especially London, of many faith groups, both Christian and other world faiths, so that London now has higher rates of religious practice than the rest of the country, reversing the usual pattern of urban decline versus rural fidelity; the fascination with new religious movements and the fashion for 'spirituality'.[4] Even at public policy level, it's clear that the opinion of religion as a purely private affair is just that – an opinion, a political option promoted very vigorously by some. But just going by the evidence of the Papal Visit two years ago and its main 'secular' event – the address in Westminster Hall – it's clear that, in terms of actual socio-political reality, religion and faith remain a genuinely public affair even in our post-modern culture.

Nevertheless, religious faith no longer enjoys the kind of social familiarity and ready acceptance it once had; it now occupies a more awkward place in the social frame and in the cultural consciousness.

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[3] Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularization 1800–2000,* London: Routledge, 2000

[4] These trends are charted in the recent publication, David Goodhew (ed), *Church Growth in Britain: 1980 to the Present*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2012

So, it's newly vulnerable. This is quite baffling for believers – but not only for believers; many others feel adrift in modern culture as well. Behind the brash self-confidence of our techno-savvy world there's the feeling of being on shifting ground. This can be very disturbing – for young people in particular, with the difficult task of 'organizing themselves in the world', of finding their place. Cultural change becomes very unsettling when it starts moving the ground that you've always taken for granted as the sure basis for life and faith: community, neighbourliness, family, religious practice, regard for biblical standards, responsible sexual mores, thrift, prudent finances, stable employment, pride and responsibility in work; and the shift, above all, to an emphasis on personal life and fulfilment and individual autonomy. All this is especially confusing in the absence of any deep discernment, sifting what is true and false, and when the best or prudent course of action is far from obvious. Discerning the signs of the times isn't so easy.

So, where does the crisis leave the Church and religion in this culture? I think it's actually quite paradoxical – a paradox of absence and continuing presence – and we're a bit schizophrenic as a result. London may have higher rates of religious practice than elsewhere in the country, but Londoners are also the least likely to describe themselves as Christian or religious.[5] So, is religion in decline? Or still very much in evidence? Is faith marginalized? Or surprisingly influential? Is secularization sweeping all before it? Or has it been checked? Are Christians now being 'persecuted' – in Britain, in America? Or are they still accorded an undue place? You can answer yes or no to all those questions, depending which side of the bed you got out of. And you'll find bishops and religious leaders and academics switching sides depending which train of thought they happen to be on. Faith in the Culture, in other words, has many faces – it's Janus-faced.

This cultural Janus face is a social dialectic. It's tempting to say that one side or the other is the *real* truth – religion is either socially marginal or it retains social influence – but then we flip flop to the other pole. Our stances are not dispassionate or objective. Ideology and personal attachments come into play. If you think religion should flourish you'll point up that it's still a force to be reckoned with – or alternatively, sound the alarm that it's being marginalized. If you're a foe of religion, you will either dismiss it as intellectually bankrupt – or rail against its staying power. Richard Dawkins does both.

This is the context in which the Gospel, as always, aspires to be a leaven, a spur for transformation. It has to meet this culture in depth.

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[5] Goodhew 2012, p. 254

Part 2

The real character of the crisis

What are the specific features that mark the culture and the religious-cultural crisis today? This preoccupation in the thinking about New Evangelization makes for common ground with sociologists and social theorists, not all of whom are hostile or sceptical about matters of faith, and many indeed are fruitful conversation partners. Charles Taylor, who will be my main guide in this section, charts the historical trajectory of the shift from a religious to a secular age and the impact this has had on the 'conditions of belief'.[6] Danièle Hervieu-Léger from France analyses how believing is transformed in a pluralist culture, with consequent diversification of beliefs, both religious and secular.[7] Grace Davie proposes the cultural forms that contemporary religious belief takes – believing but not belonging, belonging but not believing, vicarious believing, and so on.[8] José Casanova argues for the continued public character of religions, but on condition that they accommodate the fundamental structural shifts that characterise late modernity (although such structural or societal change isn't exactly identical with cultural change).[9] In theology there are important insights from, for example, Lieven Boeve in identifying the present cultural moment as de-traditionalisation and, following Metz, one of 'interruption'.[10] For John Milbank too the problem lies at the church-culture interface, even though he takes the very definite line that it is the modern social structure, and also sociology, that is the problem – an illegitimate encroachment onto theological territory.[11]

Assessing the cultural crisis and taking into account the evangelical goal of social transformation – the evangelizing of the culture as well as the individuals in the culture – the first thing to say is that transformation as such isn't the problem. It's rather the name of the game. Postmodern culture is always in process, always changing, open to transformation. It's driven by technology and consumerism – the great engines of change. And social forces like globalization and migration are continuously giving society a radical makeover. Society has become a constant 'work in progress'. This isn't to say that

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[6] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age,* Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007

[7] Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory,* London: Polity Press, 2000

[8] Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945,* Oxford: Blackwell, 1994

[9] José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1994

[10] Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval*, London: Continuum, 2007

[11] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990

postmodern culture is eager for transformation by the Gospel. Parts of it may be. But it's very varied – from deepest secularity to wackiest spirituality – and while it may not totally silence the question of God it is in most part religiously tone deaf to traditional Christianity.

Dialectics of culture and faith

The Janus face to religion – its cultural decline versus its staying power – has dogged the sociological debate about secularization for the last forty years, and made it largely a dialogue of the deaf. José Casanova could have put the controversy to bed with his magisterial *Public Religions in the Modern World* in which he made very careful distinctions about the meanings of secularization and clarified which of them is well founded (i.e., secularization as institutional differentiation). But the dispute refuses to die. The recently published *Church Growth in Britain: 1980 to the Present*, edited by David Goodhew, makes a spirited case for religion not only surviving but reviving, and it gives secularization theory a good kicking, but the evidence does not go as far as to show religion being reinstated in the same social and cultural influence it once had.

The most influential recent contributor to the debate has been Charles Taylor. His project in *A Secular Age* is to explain the transition from a culture where it was virtually impossible not to live by religious faith (1500) to one where religious faith – even for the staunchest believer – is one option among others, and where unbelief is now the default option of many, perhaps the majority (i.e., in the West, 2000). His detailed survey of the past five centuries maps the historical process. We can take up two points in Taylor's analysis: his demolition of what he calls 'subtraction stories' to account for the arrival of the secular, and his analysis of the new 'conditions of belief' in the modern era.

Taylor has been criticized for an over-lengthy narrative, but his close reading of the historical record does serve to undermine the received wisdom about secularity and secularization. He disposes of the 'subtraction account' which sees secularity as emerging from the steady stripping away of mythological elements in the culture until the secure truth about reality and humanity is finally revealed, with faith consequently confined to ever more restricted territory until it is finally forced into ultimate retreat – along Dover Beach, as it were.[12]

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[12] The subtraction account, in Taylor's words: ". . . stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process – modernity or secularity – is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along,

Taylor rejects this zero-sum game. He shows that the social order we inhabit today is the result of 'new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices' (p. 22), which have allowed for 'alternative possible reference points for fullness' (p. 27); i.e., alternative reference points for that in which human 'wellbeing' is achieved. In this relocation of 'fullness', an erstwhile 'enchanted world' with its 'porous selves' and a natural-supernatural societal frame becomes displaced by a sense of the 'buffered self' and an 'immanent frame' of what constitutes the real.

These two things – the buffered self and the immanent frame – are now the determinants of the conditions of belief according to Taylor; they set the parameters in which belief and human aspiration are culturally expressed. But this doesn't mean that only non-religious and non-transcendental reference points for human fullness can now be minted. The historical process has been new invention, not discarding old ways. So newly framed religious understandings and practices can – and do – come through as well.[13] We see this across the centuries – Protestant devotionalism and counter-Reformation Catholicism, the Oxford movement in the 19th century and restored Catholicism after the ravages of the Napoleonic era, especially the exponential growth of religious orders.

What Taylor identifies as new in the new conditions of belief in the secular age is not only that religious belief survives, but that the re-articulated religious impulse now co-exists, under considerable pressure, alongside the secular impulse. I think this can be taken a step further, and that these two impulses can be said to depend on each other. In other words the religious and the secular, in how they self-define, each make reference to the other.

This is clear enough with the term 'secular' itself. It's actually very difficult to give a positive content to this term beyond the 'non-religious'. It's not quite the same with 'religious' because the term and the reality pre-date the emergence of the secular as now understood. But belief too is bound up in some way with unbelief: 'I believe, Lord; help thou my unbelief' (Mark 9: 25). Belief and unbelief exist in a sort of mutual dependency, not as opposite shores of the human spirit. We can see this with reference to contemporary forms of atheism, which owe a great deal to their religious (usually Christian) origins – and the funny paradox that it makes a difference whether

but had been impeded by what is now set aside. Against this kind of story, I will steadily be arguing that Western modernity, including its secularity, is the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices, and can't be explained in terms of perennial features of human life." (p. 22)

[13] For another discussion of this feature of contemporary belief, see Danielle Hervieu-Leger *Religion as a Chain of* Memory, Oxford: Polity Press, 2000.

you're a Catholic atheist or a Protestant atheist! So too faith, our ways of believing, are tied up with the prevalent modes of unbelief.

This cultural dialectic can be seen as a key feature of late modern society itself. There is a *structural* inter-relationship here – of secularity and faith, belief and unbelief – which enters into the actual make-up of the culture, so that neither secularist nor religious can lay claim to society as completely its own. This, I think, is where Taylor's analysis finally leads.

This may be saying no more than that in the modern social structure there's a specific kind of ongoing production – not just reproduction – of values. This is a key aspect of institutional differentiation; that as social sectors become more autonomous – education, health care, business, the economy, religion – they begin to craft values semi-autonomously. By values here we mean the social expression or formulation of social and cultural norms; and of course such 'values', taken as substantive, can be very questionable. The norms or values that emerge in this social process are inevitably in very strong tension with each other, especially the values that the religious sector brings forth on transcendental grounds versus the pragmatically based values of other sectors.

In this context, for Christian faith to be credible – or before that, to be even audible – it has to be seen engaging with *how* values are culturally produced – in the media, the economy, popular culture. This also involves engaging with the value production that goes on within the Catholic community itself; that is to say, the new phenomenon of contemporary Catholics being, in general, less prepared to accept values directly from authority and intent on making up their own minds (with or without taking on board the authority view). What's not sufficient – not now *credible* – neither internally in the Church nor as a social witness, is just 'handing down' values from a *magisterium*, or simply proposing the received values of the tradition, or keeping on *preaching* the Scriptural values. These perennial values – lustrous as they may be – go into deep freeze if they're kept in cultural isolation. This is 'producing documents, full of truth, but unread'. A more dynamic, creative kind of value engagement is needed.

Church pronouncements, however, tend only to note – and lament – the loss of values handed down, those that are embedded in traditions such as those of family life and a stable social order. The disruption of these values and practices is identified as the critical cultural challenge to the life and practice of faith. This leads to a defensive strategy – a defence against the culture. It's right, of course, that there's much in the culture that's inimical to the Gospel, bearing falsehoods, and it would be foolish to minimise it. But the 'big picture' – for mission, for evangelization, for ecclesial credibility – is for the Gospel to engage with the culture itself, the dynamics of the culture; in other words, the evangelisation of the culture.

We are, however, rather easily seduced into culture wars, setting religion and secularity too much and too quickly at odds. Yet Pope Benedict in his Westminster Hall address called for dialogue:

> The world of reason and the world of faith – the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief – need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue, for the good of our civilization.

Nevertheless, 'secular rationality' is precisely what many still identify as the enemy of the practice of the faith. A dominant approach in the evangelization synod was epitomized in opening remarks of the relator, Cardinal Wuerl, when he spoke of the West being overtaken by 'a tsunami of secularism'. An un-nuanced view like this portrays the advance of the secular as simply corrosive of faith. The official Church is still quite uncertain about what stance it should adopt to the modern secular world. Simply opposing it can no longer be seen as a viable pastoral strategy, but a hyper-sensitivity remains – and it's not unrealistic – as to how secularization, left to its own devices, is a threat to many deeper human and spiritual values. But the tendency can then set in to view secularization uniquely as a moral and ideological challenge, and getting locked into a negative response. When, for example, the Pope's Letter blamed the sex abuse in Ireland on secularization the irony was quickly picked up. It took the secular media and the freedom of the press to bring it out into the open!

It is necessary to make a clear distinction between the social process of secular*ization* and the ideology of secular*ism*.[14] Failure to do this leads to an under-emphasis on the worth inherent in the social and cultural practices of the secular world – personal freedoms, democratic participation, extension of human rights, as well as the beneficial advances of science and technology. By simply berating the secular world the message is put out that, while the world of secular rationality needs religion, the world of religious belief has no need of the secular.

Evangelization is more than instilling beliefs; it is opening up a Way and crafting practices of life to embody that Way. For better or worse, these evangelical life practices must engage with the practices that structure life in the secular world. Setting criteria for that, and opening up an effective and realistic path, is the challenge facing the Church today.

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[14] This is a distinction that Archbishop Longley of Birmingham was careful to preserve in a recent talk – although he reversed the terminological convention, and made secularization negative and secularism positive. See report: http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=19785

Part 3

The ecclesiological shape of a response

This third part borrows from the title of Karl Rahner's book *The Shape of the Church to Come* [15] – to stress that response is more than a new plan of action; it's a new way of being church. Evangelizing is the Church's *raison d'être*, so in proposing the Gospel to others the Church is re-constituting itself. Cardinal Schönborn's point mentioned earlier seems to be that the form of Church we now have is somehow 'not fit for mission'.

This is about the *form* of Church – its contingent historical shape, different in different times and places. Staf Hellemans calls this a 'church formation': i.e., 'a historical constellation – with a number of basic structural characteristics – typical for a church in a particular period of time.'[16] These ecclesial features relate to social and cultural circumstances, and the trigger of a shift in Church formation is a transformation in the wider society. The successive historical formations are easily charted: pre- and post-Constantine, mediaeval Christendom, the post-Tridentine Church, the ultramontane Church, post-Vatican II.

A Church formation is not established by simple ecclesiastical decision; it's not the result of clever pastoral strategy – even though negotiating the transition requires strategy. No one planned for the role the Church was to take on after Constantine. There is the sense, rather, of history preceding the Church. Just as the Church is to be faithful to Revelation, faithful to the Scriptures, it also has to be faithful to history and to the designs of God discerned in history.

So, what are the tools and what can we glean about the emerging directions, if anything? Staf Hellemans makes the proposal that the Church needs to surmount the 'ultramontane mass Catholicism' of the 19th century and embrace 'choice Catholicism'. The 19th century re-constitution was a remarkable feat. It was also in tune with trends in the secular arena. Incipient modernity was re-organising society in a major makeover, and the Church did the same.

That was a mass mobilisation, and the many ecclesial movements and associations of the time were all in service of it, but today the cultural current leads elsewhere. For Hellemans the key is choice – an iconic word in late modern culture. For Cardinal Schönborn – not a raving radical – it is freedom:

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[15] Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come*, London: SPCK, 1974
[16] Staf Hellemans, 2009, 'A Critical Transition: From Ultramontane Mass Catholicism to Choice Catholicism', in P.C. Beentjes (ed.) *The Catholic Church and Modernity in Europe*, Tilburg Theological Studies, Berlin: LIT Verlag, pp. 32–54.

> Today we live in a culture of freedom, and that is a very good thing as
> it is when we are free that we most resemble God . . . Freedom is the
> best starting point for the convincing, believing and strong Church of
> the future – which will look quite different from the Church we have
> known up to now.[17]

Such a proposal might be looked upon with suspicion in some quarters. Is it not buying into the very worst of the individualism that's so dominant in the culture? There is some weight to that objection and some realism – even if it could be motivated by blind resistance or fear – leading to a clash of perceptions.

It is possible, however, to construe this clash in dialectical terms. The tensions – in the culture and in the Church – are deeply felt, and when they kick in they produce a clash not just of views but of life impulses. There is a basic clash between individual and community. While it's true that the typical post-modern individual can be preoccupied with the self and seek fulfilment in narrow personal experience, there is more to the story than simple narcissism. There has been an underlying shift in the relation of the individual to the social order, and it is this which produces a new dialectic between them.

This is a point Anthony Giddens highlights.[18] In an ever more complex, specialist, high-tech, knowledge-based society, where individuals can only be 'a part' and never 'the whole', it's only by a greater cultural stress on individuality that they can assert themselves as more than a mere cog in the machine. The assertion of the self is a social necessity given the nature of contemporary society. The specialist skills needed, not only for working but simply for living today favour a more individualised self. But *individualisation* of this kind is not the same as individualism. If we simply counterpose individual and community we're lost – but much of our rhetoric does just that.

The fact, however, is that our culture and society, as well as the Church, is in a mess over these matters. Our post-modern culture lacks the consistent social practices – and disciplines – that would nurture genuine individualisation and fashion the personal freedoms that are associated with it. The culture takes the *laissez-faire* attitude that the individual reigns supreme and individuals can look after themselves. They can't!

The practices that the Church can propose are those reflective and liturgical and diaconal practices that Cardinal Martini, for instance, was so brilliant at popularising. But to gear up for that the Church would have to re-form – be translucently the right kind of community.

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17 *The Tablet*, 21.01.12, p. 27
18 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, London: Continuum, 1994

It would have to live free. To be the champion of freedom the Church needs to embrace freedom, and surmount its compulsion to an invasive control of people's lives. That is the bottom line if it is to move in the direction Cardinal Schönborn wants. The Church could then be the place where people find room to establish their individuality while remaining in communion with others; develop their 'self' while being capable of 'abandoning themselves'; be fed by a vision of gaining their true selves, their 'souls' (Mark 8: 36). Church could be the place of living free of the many hidden traps set within the glitter of consumerism.

The hope is for the Church to grasp the opportunity to articulate a way of evangelising and a form of Church that re-presents the Gospel as both the call to and the assurance of this freedom – showing it to be genuine and possible. This would go a long way both to confidently proclaiming the Gospel and truly *commending* the Gospel to the people of our time – those acknowledged in *Gaudium et spes*:

> The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.

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