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Response to “Returning to Ancient Paths”

MICHAEL KRAUSE

THANK YOU, CONNIE, FOR your excellent delineation of the responses to secularism in Canada. It resonated with me on a number of levels—perhaps most significantly, the subtle wistfulness about the state of the Church in Canada today. My vantage point is also that of a Baby Boomer, but one with a more eclectic Protestant religious background that includes German Baptist, Charismatic, and Pentecostal elements and a plethora of experience in multi-denominational and multi-faith contexts.

Secularism has, for the most part, succeeded in dethroning Christendom from its place of privilege and power—especially in Canada and Western Europe. By Christendom, I mean the institutional alignment of Christianity with political power and social influence displayed by the Church’s historic impact on institutions (government, education, health), legal decisions (laws about marriage and Sunday shopping), and public opinion (shaming people for being divorced, having sex before marriage, or shopping on Sunday). Instead of secularism, however, I believe that the term post-Christendom better describes the deconstruction of societal norms, and once we determine our location in the process of this deconstruction, it will help us better formulate a missional response. To help us do that, I’d like to propose a metaphor to contextualize Connie’s responses to the secularization process.

I believe Christendom is actually another way of saying “Western Civilization”—where Christian values, symbols, ethics, and institutions have deeply and profoundly shaped our understanding of law, politics, religion, literature, philosophy, morality, and meaning. It has proscribed many of the Western world’s ways of thinking-and-being and is deeply imbedded in civilization’s structures and institutions. What secularism is attempting to do is to unlink Christian thought and meaning from the institutions of society and to delegitimize their control over them. As a result, the very threads of the tapestry called Western civilization are being unravelled. Instead of looking at the tapestry prominently hanging on the wall, we see a

pile of detached threads on the floor, disconnected from their framework and anchors, with each thread proclaiming its own significance and uniqueness. Christianity was the fundamental framework that gave shape to the construction of that tapestry; the colors of Christianity were the defining elements of the image portrayed on this tapestry. We must also distinguish the difference between the tapestry (Christendom) and the story it tells (Christianity). For most of Western society, the tapestry of Christendom is already “deconstructed,” the Christian underpinnings unhinged, the moral framework dismantled, and the memory of its significance forgotten.

To extend the metaphor a bit further, this unraveling or dismantling of the tapestry could be called secularism—the loss of memory about the tapestry, post-Christendom, and postmodernism (or the resulting mess of individual threads competing for attention). The threads have lost the meta-narrative that once bound them together.

The missional question is this: “Where are we in this process of deconstruction?” Our location in it will determine our missional response to it. So if we believe we are still on the wall as a recognizable tapestry, then Connie’s “revivalism” response and the “I found it” promotional campaign could be seen as appropriate responses from this location. Let us just preach the Gospel and call people back to Church, embrace the certainty of the Christendom mindset, and make sure we do it all with excellence. I don’t believe this response, however, will be effective, as the deconstruction process continues.

If we believe we are at the stage where Christendom’s underpinnings are being removed and the framework is being dismantled, if we see the powers-that-be with scissors in their hands trying to cut apart the tapestry, then the proper response might be a prophetic one—decrying the injustice and revealing the secret and destructive deeds done in darkness. We would also want to ensure that proper legislation was being enacted to entrench the right of the tapestry to have the prominent position it has always held. Or, at least, we need to make sure that the tapestry is being displayed as prominently as all of the other paintings and portraits of reality in the gallery. While we are still in the twilight of modernism, our macro-response to secularism needs to be that religion still deserves an equal voice at the table and must therefore still be allowed to express its conscience on issues like injustice, abortion, and morality. The main challenges of secularism are at the institutional level because secularism attempts to separate religion from the state and to delegitimize the rights of the Christian institution—attempting to deny its voice and its right to self determination (like maintaining community standards at Christian schools). This is a worthwhile fight, but it may be one that we eventually lose.

If, on the other hand, we believe that this deconstruction is an inevitable process, that the tapestry will be destroyed and our memory of it will fade, then we might respond by capitulating to the pressures of society and accepting the role secularism assigns us—the marginalization and privatization of our faith and the alignment of the Church with the secular humanist metanarrative, baptizing its values as best we can. Alternatively, we may resign ourselves to collecting the few relevant and recognizable threads of the tapestry that remain and hide away in our monasteries, communes, and home school conventions to try and cobble together a faithful life of following Christ as old-order Mennonites.

However, if we believe we are at the stage of finding ourselves on the floor and among the piles of disconnected truth threads, then our missional approach will be different. The characteristics of postmodern society are heterogeneity (everyone and every story is different), fragmentation (things no longer fit together neatly and logically), and pluralism (all stories and traditions have equal value and equal truth claims). Postmodern society has become disenchanted with the demystified world of modernism (and Evangelicalism) and desires mystery, fantasy, and escape (note the rise of vampires, demons, superheroes, the supernatural, and the unexplained in TV, film genres, and the proliferation of alternate reality games). The postmodern mindset has abandoned the security that is based on a single claim of truth. Postmodernism opens up the possibility for faith in Jesus because it casts doubt on the grand narratives of modernism and secularism, questioning the claim of reason as the only route to knowledge. Postmodernism opens up multiple ways of knowing through things like intuition, mystery, liturgy, revelatory experiences, and communal wisdom as possible ways to discover knowledge and to experience truth.

The postmodern mindset is not as much opposed to faith tradition as it is to faith traditions as structures of power. As such, our missional response should be to learn how to be one clear voice in the midst of the cacophony of many equal voices and how this voice can be expressed with the unction of the Holy Spirit from a community of believers living prophetically. We will need to learn how to lead without power. As Christians, our role will be to help interpret the confusing array of options before people, to provide meaning and significance, and to communicate truth relationally. We should learn what it means to embrace the mystical and the experiential more enthusiastically; we may all need to become both more Catholic and more Charismatic.

Location determines response. We are currently in an in-between place of deconstruction, where, at any given time, any of these missional responses might be appropriate. Will we do the hard work of discerning our

location, contextualizing our message, responding communally, being authentic, and living out our prophetic mission? We will need to learn what it means to live without guarantees and without certainty, except the certainty that comes from trust in Jesus—faith as the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.