Lutheran
Mission Matters

The New Religious Context
in the North Atlantic World:
God's Mission in a Secular Age

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Abstract: In our modern, so-called "secular age," religion in the North Atlantic world continues to flourish unabated, yet its shape and character seem undoubtedly to be changing. This essay aims to articulate the nature and character of our secular age in order to help the pastor, professional church worker, or missionary gain a better grasp of our contemporary religious milieu. The scope is not comprehensive, but it is broad enough to give the reflective practitioner some resources to help map and navigate our present moment, especially in terms of anticipating mission efforts, reflecting on faith formation in the lives of the youngest to the oldest, and attempting to give a helpful description about how we came to be the kinds of religious people we are in the North Atlantic.

Making sense of our age is becoming more and more challenging for pastors and professional church workers. The most easily accessible resources usually are "click-baity" headlines from arm-chair Christian culture critics that deride America for not being Christian enough or Christian in the "right" ways. If we dig deeper for more nuanced accounts of our time, we are often faced with a more complicated reading. This challenge is compounded with the problem of not quite knowing what one should read in order to find the most helpful wisdom.

Deciding what to read tends already to be predetermined by what we think is going on in our current cultural context. It also presupposes what the possible solutions already are. While the contemporary apologetic publishing industry exerts a strong pull on the attention of American ministry practitioners, I suggest that its construal of our cultural context is insufficient for comprehending the gravity and complexity of the contemporary situation.[1] The usual account is that Christians are embattled, forced to play defense against the march of the secular in a winner-take-

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all culture war. This story is too simplistic. Giving an account of our context requires more attention to the complicated stories and influences that have brought us to our current place.

The goal of this essay is to complicate our picture that gives us an understanding of our present religious context. Rather than make a sustained argument, I intend to sketch out a clearer image of how religion is situated within Western culture, how it's perceived, how it's engaged. I want to describe our "secular age," especially in terms of how it affects the experience and perception of religion by nearly everyone. Having a better sense of the way the world is allows us to see anew what kinds of action are possible in this world. Once I've sketched this new picture, I'll point out a few responses that might reach/engage the people in this context who need the lifesaving message of the Gospel.

Our New Religious Context

Our world is progressively more pluralistic. At every turn, we meet people who live according to a story different from ours. Christians perpetually interact with people who view the world otherwise. Each view makes the claim of being the right view of how things are in the world. Each is vying for authority. Among these views are traditional religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. Joining them since the mid-1800s are various new religions: Mormonism, Scientology, and others. Many of these have gained significant social traction. In our emerging age with the growth of "nones," others have hybridized their faith by cobbling together various views from amongst the doctrines, tenets, practices, philosophies, and beliefs of the traditional religions along with faiths such as Wicca, pagan druidism, voodoo, deism, etc., resulting in unique spiritualities that might be specific to a single individual.[2] Creation of *sui generis* religions or spiritualities happens within the context of a pervasive attitude held by religious and irreligious people alike: the highest good in life is to pursue what makes people happy, feel good, get along together, and not hurt anyone else. Furthermore, few people feel comfortable saying someone else's religion is wrong or that persons and/or their actions are immoral in some way. Rarely is someone even so bold to say that the religion with which he/she identifies is the right one, the exclusively right one, the Truth with a capital T. How do we make sense of this?

Secularization? No, but We Are Secular

Since the 1960s, it has been proposed that in the North Atlantic world, religion would continue to experience regular decline as a result of various sorts of social, economic, philosophical, and scientific progress. Eventually, it was believed, we would see religion die out completely. This "secularization thesis" was very quickly recanted by those scholars who initially proposed it, such as the eminent sociologist

Peter Berger,[3] and a more nuanced theory about how religion is undergoing significant change was proposed. In more recent years, it has become fashionable to discuss our age as "post-secular." Another way of articulating this is to say that religion is experiencing a "new visibility."[4] While there is wide disagreement about what it would mean to describe our age as post-secular, there does seem to be greater clarification emerging about what it means to call our age "secular." In using this language, it is most important to point out that it does not refer to an age in which religion has disappeared (or is progressively disappearing). These more nuanced proposals have only become more complicated.

Taking stock of this complicated story, James K. A. Smith has written a very accessible book aimed in many ways at ministry practitioners and professional church workers. Smith's *How (Not) To Be Secular* is based upon and can function as a companion volume for wending one's way through philosopher Charles Taylor's monumental tome *A Secular Age*. Each can also be read on its own.[5] Either way, Smith breaks Taylor's argument down into consumable chunks. Taylor asks a basic question: How is it possible to go from "a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others"?[6] Thus begins his quest to trace the unique cultural and social phenomena of the North Atlantic world that have produced the radically different religious context that pervades our time. Smith highlights Taylor's argument that being religious, especially in a Christian sense, is no longer something we can take for granted. Rather, it is merely optional, a choice among many other choices (I'll return to this point below). One of the main clarifications Smith offers is to the idea of what "secular" means for Taylor. Smith highlights the three different ways Taylor uses "secular." His second use is most important for us in this essay. Smith borrows from Taylor's sense that *belief* in our secular age is "fragilized." He continues, "What Taylor describes as 'secular' [means that we inhabit] a situation of fundamental contestability when it comes to belief, a sense that rival stories are always at the door offering a very different account of the world."[7] To think of our world as constituted by a plurality of views that are contestable, and thus contested, is to move away from the simple assumption that *we* have the Truth and all we need to do is convince people that Christianity is right. The challenge for us is to reorient our understanding of the world away from a story that suggests that people have a

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God-shaped hole in their heart and that we have the message to fill it (or arguments to convince them it's there). Rather, a prominent feature of this new religious world is that people actually find it quite easy to get along without religion at all. In other words, they don't even assume that they have a hole in their lives. Those with whom we engage might adhere to such a perspective and seemingly experience fullness of life without Jesus and the trappings of religion.

The Diminishment of Religious Authority

While the secularization thesis might have been quickly withdrawn in light of nuanced proposals by philosophers such as Taylor, it does seem clear that something about religion and its influence on everyday life has indeed *diminished* in the last half-century. One might frame this issue in terms of a loss of religious authority, especially in terms of identity-creation within particular communities.[8] As practitioners, we often want to pinpoint exactly why this has happened. The fraught accounts typically offered by apologetics or worldview scholars lead many to point fingers at the unabated advancement of a scientific worldview, assuming that, especially in the age of the New Atheists, there is some sort of battle between science and religion and that religion is losing.[9] Others point to "postmodernism," which is usually considered synonymous with "relativism."[10] Additional options include globalization, technology, urbanization, industrialization, etc. While all of these are probably contributing factors that work together to compound the problem, Taylor would critique these suggestions because, standing alone, they function either too simplistically or as "subtraction" stories.[11] Instead, he is convinced that we must adopt a more complex picture, one that engages social theory, sociology, history, philosophy, science, religious studies, economic, politics, theology, and cultural theory to bring all these factors into a grand, historical narrative. In other words, we cannot point to just one phenomenon and lay blame for the diminishment of religious authority at its feet. Lack of space and time prohibits dealing with these myriad elements (for a fuller treatment, please carefully peruse either Taylor or Smith). However, I will highlight two factors not listed above that intersect in a complicated manner and which directly impinge on our ministry in the twenty-first century.

The Inextricable Relationship between Family and Religion

Mary Eberstadt pens a convincing essay in her book entitled *How the West Really Lost God*. She advances the hypothesis that the new contestability of religious and other stories about reality, often called secularism, is to be found in the decline of the family.[12] She names her proposal "The Family Factor." Elaborating, Eberstadt writes the following:

> The causal relationship between family and religion—specifically the religion of Christianity—is not just a one-way, but actually a two-way

> street. . . . I will argue that family formation is not merely an *outcome* of religious belief. . . . Rather, family formation can also be, and has been, a causal agent in its own right—one that potentially affects any given human being's religious belief and practice.[13]

Her argument adds to the portrait that scholars such as Charles Taylor offer. Her examination of the relationship between family and religion—which she calls a double-helix connection—claims that whatever affects the one inevitably also affects the other. She suggests that the decline of religion is a product of, among other things, the decline of the family. This conclusion alone ought to get our attention, since families and family ministry are often at the heart of our work. One of the major tasks of the Christian church is to form faithful disciples and pass down the tradition of the faith. The decline of the family has erected significant roadblocks to fulfilling this mission. There is, however, some sociological work, based on long-term research, that has shown what sorts of families are most likely to form lifelong faith amongst their youngest members. Vern Bengston's *Families and Faith* describes how religion is successfully passed down through the generations.[14] Do keep in mind that reading such research promises nothing in terms of developing lifelong faith. While the knowledge is helpful for understanding how God might be using our material realities to do His work (He is a God of "means" after all), it is ultimately the responsibility of the Holy Spirit to generate and sustain faith.

Passing on a Therapeutic Faith?

While the home or family—and not the church—is the primary location for faith, we should notice another trend that helps us understand why religious authority and its identity-shaping effects have waned, especially in recent decades.[15] Related to what the late sociologist Philip Rieff called "the triumph of the therapeutic"[16] is the observation that the typical faith of modern American teenagers is "moralistic therapeutic deism." Through the ongoing work of the National Survey of Youth and Religion (NYSR), Christian Smith, a sociologist at Notre Dame, argues that "what appears to be the actual dominant religion among US teenagers is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace. It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people."[17] He goes on to say—using the words of the interviewees themselves—that the source of this faith amongst contemporary teenagers comes predominantly from the very faith communities in which they participate. In other words, this religious worldview is significantly modeled by their parents. These teenagers are merely *mimicking the faith of the adult world* as they experience it. Another scholar involved in this study, Kenda Creasy Dean, sharply articulates a major problem that we are facing:

> The problem does not seem to be that churches are teaching young people badly, but that we are doing an exceedingly good job of teaching youth what we really believe: namely, that Christianity is not a big deal, that God

requires little, and the church is a helpful social institution filled with nice people focused primarily on "folks like us"—which, of course, begs the question of whether we are really the church at all.[18]

Dean's words are a substantial indictment of the church that should cause us to pause and reflect. It echoes other analyses which call upon the church to take responsibility for the very nature of our modern secular age, arguing that the seeds of the secular are latent in the church's theological past—seeds that are germinating and taking root in the present.[19]

The New Shape of Religion in American Life

Based on what has been noted above, we can conclude that religion looks and feels remarkably different in our present North Atlantic context than perhaps even a few generations ago.[20] Particularly within America, religion is treated instrumentally—it is used for particular purposes. We regularly hear demands for religion to be relevant. I often engage a person whenever I hear this, trying to probe what they mean by this term. "Relevant" functions almost like a Master-Signifier,[21] as if it is some kind of banner under which all of us who want the "right" things can gather, but about which almost all of us are rather inarticulate and cannot be sure we really agree with one another.[22] The term "relevant," from what I can surmise, seems to refer to a religion that's practical, that is, having immediate applicability to everyday life, concerned with worldly experiences about which religious knowledge can speak and advise, and concerned with immanent realities and experiences. D. G. Hart is helpful in tracking how this particular understanding of religious relevance has come to be dominant. Rather than ascribing relevance on the basis of the timelessness of religious truth—an assumption that might theologically seem more likely—relevance has to do with timeliness. It is about me, my needs, concerns, wants, desires, problems, etc. Hart argues that this understanding of relevance is derived from three common elements in American Christianity: a Pietist focus on religious experience "in the heart," an Evangelical focus on changing the world in practical ways as a consequence of the Christian worldview, and mainline Christianity's concern with transforming social realities for those suffering injustices.[23] Relevance then, as Hart might conclude, emerges against not just the historical development of Christianity in America, but particularly in the early twentieth century against the backdrop of the conflict between fundamentalism and modernist theology. As a response, regular efforts were made to prevent the public from presuming the inferiority of religion (in this case, Christianity).

The efforts to present religion as relevant only became more expansive as the twentieth century progressed. They were more than endeavors at denying the inferiority of religion. Indeed, they were an attempt to make religion *attractive*. Relevance came to refer to something much closer to the meaning of "religion as useful" that I intimated earlier. Examining the phenomenon of how religion was

being used to meet the specific ends and goals of adherents led Peter Berger to discuss how religion was sustaining itself on the basis of plausibility structures.[24] Writing in the 1960s, Berger tried to account for how religions maintained a clientele as a means—in some respects—even for survival. He would go on to describe how these plausibility structures tended to work:

> The religious institutions have accommodated themselves to the moral and therapeutic "needs" of the individual in his private life. This manifests itself in the prominence given to private problems in the activity and promotion of contemporary religious institutions—the emphasis on family and neighborhood as well as on the psychological "needs" of the private individual.[25]

By the end of the twentieth century, sociologist Wade Clark Roof observes that Americans had simply come to expect such things from religion. Religion as "useful" had become a dominant part of the American social imagination. "What was once accepted simply as latent benefits of religion, for example, personal happiness and spiritual well-being," Roof tells us, "we now look upon more as manifest and, therefore, to be sought after and judged on the basis of what they do for us."[26] The establishment of plausibility structures has produced our contemporary spiritual marketplace in which countless varieties of religions (including *versions* of Christianity) compete with others for adherents.

This massive change in the shape and perception of religion in America both resulted from and continued to produce what Taylor calls our secular age. One of the defining features of an age in which religious and other grand stories are contestable, and thus contested, is that it is an age of a plurality of views. The presence of such a plurality is something that contemporary Christians seem to be grappling with still. As James Davison Hunter notes in his powerful analysis of Christian cultural engagement, there is a ubiquity of plurality:

> Religion has become merely optional in our time as a result of this ubiquitous plurality (among other causes).

> For the foreseeable future, the likelihood that any one culture could become dominant in the ways that Protestantism and Christianity did in the past is not great. An irresolvable and unstable pluralism—the conflict of competing cultures—is and will remain a fundamental and perhaps permanent feature of the contemporary social order, both here in America and in the world.[27]

Religion has become merely optional in our time as a result of this ubiquitous plurality (among other causes). To be religious is no longer to be born into a particular people. Nor is it to be "claimed by the Almighty" and made a member of

his people. Rather, it is to make a choice.[28] Picking and choosing seems natural and obvious. Peter Berger argues that making a choice is what is demanded of us now. He calls this "the heretical imperative," drawing on the Greek verb from which we derive "heretical" or "heresy," which means "to choose." He notes regarding our secular age, "Whatever other causes there may be for modern secularization [this age in which every view is contestable, not where there is less religion], it should be clear that the pluralizing process has had secularizing effects in and of itself."[29] Joining with Taylor's description of our secular age, Berger continues:

> In premodern situations there is a world of religious certainty, occasionally ruptured by heretical deviations. By contrast the modern situation is a world of religious uncertainty, occasionally staved off by more or less precarious constructions of religious affirmation. . . . For premodern man, heresy is a possibility—usually a rather remote one; for modern man, heresy typically becomes a necessity. [In other words,] modernity creates a new situation in which picking and choosing becomes an imperative.[30]

As a result of all this, rather than conceiving of religion traditionally as communal and identity-giving—something which the premoderns experienced as a kind of fate—our contemporaries (and probably many of us) now conceive of religion as private, up to the individual, personal, often unnecessary, or merely a part of life. When it is present, it usually functions instrumentally.

The Shape of Ministry and Mission in a Secular Age

So how might we respond to what has been described above to carry out our role as participants in God's mission? The old responses are to fight (engage in culture wars) or to withdraw (be sectarian) or to surrender (passively accept second-class status). One response that will absolutely fail is to maintain a glib attitude of criticism that still expects everyone outside of the church to realize they need the religion we have to offer. This is an attitude summarized in a cliché: since we have built it, they will come. Nor will it be right to suggest that the Christians who exist just proliferate amongst themselves, for we have already pointed out the problems that exist in passing along the tradition of faith to the youngest members of our population. I suggest that we engage intentionally, but with a sensitivity to the new picture I have sketched above. Here are two forms such an engagement might take.

1. Tapping into the Desire for Enchantedness

If what has been presented here is an accurate picture of our contemporary religious context in a secular age, it seems clear that strongly apologetic approaches—as conceived of and performed as some kind of philosophical or evidentialist argumentation—will not be broadly effective for accomplishing God's mission. Rather, perhaps a better approach would be to listen to the culture around us and recognize when it indicates the inevitable sense that it is haunted by the

transcendent—even in a reality imagined to be closed in by a brass ceiling. One might notice this sense of the transcendent in contemporary obsessions over fictional worlds that exhibit an "enchantedness" that our own imagination of the world lacks. *Narnia*, *Middle Earth*, the *Star Wars* galaxy, Harry Potter's world, the *Twilight* series' world of vampires, the reality of zombies in *The Walking Dead* and elsewhere, the expansion of enchanted virtual realities (think: video games).[31] The widespread interest in these imaginative fantasy lands might be indicative that, as James K. A. Smith has observed, "the secular is haunted."[32] We want back what we have lost. Here is where Christians might influentially speak into the lives of those who live in our secular age without aiming to fill a God-shaped hole. Perhaps they don't experience life as empty but full. Yet they may find themselves strangely filled with gratitude for it all, but without someone (someOne?) to thank. There is an Acts 17 moment if there ever was one.

2. Reflecting on how Faith is Passed Down

Passing down the faith is a vitally important concern, especially in light of what we've learned about the religious faith of American young people and how that faith came to be engendered in them. Churches and their leaders ought to be extremely concerned with faith formation and catechesis. Yet, the Christian faith is not merely a matter of intellectual ascent or figuring out how to do Sunday School better. Human beings are not merely input/output mechanisms, such that installing the right *beliefs* or *knowledge* in their minds produces the right kind of living (a critical, but faulty assumption of contemporary apologetics or worldview scholars). Catechesis and faith formation will have to take into account not just the head (mind), but the entire body of the human being. Human beings learn not only—or even primarily— with their minds, but with their bodies.[33] It is in the body that one comes not just to know, but to be able to act in the world in particular ways. The Christian narrative has the resources for understanding a human being more holistically than many of the modern anthropological assumptions of the twentieth century, especially those presumed amongst Christians. Worship, catechesis, and faith formation more often than not involve mimicry, such that what is seen and participated in is reproduced. The body knows and remembers in ways the mind does not. Pastors implicitly know this when they visit parishioners suffering from dementia who do not know the names of their own children but can still recite the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Psalm 23, or various hymns. These pillars of faith are inscribed in their bodies, are part of the fabric of their being, and linger timelessly in their bones. This sort of bodily knowledge is exhibited by people in countless ways: athletics, the arts, technical skills, or simply making one's way through his/her hometown without a map. Our awareness of how bodily knowledge is influential in establishing one's identity ought to imply that our practices of catechesis and faith formation aim at shaping humans on every register to be faithful followers who trust Christ in all things.

Conclusion

Perhaps you can think of more creative ways to engage with others that might fan the flames of faith in our contemporary culture. There is, as always, much work to be done—the harvest is always ready. But the work is challenging, frightening, and frustrating. Yet at times, it is mind-bogglingly miraculous and energizing. That is because no matter what (or how much) we "know" about our cultural context, God the Holy Spirit still uses feeble souls like you and me to present Jesus to others. For "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20b, ESV). May the world meet Him when they meet us.

Endnotes

[1] There are various helpful resources that highlight the critique of contemporary apologetics and worldview studies. See for example William Placher, *Unapologetic Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989); Philip D. Kenneson, "There is No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and It's a Good Thing, Too," in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Ockholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 155–70; Myron Bradley Penner, *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

[2] This is reminiscent of what Robert Bellah calls "Sheilaism." See Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkley, CA: University of California, 1985), 221. For more on the "nones" (people who identify as non-affiliating with major religious traditions), or the so-called "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR), see Linda Mercandante's excellent and very informative book, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2014). See also Kaya Oakes, *The Nones Are Alright: A New Generation of Believers, Seekers and Those in Between* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015). Also of interest in terms of do-it-yourself religion, Oprah Winfrey's *Belief* series on the OWN network (see here: http://www.oprah.com/app/belief.html) has been analyzed as contributing to the practice of hybridization observable amongst SBNRs. See Diana Butler Bass, "Oprah's new 'Belief' series shows how dramatically the nature of faith is shifting," *Washington Post*, October 18, 2015. Accessed October 18, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/10/18/oprahs-new-belief-series-shows-how-dramatically-the-nature-of-faith-is-shifting/.

[3] Evidence of Berger's retraction of the "secularization thesis" comes most obviously in a book he edited more than thirty years after it was proposed. See *The Desecularlization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

[4] Graham Ward has noted this in various places. See *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 132–135. See also Graham Ward and Michael Hoelzl, *The New Visibility of Religion: Studies in Religion and Cultural Hermeneutics* (London, Continuum, 2008), 1–11.

[5] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, Harvard University, 2007). Taylor's book is probably the most critically acclaimed argument regarding how to understand our secular age. And it is indeed a monumental tome, at 874 pages with text and notes. James

K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

[6] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

[7] Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 10.

[8] Various works concerning authority—whether religious or not—are worth paying attention to. For example, a classic text attending to this topic is Jeffrey R. Stout, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981). Others that deal more currently with an explicitly American religious context include Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2013) and, tangentially, George Marsden, *The Twilight of the American Enlightenment: The 1950s and the Crisis of Liberal Belief* (New York: Basis Books, 2014).

[9] There is no such battle. The conflict between science and religion is an invention, a myth. For a very readable guide that undoes this presupposition that many of us "think with," see Peter Harrison's *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2015). The entire book is worthwhile as it re-situates our understanding of both "science" and "religion" as well as traces the history within which the "myth" of the conflict began.

[10] Making these synonymous betrays a deep misunderstanding of them both. For some help at understanding the difference, and even drawing the conclusion that postmodernism can be "good" for the church, see James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006) and *Who's Afraid of Relativism?: Community, Contingency, and Creaturehood* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).

[11] Taylor defines subtraction theories as narratives that describe the secular as "what's left" when religion and superstition are taken away. For example, naming "science" as the explanation for what happened to religious authority is a subtraction story—one told regularly by such figures as the New Atheists, e.g., Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett.

[12] Mary Eberstadt, *How The West Really Lost God* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2013).

[13] Ibid., 20–21.

[14] Vern L. Bengston, Norella M. Putney, and Susan Harris, *Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down Across Generations* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2013). Another helpful text (because it is practical and more accessible overall) is Kara E. Powell and Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

[15] Regarding the home as the central location of faith formation has long been a presupposition of the church. Consider the description of "households" that were converted in the New Testament and that Luther's *Large Catechism* was meant to be a tool for fathers. While not a comprehensive argument, this point nevertheless recognizes that Sunday School classrooms and Confirmation classes led by pastors are much later inventions.

[16] See Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (1966, repr., Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006).

[17] Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005), 162.

[18] Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2010), 12.

[19] See for example these selected works: Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Belknap, Harvard University, 2012); Mark Allan Gillispie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University, 2004).

[20] Ross Douthat argues that the 1950s were a heyday in American religion. The post-WWII era saw some of the greatest growth of Christianity in the US in the twentieth century. It made way for the influence of religion in politics and created the conditions of possibility for what James Davison Hunter has called the "culture wars." Douthat traces a very substantial downhill decline in the character of American Christianity beginning immediately after this spike. Not only does he sketch the reasons for decline in a concrete (if incomplete) manner, he also sketches four images that are definitively visible in American Christianity today in the form of what he calls "heresies." *Bad Religion: How We Have Become a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2012).

[21] I borrow this term from David Fitch (who in turn, borrows it from philosopher Slavoj Žižek) in his book *The End of Evangelicalism: Discerning a New Faithfulness for Mission* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011). He offers a helpful definition in the accompanying Glossary: "A Master-Signifier is a conceptual object to which people give their allegiance thereby enabling a political group to form. It represents something to believe in. Yet it is an enigma for the members themselves because nobody really knows what it means; but each of them proposes that all the others know. Concepts such as Obama's 'Change We Can Believe In' or Bush's 'Freedom' are examples of Master-Signifiers in recent history" (203).

[22] I often think the same is true for the term "confessional," especially as it has been applied within intra-Lutheran debates of late. For a little help through the mire on this term, see Joel P. Okamoto, "Making Sense of Confessionalism Today," *Concordia Journal* 41, no. 4 (2015): 34–48.

[23] D. G. Hart, *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002). While the entire book is excellent, I'm drawing here on the first chapter, "The American Way of Faith." What makes Hart's book particularly valuable is the discernment evident in his distinction of confessional bodies (like the LCMS and some Presbyterians) from the rest of Evangelicalism and Mainline Christianity in the United States. Rather than focusing on the "here and now" as those traditions predominantly do, confessional bodies, Hart argues, aim to shape lives that are prepared for the world to come and in view of the presence of a transcendent order that organizes our sense of life in this world, allowing the consequences of such formation to affect life in the present.

[24] Some sociologists refer to "plausibility structures" to point out that the socio-cultural context is what makes things meaningful for its members.

[25] Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967; repr. New York: Anchor, 1969), 147.

[26] Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1999), 78.

[27] James Davison Hunter, *To Change The World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2010), 201–202.

[28] The reader is advised not to understand this as a reference to Decision Theology. That would be to hear what I am not saying, and to draw too simplistic of a conclusion.

[29] Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (New York: Anchor, 1979), 27.

[30] Ibid., 28.

[31] Graham Ward is fond of noticing this trend. See for example, *The Politics of Discipleship*, 147–154.

[32] James K. A. Smith, "The Future of Religion in a Secular Age," *Slate*, n.d. Accessed October 28, 2015. http://www.slate.com/bigideas/what-is-the-future-of-religion/essays-and-opinions/the-future-of-religion-in-a-secular-age.

[33] The Greeks knew this well. So do contemporary marketing agencies. The church has known this for quite some time (i.e., liturgy does more than *in*form), but it has been eclipsed by the perspective of faith as doctrine, or cognitive-propositionalism, that dominates much of orthodox Protestantism.