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KEYNOTE LECTURES

WHERE WE ARE CULTURALLY AND HOW THE CHURCH MIGHT
RESPOND

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My work as a theologian has been concerned with two lines of enquiry. Those two lines of enquiry are: a) where are we today, culturally, socially, historically, and b) how might the church respond. There are lots of methodology questions which instantly arise, of course, about the relationship between the church and the world, but my own simple take for the moment is Johannine: the church is in the world, inseparably part of the world, but not of the world.

So let me focus on that first line of enquiry and sketch where we are today. What are the signs of the times? This enquiry is not without its methodological difficulties. We are not only surrounded by signs, we are immersed in them. So which signs do we choose as significant for characterizing where we stand culturally, socially and historically today? And let me be clear. the standpoint I am situating is broadly called western—European, English-speaking, North American. And that standpoint too is highly complex. So I'm forgetting nuance in order to try and give a "big picture." Taking a cue from Charles Taylor this standpoint has been viewed and interpreted to the point of self-identification as "a secular age."¹ Again, I'm going to cut through the thickets of defining the secular, secularism and secularization by making two points. First, secularism is an ideology that emerged from the Enlightenment and modernity's commitment to progress, and secularization is a socio-historical concept. Secondly, no one is questioning that a

1 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007)

process of secularization has been underway from the increasing acceptance of that Enlightenment ideology and the rise of scientific explanation. No one is questioning an erosion of Christian faith in Europe—although it took place in different ways and according to different speeds depending on whether that country's culture was Protestant in its orientation or Roman Catholic.

So then within the major cultural condition—the secular—in which the church and its beliefs have had to engage, certain theological expressions have emerged still best typologically set out I think in Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* volume.² There have been theologies of accommodation to the secular (in a shorthand we can say liberal theologies); there have been theologies radically opposed to the secular (in a shorthand we can say conservative theologies); and there have been theologies that tried to find a place between assimilationism and sectarianism. But what I want to argue, and demonstrate, is this: the signs of the times currently point to either the collapse or the radical questioning of the aegis of the secular itself. We seem to be elsewhere and we have been elsewhere for quite some time. So for the church to continue to see itself and its work, for the church to still engage in and develop theologies responding to the secular, is misguided.

I want to go straight to the core of what has changed. I've been working on this now for some time and the results of my findings appear in a new book entitled *Unbelievable*.³ What has changed, it seems to me, is our epistemological conditions. Now that's abstract so let me try and pin that down. The ideology of secularism was associated with the triumph of human reason and a certain understanding of concepts like knowledge and truth, and how we arrived at knowledge and truth. The empirical and the factual were criteria for establishing knowledge and truth. On the basis of what these provided as evidence, probabilities could be made, risk of errors assessed and consensus could be established. Belief, whether in its hardcore form of religious faith or its soff sense as opinion was viewed as a weak and inadequate form of knowledge, prey to superstition, false consciousness, fantasy and so on. This was the epistemological condition of what another piece of short hand called "modernity."

This epistemological condition has changed. Why it has changed is complex and still being debated and terms like "postmodernism," "late

2 H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).

3 Graham Ward, *Unbelievable: Why We Believe and Why We Don't* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

modernism” or even “postsecular” are very blunt tools for cultural analysis because they only say we are “beyond” in some sense modernity or the secular. As cultural, social or historical descriptors they are inadequate. But what seems to have changed in our epistemological condition is the status of belief or believing. Let me give you some examples here. I’ll start with the philosopher Wittgenstein in one of the last pieces of work on which he was engaged before he died, subsequently published as, ironically, *On Certainty*: “[m]y life consists,” he wrote, “in my being content to accept many things.”⁴ In its own ways this concurs with a statement made by no less a figure than Pope John Paul II in *Fides et Ratio* where he describes human beings as those “who live by belief.”⁵ Now consider some more contemporary and popular expressions: Sky TV’s logo “Believe in Better” or Sony’s commercial logo “Make. Believe” or the commercial logo for Nintendo games, “Believe your Eyes.” Or there’s the British Olympic Team’s logo “Genuine Belief,” the title of Justin Bieber’s acclaimed album “Believe,” the name of Britanny Spears’s own brand of perfume, “Believe,” or Apple’s advertisement for the iPad 2 which revolves around the opening statement: “This is what we believe.”

What I am suggesting here is that the structures of what we believe and what makes a belief believable have changed. There is less certainty, not more. And there should be more according to the notion of the age of progress. We know less, and accept that we know less. We believe more and recognize the power of belief is much more fundamental than our “knowledge of” Some cultural and sociological theorists speak of this shift in terms of “enchantment.” It was a major part of Chares Taylor’s examination of the secular age that the world became disenchanted as a result of secular modes of viewing the world. He develops this from the German pioneer in sociology, Max Weber, who spoke of the rise of instrumental reasoning and scientific explanation as the construction of an iron cage of reason that disenchanted the world.⁶ But now a number of people, from a variety of different academic disciplines, wish to speak of the re-enchantment of everyday life. I’m not

4 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed G E M Anscombe and G H von Wright, trans Denis Paul and G E M Anscombe (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1969), 86 (#344)

5 John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Encyclical Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Relationship between Faith and Reason (Rome, September 14, 1998), par 31, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_15101998_fides-et-ratio_en.html

6 Max Weber, *Political Writings*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, ed Peter Lassman, trans Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), xvi

going to ply you with names. Just type re-enchantment into Google and you'll find there are plenty. Indeed the internet, advanced electronic communications and increasing immersion in virtual realities of one kind or another, are all at the forefront of, and expressions of, this re-enchantment. Let the Odean cinema logo stand in for this trend: "Leave reality at home." In two 2013 surveys, one in the US and one in the UK, it was calculated that the average person in the US spends 5 hours 9 minutes a day online and a further 4 hours 31 minutes watching TV, and that 25 per cent of the British population spends 12 hours a day in such a manner.⁷ In the wake of an upsurge in cyber-bullying, cyber-stalking and cyber-harassment, one spokesperson for a major charity revealed that "there is no off-line on-line mode of living for the younger generation"; the lines demarcating a difference have gone.

If I'm right and our epistemological conditions have changed such that believing is recognized as more important and more fundamental than knowing, then certain other cultural changes should be evident that are signs of these times. There are two key and interrelated sets of signs here. The first I'll call the return of the mythological and epic imagination. Secular reasoning was opposed to the mythological—myths were to be explained as the primitive mind grappling with the origins of evil, say, or sexual difference; or they were psychological states projected into cultural forms; or pre-scientific forms of explanation. Under the aegis of the old epistemological conditions they were to be swept aside as crude forms of reasoning or tolerated, at best, as aesthetic and entertaining. In the middle years of the twentieth century, though, sociologists like Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno began to explore the myths of Enlightenment thinking itself: the hidden and ideological myths behind the everyday.⁸ The French cultural theorist, Roland Barthes, knowing nothing of this German analysis began to explore and explode persuasive forms of mythic thinking informing advertisements for popular items like margarine and *Omo* detergent or the staging of a wrestling match.⁹ His attention to mass culture is intentional and significant; for it is in mass culture that the "collective representations"

7 See, for example, Cotton Delo, "Americans Now Spend More Time on Their Digital Devices Than Watching TV," *Advertising Age*, published August 1, 2013, <http://adage.com/article/digital/americans-spend-time-digital-devices-tv/243414/>

8 Max Horkheimer and Theodore W Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans John Cumming (London Allen Lane 1973 [Ger 1944])

9 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans Annette Lavers (New York Hill and Wang, 1972 [Fr 1957])

defining myth operate most effectively, that is, invisibly on our beliefs. Such mythic significations operate fundamentally, according to Barthes, “for the mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois culture into a universal nature.”¹⁰ More recently the philosopher Mary Midgley, in her celebrated book *The Myths We Live By*, has written about how “many of the visions that now dominate our controversies are ones which look as if they were based on science, but are really fed by fantasy.”¹¹ She has exposed the mythological thinking informing science itself by insisting that: “Myths are not lies [...] They are imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world. They shape its meaning.”¹² They also shape our beliefs, thoughts and actions because they are “based on an imaginative vision by a particular set of ideals, a dream which can help to shape our enterprises, but will mislead us if we trust it on its own.”¹³ As a help in shaping our enterprises, myths have their use. Midgley cites Rousseau’s social contract as one such “useful” myth. But she concludes: “some myths are much more useful and reliable than others.”¹⁴

Now all these exposés of the mythological are negative—they are critiques of concealed ideologies or rational errors where the metaphors involved in certain descriptions are taken and developed as if they were not metaphors but factual accounts. But I suggest the investments now in mythological thinking are not negative, but positive espousals of the mythological in a new understanding of a plasticity and malleability of the real. Take the three highest top selling book series in recent years, each turned into blockbuster film or TV presentations. the *Twilight* series, the *Harry Potter* series and the *Game of Thrones* series. In each of them the real is folded into the mythological. We don’t pass through a wardrobe to enter the fantasy world. Bella Swan falls for the vampire Edward Cullen in a school car park; the tram to Hogwarts sets off from King’s Cross station; and the age of dragons and werewolves is well and truly over in the streets of King’s Landing or the halls of Winterfell. But the fragility of the real is emphatically revealed in all of these narrations; it is eclipsed, shot through and manipulated by forces supernatural and mythological.

10 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 9

11 Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By* (Routledge Classics, Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), xii

12 Midgley, *The Myths We Live By*, 1

13 Midgley, *The Myths We Live By*, xiii

14 Midgley, *The Myths We Live By*, xvi

It is important to understand that this is not just entertainment. We do not just passively read or watch these spectacles in ways that have no effect upon our emotional and imaginative lives. Since at least the 1980s cognitive scientists and neuroscientists have been developing accounts of what we might call the psycho-biology of believing. One important aspect of this psycho-biology is the discovery by the neuroscientist Giacomo Rizzolatti and an associated team of what they call “mirror neurons.”¹⁵ That is, neurons involved in imitative behaviour such that when I perceive and experience an external action my body and brain mimic, to some extent, that same activity. They write the “as if” of belief into our physiologies and emotions because they evoke the “simulation, in the brain’s body maps, of a body state that is not actually taking place in the organism,” amplifying the “functional resemblance.”¹⁶ That’s a quote from another neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio. We enact these spectacles within ourselves. We live them virtually and they affect us. In the Cathedral shop in Christ Church, they sell *Harry Potter* magic wands. When the Dean was questioned why a Christian institution should stock such items in its shop, he replied, “They don’t work!” And it’s true. Young teenage girls do not flock to watch Bella Swan fall for Edward Cullen because they believe they too may encounter a vampire in the school car park, but it feeds their desires and hopes and orientates those primordial dispositions in some direction. They are fashioned by such orientations in some way—and we cannot calculate fully the ways such fashioning might take. Our “habitués,” or “habiti,” shape the way we believe, think and act, and they operate in and through the symbolic realms we, as hominid and human creatures, have been cultivating for 2.2 million years.

Let me present a more graphic example of the way the mythological is being enfolded into the everyday by showing you a video. This is Lana Del Rey’s song “Born to Die” (2011).¹⁷ The core of the lyrics here is love-trouble among young people. “Don’t make me sad, don’t make me cry / Sometimes love is not enough and the road gets tough / I don’t know why.” There is something desperate about the loving because it is played out against a background of loneliness, the need for a home and the finality of death. “Keep making me laugh / Let’s go get high / The road is long, we carry on /

15 See, for example, Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia, *Mirrors in the Brain How Our Minds Share Actions and Emotions*, trans Frances Anderson (Oxford Oxford University Press, 2008 [Ital 2006])

16 Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind Constructing the Conscious Brain* (New York. Vintage Books, 2010), 110

17 Lana Del Rey, “Born to Die,” Youtube video, 4:46, posted December 11, 2014, <http://youtu.be/BaglgUxuU0g>

Try to have fun in the meantime.” The need to escape the end of all things is countered by walking on “the wild side,” drugs, and kissing “in the pouring rain.” But the end is announced in the very opening lines: “Feet don’t fail me now / Take me to the finish line [...] But I’m hoping at the gates, / They’ll tell me that you’re mine.” The religious frames the mundane—life after the death one is born for, and living as a carrying on along a long road “by mistake or design.” Life is portrayed as short, even crazy. The song is sung to someone who is told to “Choose your last words, this is the last time/ Cause you and I, we were born to die.” The video explicitly theatricalizes the religious and, for reasons not at all obvious, U.S. patriotism. It opens and closes with Del Rey and a man in a close embrace against the background of an American flag, but when the lyrics begin Del Rey is enthroned in front of the altar of an ornate baroque church, flanked on either side by a tiger. As the narrative proceeds, it flashes back to her meeting her lover on a dark and isolated road and driving with him through the rain. The church scenes cut in at this point to show Del Rey walking down corridors of the same church, or a palace it is attached to, towards some doors. The next flashback reveals her driving with the lover in the passenger seat, and then a decision to kiss as the car hurtles through a wet and foggy night. The last intercut scenes are of Del Rey walking through the opening doors towards a floodlit, indistinct other place, and a blazing fire following a car crash from which her boyfriend carries her bloody body in a limp *pietà*. A Gnostic myth interprets a somewhat pathological set of love relations. It is a Christian Gnosticism only by association (with the church and the altar), but the final “home” is in the afterlife, understood as an escape from the depressing and exhausting temporalities of ordinary life and the evasions necessary to just “carry on.” This is the answer to the questions Del Rey has been asking herself “like a little child.” Suicide (or sacrifice when viewed in terms of the American flag and the church altar) is salvation (again apocalyptically conceived in the fires of the car crash, filmed in a way that echoes the burning of Atlanta in *Gone with the Wind*). The local inflexions of a love life are situated in a mythological tension between time and eternity. But it is difficult in this video to understand the point of the sacrifice beyond winning Del Rey the freedom in which she *might* be told at the gates that her lover is hers eternally now.

I could have chosen one of her more recent songs, figuring in *The Great Gatsby*: “Young and Beautiful.” In the middle of these lyrics there’s a prayer: “Dear Lord when I get to heaven, please let me bring my man. When he comes tell me that you’ll let him in. Father, tell me if you can. O that grace,

O that body, O that face makes me want to party. He's my sun, he makes me shine, like diamonds." Suicide and the afterlife are recurrent themes in Lana Del Ray's songs. For the moment I just wish to point out how the resurgence of the mythic imagination is quite clearly associated with the second set of cultural signs that we, as the church, must read: the new visibility of religion.

Now I have to be brief here but we are all increasingly becoming aware of this: the steep rise in the number of people going on pilgrimage, increase in those attending cathedral churches (or some of them), the reverse of a secularizing trend in the European Survey of Values¹⁸ among young people—showing more holding beliefs in an afterlife and embracing the idea of an immanent notion of the divine; the questioning of secular neutrality and the critique of a creep of procedural secularism towards a state-sponsored ideology. I could go on, but many others have commented upon this new cultural shift and all but a few hardliner sociologists now hold to anything like the classic "secularization thesis." In fact, with more revisionist work being done by modern historians confidence in the secular is coming to look more like a minor, Western European blip in the late 60s and early 70s. By the mid-1970s shifts are evident. The idea that we lived under the aegis of the secular was a particularly Christian concept. But fuelled by international conflicts with terrorism and the politicization of Islam that began in the mid-1970s with the oil crisis and was fast-forwarded by the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the strength of belief in other religious pieties made complex any simple ideology of secularism. In fact, at a time when the Christian faith and the culture it fostered were becoming anorexic in Europe, the religious landscape was being changed by post-World War II attention to the Jewish question, following the Holocaust and the Arab-Israeli conflict, by waves of immigration from Islamic Algeria, Turkey, Morocco, Pakistan and Bangladesh and by Hindu immigration from India, the 1960s interest in Eastern mysticism and new age cults. These factors greatly muddy the waters of any homogenous secular culture. Certainly, reading the signs of the time today, secularism as a grand narrative, and probably like secularisation theories, has passed its sell-by date.

I will list two prominent examples of where this new visibility is being registered and researched. First, there is a £12 million investment into the Religion and Society Research Programme in the UK running from 2007–2012.

18 See European Values Study, Tilburg University, The Netherlands, <http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>.

This is a new programme. Similar work is being undertaken in Sweden and Canada. There is a similar emphasis on religion in the 6th and 7th research Framework Programmes of the European Commission. Second, there is a range of print and online resources for the sociology of religion that began to appear in 2007 along with new cross-disciplinary initiatives like the International Consortium for Law and Religion that began in 2009.

The signs of the times as I read them show, first, a shift in the epistemological conditions affecting a change in the structures of believing that, second, surfaces in an appeal to the mythological imagination; which, third, is associated with, and has implications for, the new visibility of religion and the implosion of secularism. So the question turns then to how does the church respond? I will make three points. First, it is interesting and not insignificant that the place where secularism, the secular and secularization still have a strong currency is the church itself. In other words, for a number of years—at least since in the 1960s when we first see the dramatic decline in church attendance—the church has habituated itself to being a cultural minority, even a cultural victim. It has lost, or perceives it has lost, much of its symbolic capital—and with it a great deal of its social confidence. In fact, the decline in church attendance from the 1960s onwards is exactly mirrored by the decline in political party and union membership. The church was not a victim of secularism so much as caught up in a more systemic shift away from institutionalism and towards hyper-individualism. For various reasons, including suspicion and cynicism, people no longer wanted to belong. I want to make this point first because, if I am right in my diagnosis of where we are culturally, socially and historically then part of the response the church will have to make is to come to terms with the ways in which it has internalized its minority and beleaguered status and accepted new conditions posed by this highly problematic notion of the secular.

The second point institutional belonging is not back on the cultural agenda. In fact, there is increasing social atomization. Belonging now is in and through networks—most of them virtual. At the same time, it does seem to me there is both a desire for social intimacy and a fear of it. The recent film *Her* signals what I mean here: the love life preferred is an imaginary, synthetic one, a cyber love, deep connectedness without the interface of flesh.¹⁹ There's something highly gnostic about this fantasy. The institutions that will best cope with these new forms of networked virtual associations are those which are highly flexible about membership.

19 *Her*, directed by Spike Jonze, Warner Brothers Pictures, 2013, <http://www.hermovie.com/#/home>

Hence, I think, the appeal of ecclesiologies developing what Pete Ward calls liquid church or what Americans understand as emerging church.²⁰ Fresh Expressions is trying to capture some of this style of being church—and for some of you who associate me with Radical Orthodoxy let me say right now that while I am critical of some of the cultural accommodationism of Fresh Expressions I also champion its necessity.

And that's because—the third point—what is evident in the many forms which the new visibility of religion takes is a profound theological illiteracy. In any given year, the number of people who go round Oxford's cathedral at Christ Church must be in the tens of thousands. But I know from having been among them that very few know how to read the building as a piece of Christian architecture, or decode what is going on in the stained-glass windows, know what Christ as the Pantocrator is doing at the centre of the rose-window above the high altar or who the archangel Michael is and why he takes his place on the north side of the transept. Go back to the video I showed you of *Lana Del Ray*: this is a portrayal of the afterlife without judgement and resurrection. You just slip through a door into paradise. It is a highly polished and lavish piece of filming—a feast for the eyes as much as for the ears, but the theology of the afterlife is thin—despite the baroque church, the altar and crucifix, and the allusions to the iconography of the coronation of the Virgin Mary and the pieta. Beliefs are played with—they carry no conviction, no sense of commitment or even moral and spiritual obligation. They are virtual beliefs, semi-beliefs; inseparable from what certain literary theorists would call “mythemes”—fragments of myth or symbolic clusters with a mythic register. There is very little understanding of what the religious iconography is doing other than providing the director with an aesthetic stage set. Religion becomes a theatrical effect—material for consumption. Think of the expiation of M's sin in the last James Bond, which follows from a repeated emphasis upon her sin, and culminates in her bleeding to death in a Scottish chapel. There's no articulation of an atonement that follows from it or of a divine satisfaction made or of a righteousness bestowed. In other words, religious signs abound in this new appreciation of the mythological imagination but they float, meld and morph like the messianisms of any number of Hollywood superhero epics.

Theological illiteracy can only be countered with sound theological education: catechesis. And catechesis is a lifelong immersion in the

20 Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002)

traditions of the church's teaching—not just five steps to salvation. To my mind if the church has a specific mission today then here it lies: in investing in public and clerical education. All the theological and religious signs are still there and circulating, but they have no content at the moment. This to my mind is the church's theological and liturgical task: liturgical because liturgy is at the heart of pedagogy—it is about formation and cultivation. Literacy is not just a matter of passing on information—we have Wikipedia for that—it is about enculturation.



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