

The Faithful and Secularism, Part Three

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In view of the new and continually unfolding challenges that secularism poses to faith in general, and to the Christian in particular, within the society of modernity—which has now come to be called “postmodernity”—believers differ in their ways of confronting it. This is not surprising, because many of these challenges are entirely new, and the Church has not previously experienced them.

Until recently, people lived in a religious society. Even if everyone were not a believer, people were nevertheless born into a social atmosphere marked by religious customs, traditions, and values. In contemporary society, however, the religious character is absent and has been replaced by a secular, worldly character, shaped by human experiences, expertise, and both sweet and bitter trials.

This change has begun to accelerate greatly throughout the whole world over the past two decades. Although the speed of this acceleration differs from one society to another, it now affects all societies. Religious bodies, therefore, find themselves before a real challenge, one they have not previously faced with such intensity. It is thus natural that opinions and experiences should multiply regarding the ways of dealing with it, the questions of preserving and transmitting the faith to contemporary humanity, the language of evangelization, and the embodiment of Christian principles in today’s world. This has produced diverse currents, which we may place under two broad categories, while recognizing within each of them varying degrees of strictness and leniency.

The first current boycotts what this world produces whenever it differs from what people were accustomed to in the past. For this current, every new thing becomes suspect, every innovation stirs fear, and every unfamiliar form of communication is viewed as demonic and as a path toward abandoning the uprightness of the faith. It is worth noting that the followers of this current do not boycott the use of technological tools themselves. Rather, they reject the new possibilities these tools produce in terms of rapprochement, communication, and encounter among human groups.

They reject dialogue because they sense, behind its various forms, aims that are dangerous to the Church and to the Orthodox faith. Thus, they reject rapprochement altogether instead of rejecting only the specific form in which they perceive danger. They see every engagement with the other as the beginning of a new heresy and as an abandonment of the Orthodox faith.

They confine faith to the forms produced by the action of the Holy Spirit among the ancients, and they are eager to imprison it within those forms, forbidding it to produce new expressions. They do not appreciate the extent of the change that has come upon contemporary humanity because of secularism and modernity. They do not see the increasing challenges to faith as a field of witness for them through their engagement with those challenges. They are content with the truth they possess. Whoever wishes may come and see.

They speak in a language that they themselves understand, but which may mean nothing to others—or, if it does mean anything, may communicate distorted concepts of the faith. They do not wish to enter the contest or confront the challenge. Nor do they accept the use of modern culture and the language of today in evangelization. They are moved by a constant anxiety over the preservation of the purity of the faith more than they are impelled to face the accumulating and rapidly increasing challenges to faith.

Thus, in the best of cases, they become like someone carrying cold water while waiting for the thirsty person to come to him. They do not require of themselves that they go out to him. They are like someone sheltering securely inside a strong, stormproof building, while showing little concern for those facing hurricanes in their collapsing homes. In the best of cases, they are prepared to receive them if they knock on their door.

The adherents of the second current are enchanted by modernity and by what it produces. They adopt everything it offers without caution or discernment. They engage positively and energetically in dialogue, whatever it may be and wherever it may be found. They approach new ideas, patterns, and philosophies with admiration, even when these are opposed to their Gospel. They wish to reconcile the world with the Gospel easily, and often superficially.

They do not distinguish between the spirit of the world and the spirit of the Gospel. They hasten toward compromise in every discussion or dialogue. They find it easy to interpret the Gospel texts in ways that agree with their own ideas. They are influenced by prevailing patterns of life and wish, with good but naïve intentions, to clothe these patterns with a Christian garment.

Their motives may be pure, and many of them may be sincere in their efforts with intentions free of deceit. But they are captivated more than they should be by the glitter of modernity, by what it produces and establishes in minds and souls. They wish to modernize the faith through it, imagining that by doing so they are “evangelizing” it. It is no surprise, then, if many of them are found to be more influenced by the prevailing culture than by the culture of their faith.

In both currents, one finds those who go too far and harden themselves in one direction or the other, reacting violently toward the followers of the opposing current. The clash between the two sides may reach a dangerous point, threatening the unity of the Church and sowing a spirit of hatred and bitterness among her children. Perhaps the most dangerous thing in both groups is that each, in its own way, leans toward extremism in positions built more upon convictions than upon prayerful and tearful love, burning with longing for the salvation of the other side.

They are also driven by a zeal that may perhaps be sincere but motivated by emotionalism rather than by the quiet Spirit of the Lord, who enlightens, traces the straight path, and inspires one to walk in it. Their rigidity prevents them from meeting and engaging in dialogue within an atmosphere of prayer, peace, and love, drawn from their shared supplication for the presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst. Humility is lost—the humility that springs from the joy of encountering the brother “for whom Christ died,” whatever his position may be.

Moreover, the accusations exchanged between the two sides often take on a sharp and harsh tone, using absolute labels such as heretic, fundamentalist, liberal, un-Orthodox, rigid, destructive, and so forth. This creates an atmosphere in which people become unable to clarify their perspectives to one another. Ordinary believers see, within the ecclesial atmosphere, nothing but conflict, attack, criticism, accusation, noise and confusion, to the point that many of them can hardly understand what is happening.

Fear for the faith moves the followers of the first current to such a degree that they may forget that God is present in the midst of His Church. They assume the role of the policeman defending God's rights—even if, in doing so, they remove God Himself and replace Him with themselves. The followers of the second current are moved by the influence of the ideas of this age, to the point that they almost seem to believe that the Gospel is incomplete and needs to be completed by what human civilization has achieved.

The hesychastic life of prayer, which gives birth to love, remains absent on both sides. Without it, there can be no clear and pure vision. Let us remember that God did not speak to the prophet Elijah in the fire, nor in the storm, but in the gentle breeze. Let us make room for the Lord of the Church to express Himself, and let us not obscure Him by a false zeal that often springs from our passions rather than from our purity.

The immense efforts that were undertaken for the convening of the Great Council in 2016 ended in failure, and so many began calling it the Council of Crete. Yet what happened revealed the great chasm within the Church between the two currents mentioned above. It is the secular mentality that makes some close themselves off to the point of death, while others open themselves up to the point of losing their identity.

Olivier Clément, speaking as an Orthodox Christian, called for “the necessity that our action correspond to our word, that we free it from everything marked by hostility toward others, and that we unleash the Holy Spirit to act in history and restore to it the possibility of openness and creativity.”

He who has ears to hear, let him hear!