

# Is Liturgy Working?

James K. A. Smith and Geoffrey Ready

on Secularization, Pluralism, and Christian Formation

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**How would you characterize the state of faith and religiosity in the contemporary Western world? We've seen the statistics from Pew and other surveys showing more and more people disaffiliating from organized religion. Christians sometimes react to polls like this by panicking, turning inward, and hardening the perimeter between the Christian community and the "heathen" outside. What would a better response look like?**

*JS:* Secularization does not necessarily mean a decrease in religiosity. The philosopher Charles Taylor argues that secularization is a migration of religious devotion from institutional allegiances to other channels. This is a powerful explanatory dynamic. It's true that religious membership is down, the mainline denominations are struggling, and people are less and less willing to identify with particular religious identities. Yet

it would be hard to say that people do not have a kind of religious devotion and even fervor in our late modern world. It's just channeled and expressed differently. William Cavanaugh has a book called *Migrations of the Holy*. It offers an interesting way to think about what happens in a secularized Western context: the holy migrates from the sanctuary, so to speak, out into other sorts of affiliations and communities. In an American context, clearly, religious devotion and fervor has migrated to the political. People are religiously devoted to political identities, which get loaded with ultimacy. Our political differences become differences of heresy and orthodoxy, not of prudential judgment about the best strategy to care for the poor or build a healthcare system.

Father Geoffrey is more on the front lines than me, though. And there are

such distinctive regional accents on these trends, even the Canada–U.S. border may be significant for how this dynamic is experienced.

**GR:** You asked about that fear that a lot of Christians have. Charles Taylor helps us not to panic so much, and to move from seeing the secular as out-right opposition to the Church into experiencing it as a kind of diversity. We might be tempted to think—in terms of our mission, of the evangelical imperative to baptize the world and bring the kingdom of God into it—that somehow we have a different clientele now, that human beings are suddenly no longer religious. We imagine that until a couple generations ago, everybody was religious, and you simply had to present them with the right information about Jesus and they could become *your* kind of religious, but that somehow today we’re facing a new condition in which people are just not accessible. But sociological studies point out that, actually, human beings are human beings. In fact, what we lost for a long period of time in the Church is a proper understanding of how human beings are formed or disciplined into a storied world.

Today people are finding community in very unlikely places. If we pay attention to that, it is really instructive—almost a prophetic statement to us in the Church. People are now finding genuine spiritual connections and answers to big questions in places like SoulCycle and CrossFit, in maker groups and arts groups, in social justice movements, and so forth. That’s where they’re turning for their major life moments—births and deaths, or when somebody gets cancer and they want to raise money or get support. Traditionally, before the last few centuries, this happened in Christian

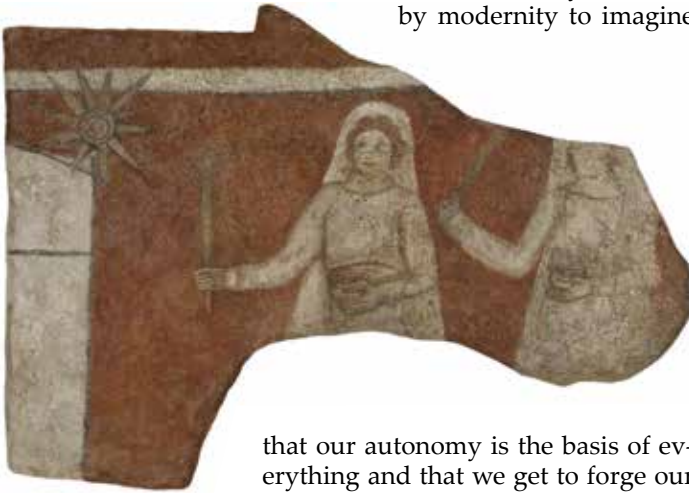
churches, in communities formed in and around the kingdom of God breaking into this world. Somehow, for a considerable period of time now, we’ve been missing that sense of embodied, deeply interconnected human community. What I think is interesting about this moment is how we can rediscover that human beings always and everywhere live like this, and we can reintegrate this sensibility into our parish communities, into our larger church bodies, and basically back into the Church’s mission.

**JS:** What we’re really asking is: what should the Church’s posture be in the face of these social realities? It’s crucial that the Church not be fearful or defensive, because both of those attitudes betray an insecurity that I think is a deep theological problem, as if it all depended on *us* and our ingenuity. We need to look for the gifts God is showing us in this moment and the patience that’s required of the Church, and—as Father Geoffrey just said—to remember some of the things we’ve forgotten, so we can be the kind of community that could welcome people into the fullness of being human. There are so many ways to present the gospel, so many different metaphors God gives us, but there are certain metaphors that can frame things strategically at a particular moment. For example, I think about Christianity as the true humanism: the glory of God as a human being fully alive. In that sense, I think the Church needs to become the kind of community that lives that out and embodies it in such a way that even if our neighbors are not quite looking for that *yet*, we might be the people that the world needs us to be in a coming season. This is a season of patience for us.

Let me add one more thing. As Father Geoffrey says, people are trading the

rituals of their lives. They have never stopped being ritual animals, never stopped being liturgical creatures. They have just swapped their rites. Perhaps the big difference between SoulCycle and Christian liturgy is between an expressivist notion of the self versus what we might call a “disciplinary” understanding. A deep anthropological shift has taken place.

We have been subtly schooled by modernity to imagine



Procession of women, possibly the Myrrhbearers approaching the tomb of Christ. Fresco from the house church baptistery, Dura-Europos, Syria, 3rd century. Yale University Art Gallery.

that our autonomy is the basis of everything and that we get to forge our own identities. We invent ourselves. That story is now hundreds of years old; it ramps up in the twentieth century, but it's hundreds of years old. This idea of selfhood, this notion of identity as a personal invention, is a weird dance, because on the one hand we want to do this with others, but what we think we are doing with others is actually expressing a sort of singular interiority.

I don't think that's actually true to being human. So the question is: how can you meet people in that space and invite them to see their humanity as something *found*, not invented—as something that is gifted, that comes by means of grace, and not from ingenuity? That's really hard, because you're going to bump into questions of normativity and discipline. But there's something deeply exhausting

about that self-invention project. The incessant cultural command to be authentic—to be individual, to be unique—is taxing for creatures like us. You already see cracks in that project, and this explains at least some of the dynamics of despair in our culture.

**GR:** One way of putting it in shorthand is: we're all rediscovering that we are storied human beings—to be a human being is to inhabit a story—but the ultimate goal for Christians is not to become the author of our own lives, but to re-story our lives according to the Author, capital-A. To be properly human is actually to be human *and* divine, sharing in God's life.

And to build on Jamie's point about the difference between expressivist tendencies in postmodern communities versus disciplinary ones, another word we could add is *eschatological*. Ultimately, our *being* as humans doesn't come from our past. We are not just the sum of everything we have gone through, our personal history. As Christians, we are born again *from the end*, and we take our identity from the kingdom, from being full participants in the body of Christ. This takes us back to the fundamental gospel theme of repenting and accepting forgiveness. What is forgiveness other than saying the past is no longer consequent for you? What matters is what you are becoming, what you're called to be. God's forgiveness in that sense is the reality of the kingdom. That's an interesting response to the despair you're talking about. People are exhausted trying to author their own lives, to come up with new identities, to answer all the big questions out of their own souls. We're not asked to do that as human beings. So the Church can give people a comprehensive message of forgiveness. People aren't always ready

to hear that their sins need to be forgiven, but relieving the pressure to create oneself is part of that forgiveness, too. It says: you belong to God, you are going toward God, you are to become a participant in God's life. Be released from the pressure to invent it all yourself! That could become the vanguard of the Christian message.

**JS:** I was just lecturing at another university earlier this week, talking with some young people who are already burned out on their passion for justice. The passion for justice is exactly right, but the burnout comes from imagining that we could secure it by ourselves. And I agree about eschatology. This is something the Christian churches in the West have forgotten. The dynamic of despair and hope could be the starting point, the opening. You see this in the Black church down here in the States right now. Everybody understands the systemic injustices that need to be grappled with. The question is, what will motivate *hope* that they could be otherwise? And here's where you see a very different sensibility in Dr. [Martin Luther] King than in Ta-Nehisi Coates: they both diagnose the same problem, but what pulls them toward a solution is so different. The Church should worry less about what young people *believe*; it's a fair question, but what's more important is, can they *hope*? And if you frame this as a question of the possibility of hope, then the biblical vision of God's agency becomes both a huge confrontation with secularization and an invitation at the same time.

**Jamie, you wrote a book called *How (Not) To Be Secular*, drawing on Charles Taylor's theory of secularization as a historical process. It seems that for Taylor, secularity is a structural condition of our contemporary world, part of the air we all breathe**

**now. It's not something we can choose individually. Is that the right way to think about it? And if so, how should we interpret the parentheses in the title of your book? Can one just *decide* not to be secular?**

**JS:** The trick is that "how." I do think Taylor is right. The story Taylor and I both tell is about a historical shift. It's a particularly contingent story, within—let's say, for our purposes—the West. It is a historical shift in the plausibility conditions in our society, in *what* is believable and *how* we believe. It's not a question of *whether* you believe in God. The arc of secularization in the West is not an arc bent toward atheism; the silly [Richard] Dawkins "New Atheist" hypothesis is clearly not borne out by sociological data. Rather, the plausibility conditions of our society have changed, such that what is believed and what is believable is *contested*. Today nobody's belief system is axiomatic. As Taylor says, there's no turning back the clock. There's not going to be a Byzantium or a Christendom again. That doesn't mean there can't be a future configuration in which Christian faith has a much different public role than it currently does in our world. It just means that nobody's ever going to forget that we didn't believe that for a while, that it was possible not to believe.

It's important for Christian communities to recognize this—maybe especially down here in the States, where I think the secularization story is different than in Canada—because there are still people longing for Grandma's days in Oklahoma, where everybody in town was a Christian and you just assumed that Christianity was true. And when their grandchildren go to the state university and hear otherwise, and questions are introduced, the questions themselves are

construed as unfaithful. That's what worries me. We can't be so fearful. We can't have our head in the historical sand. To be a Christian is going to mean that you hear the questions—and the questions aren't all dumb! So to be "secular" in this sense is to realize that you can't turn back the clock to some sort of axiomatic, monolithic belief culture. The way *not* to be secular is to assume that, oh, we're all just on our way to atheism.

**GR:** A lot of this turns on how you define belief and faith. This particular issue affects Orthodox Christians. In the early Church, there was a real reluctance to dogmatize, to turn what was experienced in liturgy and in the proclamation of God's story in the community of faith into systematic beliefs. It was only when hard-pressed by the rising of heresy that the Church had to put limits around that. It took centuries even to say what were the official New Testament books and to write a creed. And even then, the justification for what went into the creeds was, this is what we've always experienced as a community and how we've interpreted it together. The people of God, from Abraham forward, learning about God, ultimately in and through the full revelation of God in his Son, Jesus Christ: this was the experience the community passed on. They were very reluctant to turn that into rationalized, propositional truths.

Today, a lot of Orthodox would define themselves as continuing that early church experience. A lot of people are attracted to Eastern Orthodoxy because it represents that kind of tradition. But by bringing a modern, rationalistic, individualistic lens, they turn it into an idea of *belief* as holding fast to the certainty of systematic propositions. Ultimately that's what has attracted a lot of people

into Orthodoxy. They perceive that Western Christianity has been asking questions for some time now, and what they're looking for is dogmatic certainty. They want a church where they can vigilantly monitor who's in and who's out. If you go to the Internet and experience Orthodoxy there—I'm not actually counseling you to do this—it's all about winning debates, defending the faith, logical arguments, and conforming unquestioningly. Where Protestants might proof-text the Scriptures, Orthodox add the church fathers. As long as you can find a church father to say the thing you want, you can win your argument. This is a corruption of the very biblical notion of faith, in which personal *belonging* to the community precedes belief. Belief is actually just that hope you're talking about. It's *trust*. It's knowing, as the Psalmist does, that no matter how bad things look, no matter how much the wicked prosper and the faithful are oppressed, God is at work and will ultimately put all to right. To trust in that is what we're called to do.

That trust can coexist with questions, even with calling out in profound anger at God for not running the world the way we would if we were in charge (God forbid!). The opposite of faith is not questioning or doubt. It is a lack of hope and love and trust. That was the premodern community experience of the Church, and it only latterly needed to be expressed in systematic terms to protect what's at the heart of it. But now we've substituted rational, systematic theology for experience. And so people today see any question, any doubt as a denial of certain belief. So we have many people within the Orthodox Church today who would describe themselves as traditionalist (neotraditionalist is a much more appropriate term), but the philosophical

framing of their faith doesn't go back more than about a hundred and fifty years. It's a kind of fundamentalism within Orthodoxy, and there's very little resemblance to the hope, the trust in God that the gospel calls us to have, which is not about dogmatic propositions but about a relationship.

Somehow I think that will be far more compelling to the people outside of the—hopefully more permeable—boundaries of the Church than the demand for dogmatic certainty would imply. We can lead with that. We can renew within, where there are these troubling elements. What I often see, in people who live by that thinking, is that as soon as the doubts outweigh the certainty, they leave, because it's a binary on-off approach. Whereas hope and trust are much more relational and developmental. It allows us to go through the wilderness and still find the grace of God and the gifts of God in those experiences. I don't know how we can work harder or better to convey that, but we are still up against this notion that to believe in God involves no doubt whatsoever, and we don't even admit those doubts to one another, for fear of appearing less than fully Christian.

**JS:** That is beautifully said. I'm a Protestant and I have seen evangelicals for whom Orthodoxy is their way to be fundamentalist by other means. Actually, what you're diagnosing is something all Christian traditions need to grapple with. I still don't think we've acknowledged the extent to which modernity has seeped in. Do you remember, around Vatican II, the question of *aggiornamento* versus *ressourcement*?<sup>1</sup> I'm on team *ressourcement*—well, actually, I would hold both of those things in creative tension. But a lot of people think of themselves as *ressourcement*

people—retrieval or restoration people—without realizing how deeply their lens for going back to tradition has been shaped by this modernization of the self, of knowledge, confusing faith with propositionalism. So even our retrieval of the tradition is getting screened out by a deeply modernist understanding of the self. In the folks you just described, for whom faith is certainty and if they can't have certainty they want nothing—that's such a Cartesian way of thinking about Christianity, and the fact that it

<sup>1</sup> The Second Vatican Council theologians struggled to balance the retrieval of tradition or *ressourcement* ("returning to the source") with engaging the contemporary world or *aggiornamento* ("updating").



Christ heals the paralytic. Fresco from the house church baptistery, Dura-Europos, Syria, 3rd century. Yale University Art Gallery.

infects even those in the most ancient streams of the Church is really telling.

**Could you both define how you are using the term “modern”? You’ve spoken about the particular challenges of faith in the modern era. But haven’t humans always been like this? Was there ever a time when we weren’t in this existential condition?**

*JS:* There is nothing new under the sun. There is indeed something perennial about our resistances. But I’m a philosopher, and for us, ironically, “modern” is now in the past. I would say that what changed in modernity in the West was a reconfiguration of the human, bound up with a reconfiguration of epistemology. A collective, systemic shift in how we understood human beings happened in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We began to presume the autonomy and self-sufficiency of humans and of the cosmos, which became progressively unhooked from transcendence and eternity. This resonates with Taylor’s analysis. I would say that modernity is characterized by a kind of disenchantment of the world and by a picture of the human person as independent, autonomous, self-determining, and insulated both from others and from the divine. Ancient paganism and modern atheism are two very different phenomena. Neither of them are Christian, but they are not-Christian in very different ways. When ancient people were finding their way to faith, they could get there through Plato. Augustine will tell you unapologetically that Plato’s pagan philosophy was the ladder he climbed to encounter the gospel. I just don’t think that is going to be true of Immanuel Kant or Richard Dawkins. It doesn’t function in the same way, because the project

isn’t bent toward any sort of transcendence. It’s curved in on the self.

*GR:* I tend to use “modern” in the same way. Theological anthropology is what’s at stake here. What is a human being? *Incurvatus in se*, curvature toward oneself, is precisely what Augustine defines as what is most sinful. But the late modern or postmodern critique returns to community, to the idea that knowledge isn’t objective in the way we had thought. It might be interpretation all the way down. Once you understand the definition of the human being within modernity, you can see antecedents of it even before the sixteenth century. Late medieval scholasticism tends in that direction. One interesting figure is Ivan Illich, an Austrian Catholic erstwhile priest and perennial gadfly. He tried to describe the corruption of Christianity, and for him it was systematization, institutionalization. He took an ancient Latin phrase: “The corruption of the best is the worst.” This took Christianity from being what it was—a relational, community-based experience of interpretation—and made it into systems and institutions. He studied things like schools and prisons and hospitals, sort of like Foucault, and he saw these trends in the late medieval church.

As Orthodox, we can go back even further. John Zizioulas, one of our major liturgical theologians, argues for a communitarian understanding of humanity in the image of the triune God. To him, one of the first failures was in the late second or early third century. Clement of Alexandria—an interesting fellow in his own right, kind of a Greek among the Greeks, who would probably have been condemned as a heretic alongside his pupil Origen if only people could have understood anything he wrote (unintelligibility is always the savior of



philosophers)—Clement was the first to say that the liturgy is the ascent of the soul toward God. He began a long process, elaborated through the centuries, of reducing Christianity to a personal piety. Today, people can be at an Orthodox liturgy, standing in the presence of God, and they say, well, today I don't feel like going to communion, or I don't feel prepared. This is unfathomable from the standpoint of the structure and text of the liturgy, and yet it makes perfect sense in light of Clement of Alexandria, who says that you may be there as a group, but really only for the sake of convenience, because really you're just there as an individual. I think that's very "modern"—and that's the end of the second or early third century. So the term can be hard to place on a timeline. And, of course, a lot that is modern is very good. What we're critiquing here is an anthropology that privileges the individual human being as *autonomous*. Zizioulas says that we can be individuals without each other, but we can't be *persons*. Persons are always in communion with one another, just like the divine Persons in communion with one another, in whose image we are made.

**JS:** I see what you mean in that analysis of Clement. It seems to me that "modern" almost becomes an adjective to describe bottom-up, self-improvement approaches centered in the individual, focusing on *my* agency rather than *God's* agency. What you described—someone in a contemporary Orthodox service saying, "I'm not sure I should really go receive the Eucharist now"—has deeply infected all streams of Christian worship. We think of worship as a venue for me to show God something of my devotion, rather than an arena of encounter in which God is the primary agent,

actively doing something in me. This is especially true in Protestantism. I don't think it's true of magisterial Protestantism or of John Calvin, but it is functionally true of so much of Protestantism. We think *we* are the actors in worship. This is a tragic misconstrual of the splendor of what happens in worship, which is fundamentally the gift of God to the people of God, with God as agent.

**How would you reconcile your critique of modern anthropology with the conditions of life in a pluralistic society? After all, Christians in the contemporary West have generally made an individual, conscious choice to be Christian. Most of us are not subject to the kinds of coercion that existed in many premodern societies. On a possibly related note, I'm intrigued that the U.S.–Canada border has come up a few times in your conversation. Canada happens to be one of the first countries to adopt multiculturalism as an official policy. Pluralism is written into the country's understanding of itself. Are there meaningful differences between religiosity in the U.S. and in Canada?**

**JS:** I left Canada when I was twenty-five, so I've now lived longer in the States than Canada. I think secularism works itself out differently there. Quebec complicates the story in interesting ways, because Quebec was the pocket where you had established religion, and in those societies where you had established religion, the shock of secularization swung very quickly to the other side. This is true in Ireland and other European countries that now have an anti-religious kind of secularism, where the state feels the need to "vaccinate" people against religion. But in the rest of Canada, the attitude is still, "keep



religion out of the public sphere, but it's fine for weekends."

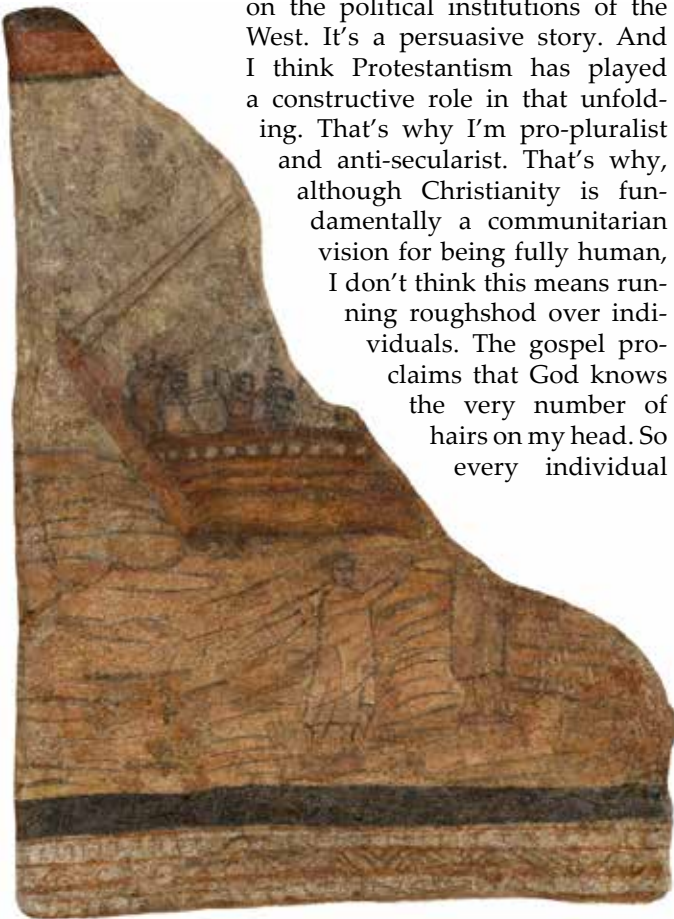
I think there's a difference between secularism and pluralism. A genuine pluralism would have to resist secularism, because secularism would amount to a very doctrinaire policy, in which one story rules the day: the dogmatism of nonbelief. In a lot of Taylor's work, he tries to avoid letting one particular Enlightenment story rule the day. That would actually be premodern, letting one story become axiomatic. The British theologian and ethicist Oliver O'Donovan writes about the unfolding of freedoms and certain individual rights as a spillover effect of the gospel on the political institutions of the West. It's a persuasive story. And I think Protestantism has played a constructive role in that unfolding. That's why I'm pro-pluralist and anti-secularist. That's why, although Christianity is fundamentally a communitarian vision for being fully human, I don't think this means running roughshod over individuals. The gospel proclaims that God knows the very number of hairs on my head. So every individual

who bears the image of God is seen and known intimately by God. That underwrites an individual dignity. This vision can uphold the freedom and integrity of the individual without spiraling into individual *ism*, an atomistic picture that reduces me to my own self-inventor.

**GR:** Ultimately, human beings have a freedom to accept or reject God. This is a very Eastern patristic notion. What we'll be asked at the final judgment is, have we chosen God or not? He will respect that choice. If there's a hell, it's because people have been given the choice to reject God's love. I do think a lot of things we would consider modern in a political or social sense—human rights and so forth—are an outworking of the gospel, though sometimes without parameters to guide it. Some of today's deep political divides are not a battle between completely different sides. They're all within a narrow part of the political spectrum focused on human liberation, and they're just arguing for how that should happen. Do you do it on the basis of upholding the welfare of the marginalized and outcasts, or do you just take off all the barriers and have complete freedom in society? That's the deep divide in American politics, but it's focused on a very narrow part of the political spectrum.

A really interesting question here is, how you get to the individual—or, in Zizioulian terms, the person—how you define the person who is actually able to make that choice? What is the process by which such a person is *formed*? The question, "Shouldn't we just let people decide?" presumes that we're born already equipped to make that decision. But Alasdair MacIntyre points out that to produce an "ideal" person in a contemporary Western

Christ walks on water. Fresco from the house church baptistery, Dura-Europos, Syria, 3rd century. Yale University Art Gallery.



democracy, someone who can vote wisely and interact sensibly without harming others, takes formation. It's not a given. And that formation is an interdependent, communitarian kind of thing. It requires virtues that are formed in a story, governed by community practice and good exemplars. The older, Aristotelian teleological and virtue-ethics ideas come into play here. In order to create the kind of person that a *modern* would be happy with, you need *pre-* or *post-modern* processes of formation. You need a good, compelling story that leads people to form second-nature virtues, that makes them capable of making wise choices that are not just going to benefit themselves and harm others.

Otherwise, all you have is *laissez-faire* capitalism's unfounded hope that if I seek my own selfish desires, somehow it'll all work out in the wash. It hasn't worked out that way. There have been great divisions of wealth, we've seen all kinds of oppressions, systematic racism, and violence. The twentieth century gave us more war, not less, despite all those assertions of individual human rights and so forth. So all the things we've been talking about actually produce the very people that work well in modern Western capitalist democracies. This anthropological critique will actually help *save* all of those human rights and individual freedoms and the possibility of choice! So I would say, let's have more pluralism, more competing narratives, and let the best story win and the best people be formed as a result.

**JS:** The individual is the fruit of a community that precedes her, and therefore, insofar as pluralism makes it possible to build robust forms of community, it's a good thing. The

French Catholic thinker Jean-Luc Marion talks about the self as *le donné*, the gifted one. My identity is given me by a community. Ultimately it is grace. It is given to me by God, by means of community. To lean into that requires a healthy pluralism. One of the great challenges for secular societies is that they have cannibalized all the institutions of community that built the kind of citizens liberal democracies need to thrive. The university, for example, has been decimated as a formative institution. So where are we making citizens?

**GR:** And look whom we're bringing forward as politicians and leaders. Just think of the great statesmen of years gone by. Democracy itself is in peril, I believe, and we're in danger of tipping into totalitarianism.

**JS:** There's another side to the question of pluralism: the failures of the Church to undertake catechesis well in modernity. I think this is true in parts of Orthodoxy, it's certainly true in Roman Catholicism and in my own Protestant tradition, which is a Dutch immigrant strain. We were insufficiently attentive to the ways ethnicity got intertwined with liturgical identity. Because ethnicity and liturgical practice were so melded, now it's like watching the Sopranos on HBO: you're an Italian from North Jersey, so this is what you do—you engage in rituals that aren't even Christian; they're Italian. And that does funky things to Christian formation. Somewhere between caving to autonomous independence and the ritualization of ethnic identity is a healthy sense of what it means to be the body of Christ, to be shaped into a community by the Spirit, to hope together for a future. I think that sort of ethnic-ritual melding is the shadow side of our failures of catechesis.

**GR:** Yes, that's certainly been the dominant narrative for Orthodoxy in North America, particularly in places like Toronto, where you're encouraged—no matter what your background is—to remain that first and to be Canadian only secondarily. There are third- and fourth-generation Chinese here in Toronto who don't speak a word of English, because they can exist entirely within ethnic enclaves. There's a beauty to that, to the fact that people can come from all over the world, leave behind ancient hatreds, and live side by side. Come World Cup time, it's beautiful to see every nation represented here. But many of our Orthodox churches are insular ethnic communities and can only survive because of ongoing immigration. Second- and third-generation people are just lost. They either marry Christians outside of Orthodoxy and attend there—it's an astonishingly high number, something like ninety percent would go elsewhere—or they stop going altogether, which is far more likely today.

Often Orthodox will say that this is the incarnational reality of the Church. It melds itself to particular cultures. From a very early age, Eastern Orthodox missionaries were known for using the vernacular language. They invented whole alphabets for other Slavic peoples, and then as they went across the great Russian wilderness and met the indigenous populations, it was a different story from the Western missionaries who came with Latin. Some of our missionaries would spend twenty or thirty years listening to the people, giving them a written language, writing the Bible for them, and trying to take on as much of their culture as possible. But today we sometimes tell ourselves we are taking that incarnational approach of taking the

culture and “baptizing” it and using it to express the gospel. If the gospel is still not being proclaimed at the heart of it, though, then what you get is just the culture. It may have vestiges of Christianity embedded in it, but that's about all. I know lots of Orthodox who, because of their cultural heritage, have a really enjoyable Lent. They have all the recipes they learned from their grandmother. They can stay completely away from animal products. But they're not living it as a spiritual commitment, not understanding anything of the Paschal mystery that it's supposed to lead to.

Our job is to bring the gospel forward. In my own research, I've wanted to understand why liturgy—which is a crucial part of formation—isn't working, why people could just hold to cultural practices or think of themselves as Russian or Serbian or Greek or whatever, not principally as kingdom-bearers. What is going wrong?—particularly when Orthodoxy, which didn't experience the same upheavals as Western Christianity (the successive shocks of the Renaissance, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the Industrial Revolution, and then the full blast of the twentieth century)—Orthodoxy, because it's been under various kinds of persecution, has preserved its liturgical tradition in a really conservative way. Why, then, is our liturgy not working the way it's supposed to?

My own thinking around this—informed by some of your writing, Jamie—is that over the last few centuries, we have not emphasized the story, the narrative at the core of it. All of the cultural ritual continued, and people like Alexander Schmemmann came along and said: just look at the text and you'll understand what liturgy is

supposed to be all about. But even he wasn't able to put his finger on why it wasn't working. Why are people going through the motions, participating in this ancient, beautiful liturgy, with all its resonant social imaginary, but not being touched by it? The stories of their lives are not connecting to the story of God because the story of God was not being brought to the fore. All of this was suppressed during the modern period of the Church. The story of salvation was taken to be just a priest's private prayer that nobody even heard, or—worse—the whole liturgy was celebrated in a language that might once have been the vernacular but no longer is. Church Slavonic is no longer what people speak. New Testament Greek is not really understandable to modern Greeks—so as proud as they are that it's still in Greek, it's not actually connecting.

You can only understand Jesus Christ if you understand Israel and how he is its fulfillment, but most Orthodox Christians wouldn't be able to tell you that story. They'll be able to tell you how to light candles, venerate icons, receive the sacraments, go to various feasts, and do the fasting. What's really exciting about the last half-century or so is the retrieval of narrative as an embodied, enacted story. I think it's important to do all these things—there's some benefit to "going through the motions," as you say in one of your books—but ultimately it has to make that synoptic connection to the story of our lives. Our stories have to come alongside each other so that a spark flies across: that's an image from N. T. Wright, who talks about how stories are subversive and transformative, but they have to connect with us. That's what's been missing in these cultural islands we've formed out of Orthodox parishes in North America.

**JS:** In the communities I work with, I have a two-sided strategy: on the one hand, what I call liturgical catechesis: we have to invite people to understand *why* we do what we do when we worship, because if they're not invited into a reflective appropriation of worship, then it just becomes ethnic identity or superstition. One way to make that feel compelling to people is through a liturgical analysis of culture. The pedagogical pathway that gets people to care about the story carried in the liturgy is to take them through the back door, by way of cultural critique. I show them that they're immersed in rival liturgies for the entire rest of the week, that there are all these cultural practices, many of which revolve around consumerism—and increasingly, down here, around nationalism. All these liturgies we participate in aren't just something that we do; they are doing something *to* us. If people are given a prophetic occasion to see what kind of person these practices are shaping them into, they can say, I don't want to be that kind of person! And then I can say, yes, exactly, that's why God gives us the gift of liturgy, and here's how it's counter-formative. You have to get people to feel the conflict with these rival formations in order for them to come back to their own practice, which they take for granted as Christians, and see why it's so radical.

**GR:** This brings up what should be the scariest question any of us ever ask: what do I really love? As Christians, we're trained to think that we value certain things, and we have an hour or so a week to practice that. But for the rest of the week we're being formed in other ways. We're like an iceberg: only the very tip is the kind of stuff that we think about, but the rest is our habits and behaviors and ultimate values. I know you use that [Andrej]



A woman, probably the Samaritan woman, draws water from a well. Fresco from the house church baptistery, Dura-Europos, Syria, 3rd century. Yale University Art Gallery.

Tarkovsky film *Stalker* to illustrate this point. I've pointed out that what the Final Judgment will be is precisely that revelation: what did you really love? That's going to be disclosed to the world. That's the fundamental question: what is the story I really belong to here, what are all my habits and behaviors and second-nature parts of myself directed toward? I think for the majority of us, even those of us professionally in this business, it's late modern consumer capitalist culture. And that's a really scary proposition.

We have the sacrament of confession in the Orthodox Church, and I try to

direct people to this question. I don't want to hear about the list of rules you think you broke, and actually God doesn't really care about that. He wants your heart, and that's the biblical synecdoche, of course, for the whole of you. Where are you going? What is the orientation of your life? What do you ultimately want? And if that could be revealed to you right now and you could have it, are you sure you want it? Tarkovsky shows us that people aren't so sure when they get to that moment. They want to re-think, or rather re-desire, before they cross that threshold.

**JS:** I'm so glad that you mentioned confession. This is one way the Church is such a peculiar institution, in a good way. The practice of confession implies that we let go of any myth of purity. I'm coming from Western traditions and Augustine is my guy; I realize he is not your favorite person—

**GR:** We love him more than you realize, actually.

**JS:** OK, I'm glad to hear that. One gift we've received from the Augustinian tradition is the realization that there's no illusion, in this long saeculum of our waiting for kingdom come, of our ever achieving perfection. One of God's graces toward us is to extend forgiveness. Every single time we own up to the *permixtum* of our desires, we realize how that itself is a grace. One of the most disordering narratives at work today is how everybody thinks they can have a clear conscience. I mean among secular people. "I am the morally upright one, because I know exactly what justice requires." The hubris of moral purity can be more dangerous, sometimes, than the aloofness of moral laxity. So there's a strange gift in the

practice of confession and absolution, which releases us from that distorted picture of ourselves.

**GR:** And to return to the point about eschatology, the picture we get from liturgy—and this is profoundly Augustinian, it’s a hundred percent grace—is how the holiness we can partake of is not the product of a kind of progressive addition to us. It’s entirely a gift from the end. In the Orthodox liturgy, about halfway through—after the Liturgy of the Word, as we move on to the Liturgy of the Faithful, the celebration of the Eucharist—there’s a great prayer of thanksgiving and sharing of the Lord’s Supper. It adopts the view from the end: we *remember* Christ’s Second Coming. And then, when the gifts are brought out and people are asked to come forward, it’s the “holy things for the holy,” for the saints. In a Pauline sense, we Christians have a new identity, having died to everything in this passing-away age and been born again in Christ. We are made saints, not because we’ve added to our holiness or become pure, and not because we’re not immediately going to go back out and fail again, but because we’re brought to participate here and now, in this anticipatory, proleptic way, in the kingdom. We are already saints. Our calling is to live out that identity in which we’re made from the end. That’s the only way to understand forgiveness and confession. People are so anxious about that other model: how do I get better, how do I improve? That’s not the point.

You have to begin to see not just yourself but also others this way. This is key. What we rehearse in the liturgy is the kingdom itself. It’s learning to see one another as people created in the image and likeness of God, people who are saints. We come to that place

of *shalom*, of complete reconciliation with one another, in order to go out and live that in the world. We have to keep returning to that endpoint.

**I know you are both into art, movies, music, and popular culture. Do you see art as a potential source for the kinds of formation and even the liturgical sensibilities you’ve been discussing? What is your attitude toward modern art, which reflects the influence of capitalism and individualism—for example, in the idea of self-expression, which took hold in the Renaissance?**

**JS:** I devote a big chunk of my life to editing a quarterly literary journal called *Image*. I don’t think art has to be beholden to an expressivist model. The arts have been pushing back on that in all kinds of ways. One reason art matters is because it is a sector of our culture that remembers we are more than just thinking things or data processors. In a backhanded way, the arts testify to the fullness of being human, because they activate the imagination and visceral aspects of who we are in the same way liturgy does (or is supposed to). The arts are incarnate. They remind us of all the layers of being human. They can “captivate” us below intellectual reflection. The question is: to what end? I think Christians need to be in that sphere, and to recognize the ways that poetry, painting, film, and music resonate with people on a register that speaks to some of the most fundamental longings. In an age where we are increasingly construed as computers and meat—and so many cultural forces are bent on making this true—the arts are an oasis.

**GR:** T. S. Eliot answers this question in his poem “The Waste Land,” which depicts a world very close to



the one we've been describing. It ends with, "These fragments I have shored against my ruins." What he means by "fragments" are quotations from traditional narratives, fragments of songs, of oral culture from all over the world. It's a very pluralist vision. They all form the underground streams that underlie this desolate wilderness we live in. Novels, paintings, poems, and films incorporate fragments that can connect us back to a deeper way of being a human being.

C. S. Lewis talked about "men without chests." We've become just thinking beings, but we need the heart, we need a whole-body way of being human. The arts point us in that direction. And by this, I don't mean that peculiar and

often very American phenomenon of "Christian" novels or films or music—

*JS:* Oh please, God, no.

*GR:* —which is the product of a reaction within that world of "modern" Christianity that is vehemently opposed to the secular. Rather, it's often in those artworks that appear most secular or most alien to traditional Christianity that we find these seeds. I love going through modern art galleries. Even the most extreme versions of contemporary art can tell us something about what it means to be human in relation to God. "These fragments I have shored against my ruins": we need those connections to a deeper, wider, broader way to be. ✱



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