

Less People attend Church services - who is to blame?



The temptation inside religious circles is to blame what's happening on secularity. Secular culture, many people argue, is perhaps the most powerful narcotic ever perpetrated on this planet, both for good and for bad. It swallows most of us whole with its seductive promises of heaven on this side of eternity. Within our secularized world, the pursuit of the good life simply squeezes out almost all deeper religious desire. Interestingly, this is also the major criticism that Islamic extremists make of Western culture. For them it's a drug, which once ingested, has no cure. That's why they want to block their youth from Western influences.

But is this true? Is secular culture the enemy? Are we, church-goers, the last true remnant of God and truth left standing, prophetic and marginalized in a society that's shallow, irreligious, and godless?

Many, including myself, would argue that this conclusion is far, far too simple. Secular society can be shallow, irreligious, and godless, there's more than sufficient evidence for that; but, beneath its shallowness and its congenital allergy to our churches, real religious desire still burns and the churches must ask themselves: Why aren't more people turning to us to deal with their religious desires? Why are so many people who are seeking spirituality not interested in looking at what the church offers? Why, instead, are they turning to everything except the church? Why, indeed, do so many people have the attitude: "The church has nothing to offer me: I find it boring, irrelevant, caught up inside its own petty issues, hopelessly out of step with my life."

Secularity is, no doubt, partly to blame, but so too are the churches themselves. There's an axiom that says: All atheism is a parasite off of bad theism. That logic also holds regarding attitudes towards the church: Bad attitudes towards the church feed off bad church practices.

The great Jewish scholar, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, would agree. In his book, *God In Search of Man*, he writes: "It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than the voice of compassion – its message becomes meaningless."

Novelist Marilynne Robinson (who has both a deep sympathy for and a commitment to the church) echoes Heschel. For her, as churches today, we are not radiating the immensity of God and the larger mystery of Christ. Rather, despite our good will, we are too much subordinating the mystery of Christ to tribalism, resentment, fear, and self-protection. This is one of the major reasons for our marginalization. Christianity, Robinson submits, "is too great a narrative to be reduced to serving any parochial interest or to be underwritten by any lesser tale." It is our narrow attitudes, she believes, that denigrate the Christian message and leave the churches, for good reason, marginalized: "Undignified, obscurantist, and xenophobic Christianity closes the path for many" to enter the church." Blaming the world for our problems, she argues, does nothing to enhance the respect the world has for religion or for Christianity. The drop-off in church attendance is very much our own fault because far too often we are not radiating a church with a compassionate embrace and we are not in fact addressing the real energies that are burning inside people. For Robinson, the secular world isn't, per se, irreligious. Rather it sees our churches as self-absorbed, non-understanding, and non-empathetic to its desires, its wounds, and its needs. And so her challenge to us, church-goers, is this: "It behooves anyone who calls himself or herself a Christian, any institution that calls itself a church, to bring credit to the faith, at very least not to embarrass or disgrace it. Making God a tribal deity, our local Baal, is embarrassing and disgraceful."

Some years ago, I heard an Evangelical minister state the problem this way: As Christian churches we have the living water, the water Christ promised would quench all fires and all thirsts. But, this is the problem: We aren't getting the living water to where the fires are! Instead we are spraying water everywhere, except where it's burning!

He's right. The answer to the mass exodus from our churches is not to blame the culture; it's to make better churches!

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