

Feature Article: JAF6403

## IN SEARCH OF THE SACRED: Evangelicals on a Quest and Why it Matters

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This article first appeared in the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 40, number 03 (2017). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

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Conservative commentator Ann Coulter once said, "God gave us the earth. We have dominion over the plants, and animals, trees. God said, 'Earth is yours. Take it. Rape it. It's yours.'"<sup>1</sup> In all fairness to Ms. Coulter, she said this sixteen years ago, and she may no longer believe it; that is, the part about raping the planet, or she may have only meant to hyperbolize, as she is accustomed to doing. Whether she meant it or not, there are Christians aplenty who would not object to her notion that the dominion mandate grants humans utilitarian permission to violate the creation. Industrialism would not have possessed its ferocity, and Charles Dickens would have less to write about, were it not for Protestants who somehow thought they were doing God a favor by creating the factory system, as Max Weber has pointed out.<sup>2</sup>

Statements such as Coulter's and what they imply have led some Protestants to jump ship and swim over to the Catholic Church, where man's relationship with the world often is viewed in more sacramental terms. Communication theorist Marshall McLuhan was one such jumper. Influenced by G. K. Chesterton, he confessed that his journey to Rome was due in part to Protestantism's tendency to embrace all things new in the name of "progress." As a frustrated young man, McLuhan wrote to his mother that everything that was "especially hateful and devilish and inhuman about the conditions and strains of modern industrial society is not only Protestant in origin, but their boast (!) to have originated it."<sup>3</sup>

While there was a rash of Catholic conversions by English-speaking intellectuals from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century (Henry Newman, G. K. Chesterton, Dorothy Day, Allen Tate, Thomas Merton, Marshall McLuhan), such conversions by English-language writers before this period were rare.<sup>4</sup> However, as we move deeper into the twentieth-first century, there is evidence that young evangelicals are now going over to Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran traditions in

growing numbers.<sup>5</sup> While some are leaving the church altogether in repudiation of their evangelical upbringing, others are finding new meaning in high-church liturgy or by following the Christian calendar. For reasons that can be described only as a “sacramental hunger,” these Millennials crave the weekly Eucharist over high-octane praise bands; they would rather observe Lent than attend a seeker-friendly service.

**Disenchantment of the World.** Young Christians hanker for mystery and meaning in a world that has become progressively disenchanted over the past five hundred years. Philosopher Charles Taylor begins his much discussed tome *A Secular Age* by asking this question: “Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?”<sup>6</sup> Premodern Christians lived in a world of spirits, demons, and moral forces.<sup>7</sup> Because the liberal democratic project has reduced belief in God to a personal matter, no longer allowing the Creator to play a role in public policy, the official stance on the Divine Being is now identical to that of John Lennon’s atheism: “Imagine there’s no heaven....No hell below us. Above us only sky.” If the cultural and political environments in which we swim shape us to any extent, then we are, for practical purposes, all devoted materialists.

Taylor says a chief characteristic of modernity is that meaning no longer resides in *things* but rather in *minds*.<sup>8</sup> The so-called Cartesian mind-split, wrote poet Allen Tate, is a stunted condition of being able to perceive only a “half-horse” version of reality. In contrast, the medieval church saw the world in terms of a “whole-horse.”<sup>9</sup> Tate’s metaphor is poignant because it maintains moderns prefer the utilitarian value of a thing — its “infallible workability.”

Tate says the Reformation’s drive toward individual spiritual autonomy only served to complement the Enlightenment’s drive toward secular self-determination. As a consequence, Protestants over time easily evolved into Progressives — what Tate referred to as “half-horse” religionists. Tate observed that half-horse religionists tended to believe in horsepower rather than in horses and so they gave us lots of assembly lines and smokestacks. They took a progressive view of things where “B” is always an improvement over “A” that came before it. Today’s half-horse religionists prefer *efficiency* to *beauty*, what is *new* to what is *old*, *big* to what is *small*, *global* to what is *local*, and the *abstract* to what is *particular*.<sup>10</sup>

Both Taylor and Tate warned of the dangers of placing meaning in the mind. Abstractionism can lead to what Tate called a “controlling materialism.” In similar fashion, Taylor says that once we locate meaning in the mind, we become susceptible of those who would manipulate our brains for selfish ends.

C. S. Lewis also warned of this danger when he said in 1947 that we were on the cusp of something never practiced before in the history of our existence — the transforming of the species altogether. Lewis feared the “new Conditioners” who would seek to control the masses for their own good pleasure. “The man-moulders of the new age will be armed with the powers of an omniscient state and an

irresistible scientific technique,” says Lewis. “We shall get at last a race of conditioners who really cut out all posterity in what shape they please.”<sup>11</sup> The irony of this kind of controlling materialism is that the Conditioners cannot act upon their victims without acting on themselves: “Man’s conquest of nature turns out, in the moment of its consummation, to be Nature’s conquest of Man.”<sup>12</sup>

**A Sacramental Outlook.** “Things treated merely as things in themselves destroy themselves because only in God have they any life,” writes Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann.<sup>13</sup> The belief that physical matter is not merely matter but is connected to something greater than itself is not only a biblical idea but also is found in the teachings of early Christian theologians. The apostle Paul wrote to Christians at Colossae concerning Christ that “all things were created through him and for him; that he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”<sup>14</sup> Because Paul saw Christ as not only the *creator* of the cosmos but also its *caretaker*, he was able to speak boldly to the pagans in Athens that in God we move and have our being.<sup>15</sup>

Since the beginning of Christianity and for more than a thousand years, there was a common belief that all matter — all nature — is mysteriously and metaphysically anchored in God. Hans Boersma, who holds the J. I. Packer Chair in theology at Regent College, says in *Heavenly Participation* that the patristic and medieval mind readily recognized “that the heavenly reality of the Word of God constituted an eternal mystery; the observable appearances of creation pointed to and participated in this mystery.”<sup>16</sup> “Of course, any theist position assumes a relationship between God and this world,” says Boersma, but a “sacramental ontology insists that not only does the created world point to God as its source...but that it also subsists or participates in God....Our connection with God is *participatory*, or real, connection — not just an *external*, or nominal, connection.”<sup>17</sup>

A sacramental outlook permeated a number of prominent Christian writers of the twentieth century; each believed its recovery was an important antidote to controlling materialism. J. R. R. Tolkien was not merely describing Mordor as a vast wasteland when he wrote *The Lord of the Rings*; he was providing a critique of modernity: “Here nothing lived, not even the leprous growths that feed on rotteness. The gasping pools were choked with ash and crawling muds, sickly white and grey, as if the mountains had vomited the filth of their entrails upon the lands about.”<sup>18</sup> The values Tolkien highlights in his trilogy concern the proper relationships people should have with each other, with nature, and with God.<sup>19</sup> From the onset of Tolkien’s tale, we find the world under “severe threat from those who worship pure power, and are its slaves: the technological and instrumental power embodied in Sauron (after whom the book itself is named, after all), and the epitome of modernism gone mad.”<sup>20</sup>

The Catholic writer Flannery O’Connor was able to bold-stroke her characters into fiction because she believed the “Holy lurks in creation.” The Catholic imagination tends to emphasize the metaphorical nature of creation or its “analogical” essence, a perception that “objects, events, and persons of ordinary existence hint at the nature of

God and indeed make God in some fashion present to us.”<sup>21</sup> Like Tolkien, O’Connor was greatly aware of the sacramental power of language. She argued that fiction should be made according to nature, and when this occurs, “it should reinforce our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in concrete observable reality. If the writer uses his eyes in the real security of his Faith, he will be obliged to use them honestly, and his sense of mystery, and acceptance of it, will be increased.”<sup>22</sup>

**Give Me That Old-Time Religion.** The late Robert Webber predicted that a post-Enlightenment strain of Protestantism (which deemphasized the mysteries of God, the full-bodied nature of worship, the significance of the Eucharist, and other features of liturgical and historic Christianity) would spur evangelicals to seek out churches that joyfully viewed their sanctuaries as “thin places” where Christ and His redemptive work are revealed in more tangible ways.<sup>23</sup> Evangelicals on a quest for meaning may have little political motivation for joining a mystery-minded church, but in doing so, they could have a far-reaching impact on a culture that desacralizes everything. After all, why preserve the institution of marriage if you don’t believe it has a sacramental element behind it? Why resist the abortionist if life is not sacred?

Some observers are now suggesting that the real divide in Christianity is no longer Protestant and Catholic but *progressive* and *historic* — progressive Christians having cut themselves off from supernatural belief commitments and historic Christians still embracing truths found in the ancient creeds.<sup>24</sup> Over the past hundred years, this progressive–historic divide has certainly been evident in the Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, and Anglican denominations. And as Notre Dame socialist Christian Smith’s research has indicated, what now plagues much of the evangelical church in North America is moralistic therapeutic deism.<sup>25</sup> Dwight Longenecker, a Catholic priest and writer who follows these matters, believes “progressive” churches eventually will die out because they are essentially materialists with no message other than the one the culture already presumes.<sup>26</sup>

Peter Leithart has gone as far as to suggest in his book *The End of Protestantism* that the collapse of church divisions within Protestantism is both desirable and inevitable. He sees a future church that is Reformed, liturgical, and yet remarkably diverse. Leithart’s postmillennial ecclesiology would dictate such a vision as an interim stage anticipating a fully unified church before Christ’s return, but his musings also reflect a hard reality that walls are already being breached as orthodox groups cross sectarian lines to advance the work of the Kingdom.

Developments like these signal a possible realignment of the denominational planets. What constellations will form in the future remains to be seen; however, one wonders if the Christianity of the twenty-first century will bear more of the marks of the ancient patristic church. Would it be a positive development if Christians return to the trunk of the great tree before it began to split and splinter into a thousand pieces? Since a defining factor of that original trunk was a robust sacramental outlook, such a communion would have the wherewithal to resist any controlling materialism.

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## NOTES

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- 3 Quoted in *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, ed. Matie Molinaro et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 73.
- 4 See Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997).
- 5 See Rachel Williams, "A Sacramental Yearning That Millennials Are Craving," *Juicy Ecumenism: The Institute on Religion and Democracy's Blog*, July 31, 2015, <https://juicyecumenism.com/2015/07/31/a-sacramental-yearning-that-millennials-are-craving/> and Gracy Olmstead, "Why Millennials Long for Liturgy," *The American Conservative*, January 14, 2014, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/why-millennials-long-for-liturgy/>.
- 6 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 25.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 31.
- 9 Allen Tate, "Remarks on Southern Religion," in *I'll Take My Stand*, Lewis P. Simpson, ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1930/1980), 155–75.
- 10 See Rod Dreher's "A Crunchy-Con Manifesto" in *Crunchy Cons* (New York: Crown Forum, 2006), 1–2.
- 11 C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947, 1968), 73.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 80.
- 13 Alexander Schmemman, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press), 17.
- 14 *Reformation Study Bible*, ESV (Orlando: Ligonier Ministries, 2005).
- 15 See Acts 17:28.
- 16 Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 17.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 24.
- 18 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), 239.
- 19 See Patrick Curry, *Defending Middle-earth* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 13.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 21 See Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 6.
- 22 Flannery O'Connor, "The Church and the Fiction Writer," in *Mystery and Manner* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 146.
- 23 See Robert Webber and Lester Ruth, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, rev. ed. (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2012).
- 24 See, e.g., Dwight Longenecker, "Twelve Reasons Why Progressive Christianity Will Die Out," *Patheos*, January 19, 2016, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/standingonmyhead/2016/01/twelve-reasons-why-progressive-christianity-will-die-out.html>.
- 25 See, e.g., Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 26 Longenecker, "Twelve Reasons."