

The Toleration of Faith and Secularity

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This paper, I confess, is the result of a strong, negative reaction to title of this year's conference. When I opened the announcement and read the title, The Toleration of Moral Decay, I "flipped out." This reaction will not surprise many who know me and consider that I have been flipped out for some time. My first reaction was that the topic represented the intellectual equivalent of "fighting the last war." This is the condition were the nature of the "war" has changed but we continue to do battle related to old wars without awareness of the new situation. It will be clear that this is a very personal paper in response to the conference title and reflecting my faith journey. I appreciate the opportunity through this ANSR paper to reflect on these issues and concerns with you.

Another analogy that came to mind is the heated debates in the Middle Ages concerning how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. Assuming we could prove the existence of angels, and we could determine that angels dance on heads of pins, and we could count the exact number of angels able to dance on such a space, WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE? It is simply not important to the larger issues of life and faith.

While not obvious in the conference information, my sense is that the topic is an effort to deal with the issue often defined as the "culture wars." These wars seem to be framed in terms of those fighting "moral decay" vis-à-vis those who, it must be assumed, support moral decay. Connected to this split is the problem of the definition of "decay," often defined by topics such as abortion, stem cell research, gay life style seeking marriage, teaching evolution, all pointing to a presumed floodtide of secular humanism.

Now I admit despair over the toleration of moral decay in America but some of my examples of decay would be, as related to the wealthiest society in the world: the 2.3 million adults jailed in this country, a higher percent and number than any other country in the world; the 47+ million Americans without health care support, the majority of whom are working and have children, making America the only industrialized society in the world where all of its citizens are not covered; and the final toleration I will list is contained in two numbers: 3 trillion dollars, 4,000+ deaths. So my examples of moral decay are a bit different from the more common examples used.

But of more concern than the issue of the definition and examples of moral decay is that the framing of the topic represents and exemplifies the deeper problem of

splitting. Splitting is a large, negative force creating fear and mistrust both in the society and the church. The use of the technique of splitting has been used cynically as a political tactic in this country in recent years, to the detriment of all of our citizens. Furthermore, this particular “splitting” misses the point.

The point, I will suggest in this paper, is that what is occurring is a rise, not only in our country but across the world, of secularity and modernity that confronts not only Christianity but also the other religions of the world. The response to secularization is the rise of fundamentalism in all religious groups who see this secular spirit as something to be battled as in a crusade for Christians and a Jihad for Muslims. The result are holy wars, globally, and suppression efforts, locally, in the belief that this restoration to the “pure faith” will stop secularity from destroying religion. The negative result of this effort is religious fundamentalism within religions and a rise of what I call, atheistic fundamentalism, as well (see Hedges, I Don't Believe in Atheists.) Remember that in the last century it was political fundamentalism that wreak such havoc, in the form of fascism and communism confronting democratic nation states.

Recently, I heard a person say that the pre-modern view of time and the flow of life as cyclical whereas the modern person views time as linear. Pardon my old fashioned ways but I tend toward the cyclical. For example, I would suggest that 150 years ago the cultural battle in America was between the established rural, Protestant “immigrants” and the “new” urban, Catholic immigrants leading in one outcome to the Constitutional amendment creating prohibition. I draw this conclusion from the work of Joseph Gusfield in The Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement, (1963, 1986). Gusfield writes:

“When divergent styles of life claim equal or superior prestige, the bearers of these styles are involved in a clash to establish prestige dominance and subordination. (Gusfield, 1963, p18)

We have had these clashes historically in America after major societal upheaval points such as the civil war, the mass immigration period, the 1920's, and the mid-Sixties. Each of these points set off clashes spinning out particular “opening up” of the society resulting in “moral decays” to be addressed. The upheaval of the Sixties, I suggest, represented the beginning of the most recent clash between the deep religious traditions of America and the rising secularity in America.

Personally, from the time I graduated from NNC and moved into the larger societal context, the issue of the “secular society” was always a point of concern and intellectual work for me. I was seeking to put together the salvation theology of my church with the developing sense of the love and justice of God related to the larger world beyond the Church. Hence, my deepening concern with topic of secularity beginning in my twenties.

This became more pronounced as I became immersed in the secular society of the northern California Bay Area beginning with my graduate work and continuing professionally, along with my wife, being deeply connected to Berkeley and the University. This might not have become such a burning issue for me if I had settled where I expected to settle, in the service of our church at one of our colleges. That would mean that our life environment would be the college and church, with almost all associations and friendships with Nazarenes. But I ended up, not at Bethany but at Berkeley. Who says God doesn't have a sense of humor?!

So how should we understand, think about and act related to what is happening between faith and secularity in America at this point in time? And what does it mean for Christians and the Church, especially in America? To try to deal with these questions in a thirty minute paper is madness but I will present, briefly, some ideas to create a "reflective space" for our thinking.

To attempt to answer these questions, however briefly and inadequately, I will draw on several sources. The first source as I mentioned, is Gusfield's use of social status conflict analysis to consider that we are in another cycle of conflict previously seen in the example of the temperance movement in America with the clash between an established value group and a rising new value group.

The second source draws from the recent U.S. Religious Landscape Survey by the Pew Forum (2008). We will be looking for the "smoking gun" in the data that relates to Gusfield's notion that when the values of a dominate group appear threatened, every effort is made to resist by pushing back, usually through the political process. The third source draws from Charles Taylor and his new book, The Secular Age, (2008). His review of types of secularity we encounter, and the positing of a third perspective, can be helpful as the faith view encounters the growing secular view. The fourth source draws from a book of Brian D. McLaren, A Generous Orthodoxy, (2004). McLaren's thinking about the people of God suggests an approach to dealing with the diversity of thinking both within the Church and between Christians and secular members of society.

There are two levels that must be seen in this shift in America from an overwhelming, taken-for-granted presence of civil religion in much of daily life, to a lessening level of connection by the larger society to such a religious presence. The first level is within churches between more traditional positions and more open positions. To the credit of ANSR, this was a topic almost two decades ago presented by Tex Sample (1990). Sample dealt with the splits taking place within congregations and denominations.

The second level is within societies and between societies in the clash between religion and the secular, often identified in terms of science, modernity, and humanism. This level was address in the last decade by ANSR in its consideration of secularization (Bellah, 1999) and of fundamentalism (Appleby,

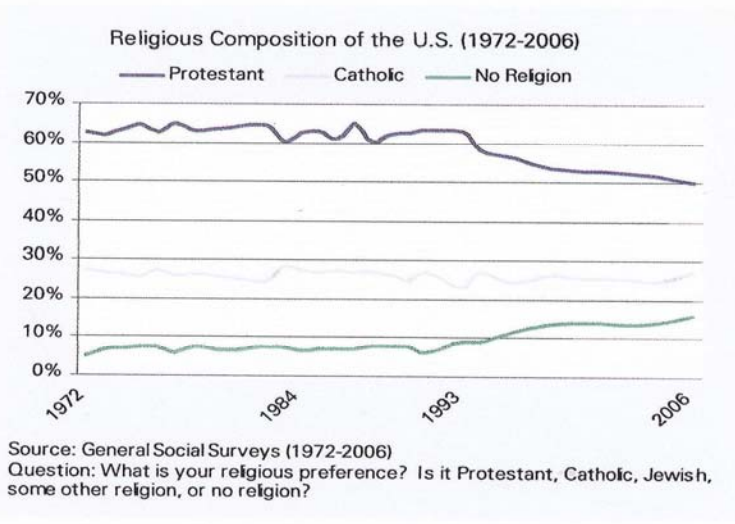
2004). So here we are still wrestling with these two levels, often discussed in the limited term of culture wars and being identified with a set of topics which are, arguably, a part of a much larger movement.

How Should We Understand What's Happening and Why? – The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey.

What does the recent research and statistics say about religion in America at this time? What are the trends that may explain the current clash? The Pew Survey involved interviews with 35,000 Americans above 18 years old.

I began reading the report looking for the “smoking gun” in the data distinctly pointing to the reason for the current clash. The first thing that struck me is the overwhelming numbers of Americans that call themselves, “Christian.” It’s a total of 78.4% of which 51.3% are defined as Protestant. Add other religions and you now have the percent of religious identity in America at 83.1%. So, the first thing you have to say is that based on pure numbers, you can’t talk about the overwhelming tide of secular humanists in America. They don’t exist unless you hold that the 16.1% deemed “Unaffiliated,” (of whom only 10.1% consider themselves agnostic, atheist, or secular), are extremely powerful beyond all comprehension. That is why you have to find another reason for the “extreme” concern and reaction about the power of those “humanists.”

The “smoking gun” causing all the concern about the takeover of the humanists is found in the graph showing the Religious Composition of the U.S. (p. 18) Here you see the trend lines showing the changes occurring between 1972-2006 for the Protestant, Catholic, and Unaffiliated or No Religion groups. While the Catholic line is steady resulting from major losses being covered by mainly Hispanic immigration, the Protestant line has moved from as high as 65% to the projected 50% while the No Religion has moved from 5% to 16%.



As the Pew report states related to various sources for the data, the interpretation is clear for Protestantism in America.

Although scholars contributing to this research have adopted a variety of definitions of major religious groups and pursued various approaches to measuring change over time, **this research arrives at a similar conclusion: The proportion of the population that is Protestant has declined markedly in recent decades while the proportion of the population that is not affiliated with any particular religion has increased significantly.** This trend is clearly apparent, for example, in the findings of the General Social Surveys (GSS), conducted between 1972 and 2006 by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. Over this period, the GSS have asked the same basic religious identification question each time the survey was conducted: “What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?” Through the 1970s and 1980s, between 60% and 65% of respondents described themselves as Protestant. In the early 1990s, however, the proportion of adults identifying as Protestant began a steady decline. By 2006, the GSS registered Protestant affiliation at 50%, an estimate that is very similar to the one produced by the Landscape Survey. (Pew - U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 2008. p. 18, highlighting added)

Thus, we have definite statistical evidence of a clear change in the religious composition of our society. But I still have to ask the question: why all the weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth? The American society is still 50% Protestant, another 25% other Christian faiths vis-à-vis only 10.1% who consider themselves agnostic, atheist, or secular.

The fear and reaction is revealed in the fine print. I would point to the chart on Childhood Versus Current Affiliation of U.S. Adults (p. 24). Here you may see why the Baptists are so upset with a net loss of 3.7%, while the Methodists are at -2.1%. The group that increased is the Nondenominational (read, independent churches) at +3%. Also the holiness grouping shows a small positive increase with a net change of +0.4%.

When the changes are moving against your tradition, you tend to define the society as at fault and needing revision, renewal, and for some, rejection e.g. “Left Behind.” The society is always in need of some renewal when you consider times of corruption and greed. But we, as Christians, need to provide a clearer, more inclusive vision of God’s presence and actions in the world. Less splitting and winning language and action are called for. There is no question from the data that Western society, including America, is becoming more secular even though American society is overwhelmingly religious.

How Should We Think About Faith and Secularity?

What, then, are the features of secularity to which we should be attuned? Charles Taylor is one of the great minds and thinkers of this age. A deeply committed Christian, he was a professor at Oxford before returning to Montreal, Canada, where he was born and raised, to teach and write. Professor Taylor has been working out the issues of faith and secularity much of his life. Highly learned in both philosophy and history, he has worked on the issues of the development of the modern mind and attitudes, and the place of God in the 20th and the 21st centuries. To understand his stature, he recently received the Templeton Prize given to scholars who have contributed the most to the dialogue about and an understanding of the relationship of faith and science. When you encounter his thinking and writings, it is to encounter a completely different level of discourse from the normal level of scholarship. His latest book he considers his culminating work. The book is, The Secular Age, and it is his effort to relate his deep belief in God and about God to the reality of the secularization of the western world of Europe, Canada, and the United States.

Taylor notes that 500 years ago in Western European society, you could not be a citizen of the society without a clear sense of the unity of religion and state. "Whereas the political organization of all pre-modern societies was in some way connected to, based on, guaranteed by some faith in, or adherence to God, or some notion of ultimate reality, the modern Western state is free from this connection.", (p.1).

This is the first meaning of secularity "in terms of public spaces. These have been allegedly emptied of God, or any reference to ultimate reality." (p.2). Here is an example of this meaning of secularity:

"We are at war!...This war is among Americans, between progressive secularists – who wish to remove all references to religion, and in particular, Christianity, from the public eye – and the traditionalists..." (This quote is from an essay in this year's ANSR conference packet, which I assume, presents an example of the tolerance of moral decay.)

The conflict, in this meaning of secularity, is seen in the debates in this country about school prayer and religious symbols and celebrations in the public spaces.

The second meaning of secularity "consists of the falling off of religious belief and practices, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to church." (p. 2). In many ways, this is what the Pew Report is pointing to in the charts I have mentioned.

But Taylor is interested in examining the secular age in a third sense focused on the conditions of belief.

The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace. In this meaning, as against sense 2, at least many milieux in the United States are secularized, and I would argue that the United States as a whole is. (p. 3)

The work and focus of The Secular Age is on examining Western society, including American society in this third sense. And this extended quote presents the crux of the focus.

The change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others. I may find it inconceivable that I would abandon my faith, but there are others, including some very close to me, whose way of living I cannot in all honesty just dismiss as depraved, or blind, or unworthy, who have no faith (at least not in God, or the transcendent). Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives. And this will also likely mean that at least in certain milieux, it may be hard to sustain one's faith. (p. 3)

It is interesting that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great saint and martyr of the last century, began thinking about this concern during his final days in terms of "modern man coming of age," (Letters and Papers from Prison, 1961, 1997).

What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today. The time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over, and so is the time of inwardness and conscience--and that means the time of religion in general. We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more. Even those who honestly describe themselves as "religious" do not in the least act up to it, and so they presumably mean something quite different by "religious."

He did not have the time before he was killed, by the political fundamentalist represented by the Nazis, to develop his thinking as a theologian working from a deeply intellectual, highly educated and orthodox position. His death was an immense loss to Christians and the Church.

Taylor's view of secularity could be seen as a slippery slope for people who have been taught that having and holding the right set of beliefs or creedal statements is the main way to salvation. That "Doctrine" is a protection from dangerous beliefs coming from science and reason that might overtake "delivered truth." We see this conflict in the current clash between evolution and "intelligent design" and "young earth creationism." (See Judgment Day: Intelligent Design on Trial, as an example of this fear and conflict.) As Taylor says,

I want to talk about belief and unbelief, not as rival "theories," that is, ways that people account for existence, or morality, whether by God or by something in nature, or whatever. Rather what I want to do is focus attention on the different kinds of lived experience involved in understanding your life in one way or the other, on what it's like to live as a believer or unbeliever. (pp. 4-5)

In other words, Taylor points to the toleration of faith and secularity and the appreciation of where people are and how they arrived there.

For example, from a personal perspective, I consider myself deeply orthodox in terms of historic positions of the Christian church. I am clearly Trinitarian; even though there are many reasons I can see why others might not be. For me, Christ is the Center, but I do not sense that Jesus required such a stance for His grace and healing to take place in the lives the people He encountered. I have a reverence for the scriptures but do not "worship" them, (See Ehrman, Misquoting Jesus). I consider evolution to be the most scientifically accurate position concerning how we and all other living organism came to be through God, the Creator and find no contradiction with holding it and being a Christian. (See Miller, Finding Darwin's God) But most of all, I see God present in lives all around me that do not hold any of the Christian beliefs that I do.

Being in the position of not only tolerating but appreciating both faith and secularity, a person clearly can encounter misunderstandings or maybe better put, angry denunciations. Here is my strongest personal example. At the last district advisory board meeting which I attended in the capacity of having been the district treasurer for over ten years, the district superintendent asked for the members to talk about ways they saw God working. Other members, mainly pastors, talked about church members or contacts that they felt evidenced God's work in their lives. At a point in the sharing I spoke about the need to be open to see God's work in the lives of those who are not in the church but are "practicing God's presence" in various actions in their lives in the world. Almost immediately a pastor spoke up in anger and said that such a position represented a modernistic, universalistic view that had no place in the church. To say I was stunned is an understatement. I decided later that perhaps the man had "outed me," I was no longer in "the closet," at least from his perspective. But his reaction shows how the tension between the traditional Christian perspective and the effort to relate the secular and the "sacred," are always present.

Living most of my life after college in a secular world with mostly secular colleagues and friends and seeing how their lives moved, I also sensed how little the Christian church seems to have to say or offer them. These friends and colleagues are people we hold in high esteem and respect and to whom we feel very connected. Needless to say, I do not take the position of the Southern Baptist man, who, having become acquainted with Mormons while working on a project, said, "They're good people; too bad they're going to hell." As "traditional and "orthodox" Christians, we wish our "secular" friends could come to similar views of faith that we hold. However, the reality is that they, and most of the six plus billion people in this world, will not.

I care about and love my friends and know that God does too. I see God's Spirit present in them; sometimes it seems even more evident than in other Christians. By their spirit and actions they are "secular" or "closet" Christians. They are in Bonhoffer's words, a part of "religionless Christianity." But in our traditional Christian sense, they are involved in a different world. This brings me to a New Yorker cartoon I saw recently that showed a couple, whom I have named, Richard and Patricia. They are walking among the clouds of heaven wearing their wings, obviously having made the cut. But Richard, with some distress on his face, says to Patricia: "I just feel we'd know more people in hell." This is to say, I don't see my friends "left behind" since my Lord and God is inclusive not exclusive.

Admittedly, this suggests different approaches in our thinking and actions concerning such topics as "evangelism," sharing the "Good News" of the reality of Jesus, the God-Man, and many other traditional positions that will be held and viewed differently within and without the church in an increasingly secular world.

What Should We Do About Faith and Secularity?

How then do ministers and laity deal with the issues of faith and secularity within their congregation? How do you help the minister and laity in their encounters with an increasingly secular society?

Well, we shouldn't do it by "splitting," by trying, forcefully, to return to a society of 500 years ago. This is what we are encountering in the radical Muslim stance, trying to hold onto their medieval society and fearing and blaming the "secular" West as threatening their religious societies. They fear the impact secularity, in the first two senses of Taylor, in changing their societies as the West has changed. But the problem for them is not the Western societies and cultures but the reality of secularity, modernism and post-modernism that are the marks of Western societies.

In the American church, we can forcibly try to create a dominant Christian civil religion society, with no separation of Church and State. The dominance of the

Church, in Europe and parts of Canada, has been a disaster for the Christian religion in those countries. So, I am recommending recognition of the facts that the Pew Survey shows, that American society, similar to the societies of Western Europe, is increasingly secular. This shift is a result of the rise of the rational, scientific and humanistic perspective that came out of the Enlightenment that came out of Protestantism.

We can create mayhem in response to this reality, or we can hold our faith with intelligence and confidence, respecting belief and unbelief, religion and secularity, as Taylor is suggesting. Interestingly, there are Christian believers who are recommending this approach. I call this attitude, "Flexibility without loss of identity." I came across two quotes that are a bridge between Taylor and his concept of "conditions of belief," and how the church, in terms of its ordained and laity, deal with and move beyond the tensions and conflicts.

The first quote comes from John R. Franke drawing from Lesslie Newbigin, a missionary theologian in India and a source I read many years ago but was connect to again in Franke's foreword in A Generous Orthodoxy.

Exclusive in the sense of affirming the unique truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ, but not in the sense of denying the possibility of salvation to those outside the Christian faith; inclusive in the sense of refusing to limit the saving grace of God to Christians, but not in the sense of viewing other religions as salvific; pluralist in the sense of acknowledging the gracious work of God in the lives of all human beings, but not in the sense of denying the unique and decisive nature of what God has done in Jesus Christ. (p. 13)

The second quote is from the South African theologian-missilogist, David Busch. "We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time, we cannot set limits to the saving power of God...**We appreciate this tension, and do not attempt to resolve it.**" (quote from A Generous Orthodoxy. p. 262, highlights added)

A Generous Orthodoxy, is a book I purchased a year ago but did not read until I was working out this paper. I bought it because the title was so positive after encountering, what is for me, so much negative stance and action from parts of American Christianity over the last decade. The rise of what has been termed, the "American Taliban" led me to put up the refrigerator magnet that says, "Don't be discouraged, these are difficult days for God, too."

As an ordained minister, McLaren focuses on the church and the cultural changes in the American society. In the following statement, he puts together parallel thoughts to what is being addressed in this paper.

But unfortunately, so much of what we're currently fighting against ("we" meaning the church in America for starters) isn't the real enemy, and so much of what we're fighting for isn't the real prize. Largely, we're fight to get something back – a lost status as the civil religion of the West, control (political, too often) over things that are out of our control, a privileged position as the favored religion of the Empire, protection of the middle class from the lower and upper classes, and so on. **These are futile fights.** (highlights added)

We're also focused on fighting symptoms like abortion, promiscuity (hetero or homosexual), divorce, and profanity. We might add terrorism to the list. But these are not the disease. These are in many ways the symptoms of the very disease that we inadvertently tend to support, aid and abet, defend, protect, baptize, and fight for – a system sick with consumerism, greed, fear, violence, and misplaced faith (in the power of the Economy and the State and its Weapons) p. 185.

I couldn't have said it better myself and probably haven't. What McLaren is saying in this book, as I read it, is that the splitting that is common on so many topics creating "futile fights," should be seen as two sides of the same coin. Out of these sides that are normally used for splitting, we can draw wisdom for "the secular age" while recognizing each position, alone, can get in the way of God's presence and work in the world. (Another book on this theme by Adam Hamilton, [Seeing Grey in a World of Black and White](#), who planted a church 18 years ago that is now the largest United Methodist Church is the U.S.)

Yes, we can afford to have a "generous orthodoxy." McLaren asks the question as one of his chapter titles: "Would Jesus Be A Christian?" He has great doubts that He would be. I ask a similar question to consider: "Would Jesus be left behind?" I think He might since Jesus always kept more company with the outsiders than with the religious insiders, though His love and mercy extended to all, even the Pharisees.

McLaren, Hamilton, and others like them are presenting a fresh and positive spirit of Christianity in America. They speak to the creation of Christian community open to the uncommitted and sensitive to the non-believers. They see that a significant portion of their income should be aimed at addressing local poverty and human needs. They aim not only at personal transformation but at community transformation as well. They provide a model for the ordained and laity of what the church should be in this age.

But the deepest question for the Church, here or anywhere and for the ordained and laity within it, is how do they respond to the needy person who timidly shows up some Sunday at the church? The best illustration of this done well is the story of Anne Lamott. Anne was born in the Bay Area into a very secular family. As a young woman she became an alcoholic and a drug abuser, slept around, had

several abortions, and decided to have a child by one of her lovers. One day she wandered into a small, mostly black, mostly poor church near where she lived. She was poor and pregnant and a rather sorry sight, but the people were open and welcoming to her so she kept coming back. They didn't condemn her for being pregnant and unwed, or for the mess her life had been. They surrounded her with support and love. She always had a spiritual sense and over time she began to have a sense of the reality of Christ in her life. She began to work at what was a great joy for her, writing. This effort resulted in eleven books including *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*; *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*; and her most recent, *Grace (Eventually), Thoughts on Faith* (2007). As a New York Times best selling author and more significant, a "Costco" author, her writings on faith are not conventional anymore that she is. But when she speaks in churches across the country they are packed and often with people who never see the inside of a church. As one reviewer said of her, "This is a Christian even an atheist could still respect in the morning."

So what does Anne Lamott's story tell us about faith and secularity? It tells us that God is at work everywhere, among the faithful and the secular. I know that class and status are a part of every organization, including the church and Anne would not be welcomed or supported in many churches. I know these things get in the way for me because I'm much more comfortable in some places and with some people than with others. I guess that's the reason God has created so many different churches in America. I guess that is the reason I have become more tolerant of the diversity of religious groups, though I think there are some amazing mythologies in the Protestant churches of America. But we all have our myths, and that's why there's grace and not grading. That's the reason I felt strongly about speaking to the issue of the toleration of faith and secularity.

You must also ask a series of questions given the trends in American society. How do the Church and its people respond to the needy, who never approach the Church? How do we respond to those who were bruised and rejected by the Church and have given up on it? How do we respond to the secular persons who, in Bonnhoffer's phrase, "have come of age," and find their spirituality or lack of it outside the Church? These are people for whom I have a sense of connection because I am confident God is deeply involved in their lives. If we see them and identify them as the enemy of faith, then we are the Pharisees for whom Jesus had the harshest language. If we "split" them and consider them "outside the box," then we have put our God in a box. But God, made visible in Jesus, is always outside the box in mercy and redemption even if people are not directly conscious of the presence of God's Spirit in their lives. This is the reason I become angry when people or groups are defined as evil or representing moral decay. This is the reason I needed to think with you about the toleration of faith and secularity.

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