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BEING A CHURCH IN A SECULARISED WORLD – TAKING OFF FROM VATICAN II

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The Council focuses its attention on the world of men, the whole human family along with the sum of those realities in the midst of which it lives; that world which is the theater of man's history, and the heir of his energies, his tragedies and his triumphs; that world which the Christian sees as created and sustained by its Maker's love...¹ With these words the Second Vatican Council announced to the world, the active participatory role of the Church. The Council Fathers intended to make it clear that the realm of faith and the so called "secular" world could not be treated as two separate irreconcilable entities but as a single integrated reality. And in another document the Council Fathers once again indicated the whole hearted involvement of the Church in the affairs of the World. In *Lumen Gentium*, the Council Fathers wrote, "*The present-day conditions of the world add greater urgency to this work of the Church so that all men, joined more closely today by various social, technical and cultural ties, might also attain fuller unity in Christ.*"²

Fifty years down the line, the involvement so ardently requested by the Second Vatican Council becomes even more urgent as there

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¹Second Vatican Council, Decree, *Ad Gentes*, No. 13, 7 November 1965, in AAS 57 (1965) §1

²Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen Gentium*, No. 13, 21 November 1964, in AAS 57 (1965), § 1.

are clear signs that believers of every religion are caught up on the horns of the dilemma. The believer is involved in a struggle of living in an extremely secularized world which seeks to exclude God from all spheres of life or seeks to limit him to a private corner and of striving to fulfil the duties of his conscience and faith. This article seeks to address in brief the conundrum in which the Catholic believer is caught up. I will deal with the topic in three sections: 1. The difficulties in analyzing the current situation and the parameters for our discussion, 2. The situation of any believer and particularly that of a Catholic in today's world and 3. The responses that the believers try to provide today.

1. The Difficulties in Analyzing

The first hurdle that arises in the way of a comprehensive analysis of the situation in terms of materialism and secularism comes from the difficulty and ambiguity in defining the two phenomena. The term "secularism" has been understood differently in different times and in different regions and can be used with the positive or negative meaning. In this sense a difference is sought to be made between "secularism" and "secularization". I take for granted that secularism here is intended as in the negative sense. On the other hand, the concept of "materialism" has many characteristics like consumerism, a limited orientation towards material goals, a tendency to exclude higher form of life than the one actually being lived. But the concept also suffers from some sort of ambiguity because the distance between comfort and luxury is not defined, as is the relationship between the desire to have and the desire to be.

The words "Secular" and "Secularism" have had meanings that range from an indifference to religion, to a respect, tolerance and promotion of all religions and in recent times even antagonism to it. In India for example, the idea of secularism is best expressed in what Mahatma Gandhi said, "I do not expect India of my dreams to develop one religion, i.e., to be wholly Hindu or wholly Christian or wholly Mussalman, but I want it to be wholly tolerant, with its religions working side by side with one another."³ Similarly according to the National Secular Society of Britain, "Secularism seeks to defend the absolute freedom of religious and other belief, and protect the right to manifest religious belief insofar as it does not

³Mahatma Gandhi in *Young India*, issue of 22-12-1927.

impinge disproportionately on the rights and freedoms of others. Secularism ensures that the right of individuals to freedom of religion is always balanced by the right to be free *from* religion."⁴ However in modern parlance specially in Europe, secularism has often come to mean an exclusion of religions from all facets of public life.

As Iain T. Benson points out, "Before the Reformation the concepts of 'religious' and 'secular' did not exist as descriptions of fundamentally different aspects of society." He goes on to add "It is quite arguable that the term 'secular' has changed its meaning over the last century and a half. The term in general usage now means, essentially, free *from* religion as in 'we ought to keep religion out of the schools because they are secular.'"⁵ This was not the original meaning nor is it a meaning that recognizes the nature of religion in society or the role of belief (religious and non-religious) in the lives of citizens. The new meaning of secular is, in fact, closely related to two others: secularism and secularization that have been taken in an anti-religious direction, a direction that is inconsistent with the principles of a free and democratic society." Secularism is seen as asserting the freedom of religion, and freedom from religion, within a state that is neutral on matters of belief, and gives no state privileges or subsidies to religions. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as "indifference to or rejection or exclusion of religion and religious considerations". The Oxford dictionary defines secular as "not connected with religious or spiritual matters" in contrast to sacred. In the Cambridge dictionary, the term secular has the connotation of "not having any connection with religion". For the Collins Dictionary secular means, 1. "of or relating to worldly as opposed to sacred things – temporal" 2. "not concerned with or related to religion" and 3. "not within the control of the Church." The American Heritage Dictionary defines it as "Religious skepticism or indifference or the view that religious considerations should be excluded from civil affairs or public education." The Macmillan dictionary defines secularism as "the lack of religious influence within society, or the belief that this is important." So in this discussion we will understand "secular" in the sense of secularization that is as the tendency to defrock public life of its religious nuance and the attempt to shut out values promoted by

⁴<http://www.secularism.org.uk/what-is-secularism.html> accessed on 03-07-2013

⁵Iain T. Benson "Notes Towards a (Re) Definition of the 'Secular,'" *University of British Columbia Law Review*, Special Issue, "Religion, Morality and Law" (2000) 33 519-549.

religion. This happens on many grounds: an overt and covert insinuation that religion is superstitious, outmoded and outdated; a direct implication that religion impedes growth and progress, is equivalent to superstition and incompatible with modernity.

Secularism in this later (negative) sense reflects the words of Marx “Religion is the opium of the people” and rationalizes and nourishes “materialism”. Materialism is described by the Merriam-Webster dictionary “a doctrine that the only or the highest values or objectives lie in material well-being and in the furtherance of material progress”. The Oxford dictionary defines it as “a tendency to consider material possessions and physical comfort as more important than spiritual values.” This attitude is for example personified in the words of the American author Howard Phillips Lovecraft, “I am, indeed, an absolute materialist so far as actual belief goes; with not a shred of credence in any form of supernaturalism—religion, spiritualism, transcendentalism, metempsychosis, or immortality.”⁶ This indeed becomes a challenge for the believer of any religion as secularization with its exclusion of Religion and religious values impoverishes spirituality and spiritual life and materialism offers an alternative way of living albeit on a different and lower level.

2. The Situation of any Believer and Particularly that of a Catholic in Today's World

The challenge of secularization and materialism is neither modern nor new. It has existed since times immemorial. The Bible is replete with examples of the high and the mighty as much as the low and the miserly falling into the trap of materialism which eventually leads either to idolatry or to the exclusion of God and religious values from day to day life. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, reminded his listeners of this fact during Angelus on September 2, 2012,

When the Israelites settled in the Promised Land and become the depositories of the Law, they are tempted ‘to place their safety and their happiness in something which is no longer the Word of the Lord: in material goods and in power, other ‘divinities’ which are, in fact, empty and futile idols. Of course, the Law of God remains, but it is no longer so important, no longer the rule of life; rather it becomes a facade, a covering, while life follows other paths, other rules, often selfish individual and group interests.⁷

⁶H.P. Lovecraft, *Selected Letters II (1925-1929)*, ed., August Derleth and Donald Wandrei. Sauk City, WI: Arkham House Publishers, Inc, 1968, 201-202.

⁷http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/angelus/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20120902_it.html, accessed on 03-07-2013.

The believer in the Bible is tested again and again by worldly materialistic attractions which eventually lead him to forget God or even replace him in his life because secularism and materialism make man to create his own gods or to seek a self transformation of himself as God. It often leads him to forget that there is a higher level of thinking, believing and acting than provided by the mundane things of life. Thus for instance, Adam and Eve “created in the image and likeness of God” lose their very birthright because they are tempted by Satan that they can “be like God” by disobeying God. The men of Babel are dispersed by God because their building of a tower was inspired by their desire to “make a name for themselves”. David’s yearning for Uriah’s wife leads him to commit murder and brings eventual punishment from God. In the New Testament there are ample occurrences of the face of materialism. Two of them stand out: Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus’ chosen twelve, who sells him for thirty pieces of silver. The second is the episode of Ananias in the early Church whose members shared everything with each other. He together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife’s full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles’ feet. The punishment upon the two was instant.

I would like to individuate three specific cultural consequences of secularism and materialism in our Society today of which the believer has to bear the brunt:

A) Moral and Spiritual Relativism

Exasperated secularism as the exclusion of God and values connected to belief in him, which has already been described above leads to moral and spiritual relativism, obliterating the dividing line between good and evil, just and unjust, honest and dishonest, noble and lowly. Paul Copan points out,

In our relativistic society, Christians more than ever are bombarded by tough questions about their faith. According to him, many of these questions emerge as “anti-truth claims” that are part of today’s skeptical mind-set. Christians defending their faith often hear slogans and questions such as: - It’s all relative - Everything is one with the Divine; all else is illusion - The Gospels contradict each other - Why would a good God create hell?⁸

⁸Paul Copan, *That’s Just Your Interpretation: Responding to Skeptics Who Challenge Your Faith*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001, 35.

Pope Francis in his first meeting with the diplomatic corps spoke of another form of poverty. In his words, "It is the spiritual poverty of our time, which afflicts the so-called richer countries particularly seriously. It is what my much-loved predecessor, Benedict XVI, called the 'tyranny of relativism,' which makes everyone his own criterion and endangers the coexistence of peoples."⁹ John Piper, in his book, *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God* sums this challenge for us: "Relativism poses as humble by saying:

We are not smart enough to know what the truth is—or if there is any universal truth." It sounds humble. But look carefully at what is happening. It's like a servant saying: I am not smart enough to know which person here is my master—or if I even have a master. The result is that I don't have a master and I can be my own master. That is in reality what happens to relativists: In claiming to be too lowly to know the truth, they exalt themselves as supreme arbiter of what they can think and do. This is not humility. This is the essence of pride.¹⁰

B) Godless Individualism based on egoism– The attitude of I, me and myself without reference to higher values

Once again egoism and individualism are not new phenomena but they have been greatly exacerbated by relativism as well as by the weakening of the hierarchy of values. Vatican II, in *Gaudium et Spes* had already warned, "Profound and rapid changes make it more necessary that no one ignoring the trend of events or drugged by laziness, content himself with a merely individualistic morality."¹¹ Moral and spiritual relativism and the exclusion of God and religious values from human life leads to a deep seated individualism founded in egoism which is almost becoming a cultural hallmark of our times. This egoism and individualism is the root cause for the lack of social justice and for the support of some heinous crimes like abortion. John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae* gave an example as to how the individualism distorts the cultural values of our world. He wrote,

While it is true that the taking of life not yet born or in its final stages is sometimes marked by a mistaken sense of altruism and human compassion it cannot be denied that such a culture of death, taken as a whole, betrays a completely individualistic concept of freedom, which

⁹http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/speeches/2013/march/documents/papa-francesco_20130322_corpo-diplomatico_en.html accessed on 03-07-2013.

¹⁰John Piper, *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God*, Inter-Varsity Press, 2010, 113.

¹¹Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December 1965, no. 17, in AAS 58 (1966) § 30.

ends up by becoming the freedom of “the strong” against the weak who have no choice but to submit.¹²

The Guru Granth Sahib of the Sikhs adverts the danger of egoism when it says, “The world is burning in the fire of desire, in greed, arrogance and excessive ego.”¹³ And the *Rig Veda* admonishes, “Ego is the biggest enemy of humans” (12/10). Religious values in fact promote solidarity and the striving for common good. Individualism deceives the person into thinking that he can solve all problems in a self-referential way and without considering the good of others. The believer who has to live in a world of “rat eat rat” culture faces a situation of conflict. Should he take care of himself alone or should he continue to battle for common good, even to the apparent detriment of his own welfare? As the Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama pointed out, “The foundation of the Buddha’s teachings lies in compassion, and the reason for practicing the teachings is to wipe out the persistence of ego, the number-one enemy of compassion.”¹⁴ A culture bereft of religious values of compassion, mercy and solidarity which are sacrificed at the altar of secularism, materialism and godless individualism creates existential problems for the believer. With his religious principles, the believer has a perception of a society that works for collective good, calling for sacrifice and renunciation from the individual in case of conflict. Individualism based on materialism overturns this hierarchy of values and places the believer in conflict with himself and within society.

C) Consumerism

An offshoot of godless materialism and crass secularism is the consumerism which feeds on it and in turn nurtures it. Chuck Palahniuk, the American author in his book *Lullaby* explains well the phenomena of consumerism:

Experts in ancient Greek culture say that people back then didn’t see their thoughts as belonging to them. When ancient Greeks had a thought, it occurred to them as a god or goddess giving an order. Apollo was telling them to be brave. Athena was telling them to fall in love. Now people hear a commercial for sour cream potato chips and rush out to buy, but now they call this free will. At least the ancient Greeks were being honest.¹⁵

¹²John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 35, in AAS 87 (1995), § 19.

¹³Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Shabad 120.

¹⁴Dalai Lama, *A Flash of Lightning in the Dark of Night: A Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*, Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1994.

¹⁵Chuck Palahniuk, New York: Random Publishers, 2002.

A number of traditional values that involve family life, education and upbringing of children, harmonious social living have been thrown to the winds as consumerism takes hold of our culture. Consumerism's biggest enemy is religion and hence the hidden agenda of globalization seems to be an anti-spiritual crusade. It promotes the worship of capital, technology, profits — and a new kind of religion of cut-throat competition. It is an unprecedented challenge for human spirituality and strikes at the roots of human spirituality. It tries to even commodify spirituality. As a potent dehumanizing force, consumerism has no connection to spirituality or spiritual well being of the entire humanity. Nevertheless, it often creates an expanding market for pseudo-spiritual goods and services. The strange new cults and their self styled, self declared prophets would create a havoc in the society. It has spawned many false prophets who use the modern technology to sell their pseudo-spiritual merchandise. This new wave of global pseudo-spirituality would create tremendous spiritual voids among families, communities and societies. As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI pointed out in *Caritas in Veritate*,

In fact, if the market is governed solely by the principle of the equivalence in value of exchanged goods, it cannot produce the social cohesion that it requires in order to function well. Without internal forms of SOLIDARITY and mutual trust, the market cannot completely fulfill its proper economic function.¹⁶

The believer is caught in a dilemma of living his religious principles in a world which is increasingly being governed by market forces of consumerism.

3. The Responses that the Believers Try to Provide Today

This brings us to our final reflection: How have the believers actually been responding to the challenges posed by Secularism and materialism and their collateral effects? Jesus was aware of the dilemma of his followers and hence in John 17:15, he prays to the Father, "I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one."

Three standard responses have come forth from the believer:

1. Adapt and be as the world demands: Relativistic acceptance

The principle behind this response is, "if you cannot swim against the current, then flow with it." Wolfhart Pannenberg points out that,

¹⁶Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, "*Caritas in Veritate*," *L'Osservatore Romano*, English Edition, 8.07.2009, § 35.

the absolutely worst way to respond to the challenge of secularism is to adapt to secular standards in language, thought, and way of life. If members of a secularist society turn to religion at all, they do so because they are looking for something other than what that culture already provides. It is counterproductive to offer them religion in a secular mode that is carefully trimmed in order not to offend their secular sensibilities.¹⁷

It is true that religion has to take cognizance of the changes taking place around it. But rather than being swamped by the multi-dimensional changes and advances, it has to be the guide that helps modern man sift reality from fiction, true well being from ephemeral happiness, the real way to the almighty from the transitory things of this life. But as Pope Benedict XVI warned us, "Having a clear faith, based on the creed of the church, is often labeled today as a fundamentalism... Whereas relativism, which is letting oneself be tossed and 'swept along by every wind of teaching,' looks like the only attitude acceptable to today's standards."¹⁸ The believer is thus often left stranded on a road he does not know amidst the constant distractions of the highly secularized and increasingly materialistic world.

2. Fundamentalism and extremism: attack, vilify and terrorize

Another easy response that believers tend to offer to the crisis they are facing is through fundamentalism and extremism. This tends to consider the whole world as evil and the only solution deemed capable of offsetting the invasion of the "great satan" is by unleashing a campaign of terror and violence. This violence may be verbal or very often physical. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby in their book *Fundamentalisms Observed* point out that fundamentalism appears to be advancing steadily in virtually every corner of the world. Sections of Latin America have been radically transformed by the growth of Protestant groups in recent decades. South Korea and Taiwan have become centres of neotraditionalist Confucianism. Expanding rapidly in Japan are the so-called new religions, several of which are essentially Buddhist counterparts to Protestant fundamentalism. And

¹⁷Wolfhart Pannenberg, quoted by Daniel Akin in his article "The Emerging Church and Ethical Choices: The Corinthian Matrix" in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent*, 270.

¹⁸Josef Ratzinger, Homily at the Mass for the Election of the Roman Pontiff (18 April 2005); as published in *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI: His Central Writings and Speeches* (2008) edited by John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne, 22.

the spread of fundamentalism throughout the Islamic world is well known. India is experiencing the rise of Hindu fundamentalists in the name of religious revival.¹⁹

Robert Wuthnow points out that fundamentalists are quite selective in what they oppose and what they accept in modern culture. Many are remarkably willing to harness the latest technological innovations to advance their causes. Tape recorders, television, and satellite hook-ups have helped spread fundamentalist ideas in many parts of the world. Their opposition is most pronounced in the specific arena of religious interpretation, and beyond that, in matters of political policy. The former is a battle over the correct interpretation of divine truth; the latter, a war to protect their own communities against incursions by secular authorities.²⁰

Fundamentalists seek to control society by forging communal bonds which are very often organized against minorities and innocents. Wuthnow observes that fundamentalists in all the major world religions tend to reinforce male-dominant gender roles. From requiring women to wear veils, to encouraging them to cater to their husbands' psychological and emotional needs, to barring them from ordination, the various fundamentalisms display much the same attitude toward women.

Fundamentalism specially in its use of violence actually denies true religious values and as a response to the crisis of secularism and materialism leaves the believer without his true religion and leads him to hate and anger.

3. A balanced discrete choice between good and evil: An authentic religious response

A third response which is sought to be offered to the challenges thrown up by antagonistic secularism and menacing materialism is based on the principles of human dignity and all round development of the human person. The Bible teaches us that man and woman are made in the image and likeness of God and that the final attainment for every human being is to find beatific bliss in the Almighty. Ramakrishna, the Hindu spiritual leader reminds us, "The magnetic

¹⁹Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, *Fundamentalisms Observed*, University of Chicago Press, 1996.

²⁰Cfr. Robert Wuthnow, "Fundamentalism in the World," *The Christian Century* (April 29, 1992) 456-458.

needle always points to the north, and hence it is that sailing vessel does not lose her direction. So long as the heart of man is directed towards God, he cannot be lost in the ocean of worldliness.”

The Catholic Church “realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.” It seeks to “therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.”²¹ The Church recognizes that man is split within himself. As a result, all of human life, whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness. Indeed, man finds that by himself he is incapable of battling the assaults of evil successfully, so that everyone feels as though he is bound by chains. Man is not allowed to despise his bodily life, rather he is obliged to regard his body as good and honourable since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day. Nevertheless, wounded by sin, man experiences rebellious stirrings in his body. But the very dignity of man postulates that man glorify God in his body and forbid it to serve the evil inclinations of his heart.

As *Gaudium et spes* reminds us, when man develops the earth by the work of his hands or with the aid of technology, in order that it might bear fruit and become a dwelling worthy of the whole human family and when he consciously takes part in the life of social groups, he carries out the design of God manifested at the beginning of time, that he should subdue the earth, perfect creation and develop himself. At the same time he obeys the commandment of Christ that he place himself at the service of his brethren.

To conclude, the Catholic church believes that there is no conflict between faith and reason and both should work together for the betterment of man and of the world. In the Words of John Paul II in *Fides et ratio*, “The Church remains profoundly convinced that faith and reason “mutually support each other”; each influences the other, as they offer to each other “a purifying critique and a stimulus to pursue the search for deeper understanding.”²²

²¹*Gaudium et Spes* § 1

²²John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998, § 100.