

Engaging the Spirituals

The secular challenge to the New Evangelization

BY DREW CHRISTIANSEN

Three events recently awakened me to the weighty reality of our secular age and why the church's New Evangelization is both timely and crucial.

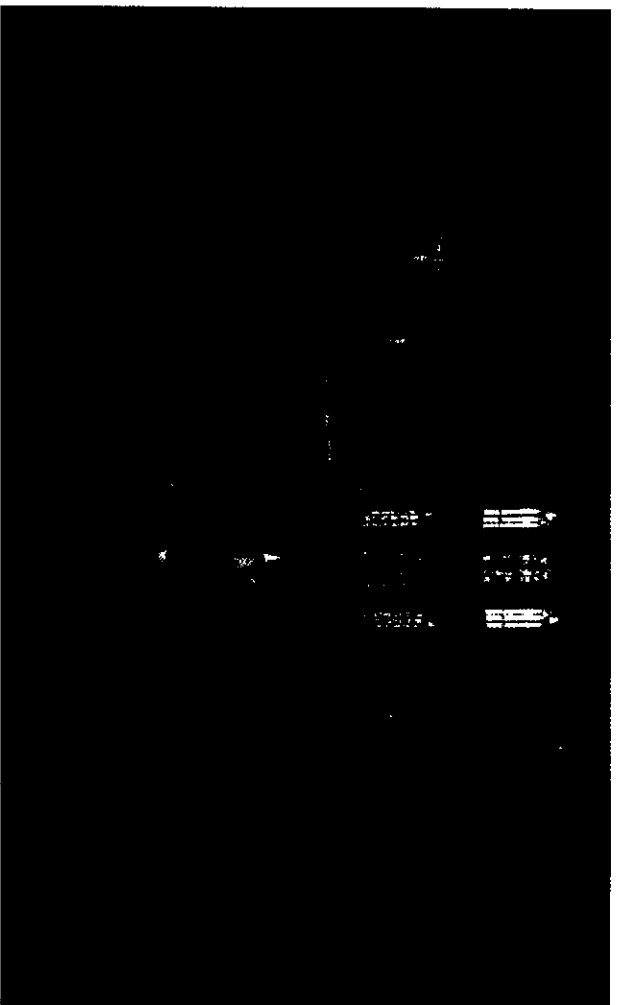
The first took place one Sunday afternoon as I watched "Higher Ground," Vera Farmiga's film about an evangelical woman's struggle with faith. The reviews I read had praised the film for giving an honest view of contemporary faith. I kept waiting for the moment of revelation to come, but the epiphany that takes place in the last sequence is no revelation at all. We are left with Corinne Walker, Ms. Farmiga's lead character, still aching for God to break into her life. If the reviewers are to be believed, the icon of faith for the people of our day is a woman bearing on her car for God to break the silence. There are hints that "Higher Ground" wants to be about maturing in faith, but the story at best depicts the impossibility of finding a mature faith in the contemporary world.

The second event occurred the same evening, as I took in one of my guilty pleasures, an episode of "Inspector Lewis" on PBS's Masterpiece Mystery series. In these stories the title character, a world-weary widower, is paired with Detective Sergeant James Hathaway, an intellectual former Catholic seminarian. Like so much in cinema and on television, this series shows a certain fascination with Catholicism. In an unbelieving world, Catholic rites, Catholic family piety and individual Catholic belief are still talismans for a forgotten world of faith. The murders to be solved that evening took place at an Oxford friary, Saint Gerard's. During the investigation, one of the suspects asks Lewis whether he believes. Lewis answers he used to, intimating that his faith died with his wife in a hit-and-run accident some years before.

Later, the murder solved, Lewis and Hathaway share a beer while contemplating a natural mystery, a Turneresque

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sunset. Lewis asks Hathaway why the setting sun is not enough for him, as it is for Lewis. Hathaway deflects the question by asking Lewis about his plans to retire. When Lewis replies that his retirement will open the way for a promotion for Hathaway, the younger detective responds that should Lewis retire, he will leave the police. The viewer understands Hathaway may be considering returning to the



ministry or taking the junior lectureship in theology offered him in the course of the episode.

Yet Hathaway, the image of the mature, educated, even sophisticated postmodern believer, holds his faith a closely guarded secret. The series requires that he share theological trivia, translate Latin and Greek and insinuate himself into clerical circles. The most viewers know about him is that he left the seminary guilty over the orthodox but ultimately deadly advice he gave a gay friend about coping with his homosexuality. We see his occasional acts of devotion: he furtively lights a candle, stops to contemplate a Nativity scene in a chapel. But we have not a hint of what or why Sergeant Hathaway believes. His is a thoroughly private, unspoken faith.

The third event came the next morning. A culture report during a National Public Radio newscast reviewed a two-millennial-old classic, Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, "On the Nature of Things," a first-century essay in cosmology best

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known for its speculation about the atomic nature of matter. What was the news? That *De Rerum Natura* is an atheistic text. As Stephen Greenblatt writes in his new novel, *The Swerve*, in Lucretius "there is no master plan, no divine architect, no intelligent design." Two millennia before Inspector Lewis, Lucretius found the complexity, diversity and beauty of nature enough for him. He did not ask, "Is that all there is?" This world was enough to delight him.

Lucretius was the reporter's stand-in for Richard Dawkins and the scientific naturalists in the creationist-evolution debate. But in the radio report there was no debate, no philosophers or theologians to comment or put Lucretius in historical context; there was just Mr. Greenblatt celebrating his atheistic predecessor. Secular naturalism, it seems, is the currency of the culture.

One, two, three, things fell into place: Ours is a secular age: an evangelical woman confronting the silence of God, Detective Hathaway mure about his faith, atheists celebrating their idols without apology and without challenge. These are by no means the only signs of our times, but they are signs symptomatic of the culture in which the church undertakes the New Evangelization.

Top Priority

Pope Benedict XVI has made the challenge to secularism a major theme of his pontificate and singled it out as the number one problem facing the church in the Western world. To meet the challenge, he established the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization and appointed one of the rising stars of the curia, Archbishop Rino Fisichella, to head it.

In a parallel move, the Pontifical Council for Culture is moving ahead with a new program for dialogue with secular thinkers, especially scientists, called The Court of the Gentiles, after the outer court of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. "There should be a dialogue," Pope Benedict said, "with those for whom religion is something foreign, to whom God is unknown yet who do not wish to be left utterly without God, but rather to draw near to him, even as if to the Unknown."

Last March in Paris the pope praised a mixed crowd of young believers and nonbelievers who had come together in a model court before the cathedral of Notre Dame "to discuss the great questions of existence." He continued, "Those of you who are unbelievers challenge believers in a particular way to live in a way consistent with the faith they profess and [you challenge them] by your rejection of any distortion of religion which would make it unworthy of man. You who are believers," he went on, "long to tell your friends that the treasure dwelling within you is meant to be shared...."

Pope Benedict not only respects unbelievers but also appreciates them in ways that should confound self-appointed

watchdogs of orthodoxy. He understands, for example, that many among them would like to discuss "the great questions of existence." He senses "the immortal longings" that make them restless, and he perceives their justified antipathy to the hypocrisy of lax Christians and how their rejection of "the distortions of religion" contributes to the purification of the church. In this he is a son of the Second Vatican Council, which confessed, "Indeed the Church admits she has greatly profited and still profits from the antagonism of those who oppose or persecute her" ("Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," No. 44).

Emergence of the Spirituals

In the last decade a major development in the religious demography of the United States has been the growth of a segment of the population whom the pollsters call "the spirituals." Many people, especially young people, report themselves as "spiritual, but not religious." In general, that means they are unchurched, not necessarily formally uninitiated but often disaffected from the church. Eventually the spirituals may find themselves in a congregation of their own choosing. Their standard for belonging, however, is not the religious authority of any church as a repository of revelation but rather the satisfaction of their own often inarticulate searching.

The subjective, unaffiliated character of the spirituals' choices does not mean they are shallow. Many regularly carry out disciplined spiritual practices: meditating daily, fasting at special times, serving the hungry in soup kitchens, doing spiritual reading, seeking out spiritual guides. What they reject is conformity in a rules-bound institution. They do not understand why they need to marry in a church building rather than under the vault of heaven. They resist the reinforcement of ritual distinctions between the ordinary faithful and the ordained. They want to explore the world of faith and plumb the depths of the spirit in the company of like-minded people. They welcome the company of the officially religious who can help them but balk at rigid orthodoxies, imagined or prescribed in the name of tradition. They want to converse with men and women of other denominations, and with those of other faiths, like Muslims and Buddhists, and to learn from them.

I think of St. Francis of Assisi in conversation with the Sultan Malik al-Kamil. The seekers and the saints find one another; they understand one another; they grow together and spur one another on in the quest for God.

Consider the lay movement Focolare. Its charism of unity inspires an extraordinary inclusiveness that embraces people of many faiths and no faith at all. All are drawn by the alluring power of the movement's charity. Where the self-appointed inquirers of the day seek to put distance



between Catholics and non-Catholics and even between themselves and some Catholics who are insufficiently orthodox by some narrow sectarian standard, Focolare's genius is to invite everyone to the table, just as Jesus did. The Focolarini are a community that lives Pope Benedict's maxim in "Deus Caritas Est," "A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak" (No. 31).

The Mustard Tree Church

Pope Benedict XVI, in his book *Without Roots* (2006), showed appreciation for spiritual kinships beyond formal church structures. Drawing on the parable of the mustard seed (Mt 13:31-32), he argued that the big church (my term), one larger than the organizational boundaries we routinely set for it, is like the great tree grown from the mustard seed, in which all the birds of the air find their home. The alliances that then-Cardinal Ratzinger was proposing were ties with Italian secularists who affirmed the Christian roots of Europe and took the side of the church on human life and other social issues. But his capacious image of the big tree is patient of expanding to include Catholics' engagement with "the spirituals" too.

Commenting last year on the parable of the two sons, Pope Benedict offered this paraphrase: "Agnostics who are constantly exercised by the question of God, those who long for a pure heart but suffer on account of our sin...are closer to the Kingdom of God than believers whose life of faith is 'routine' and who regard the Church merely as an institution, without letting their hearts be touched by faith."

So the New Evangelization is not just about rebutting aggressive European secularists but more about engaging the spirituals among them, even as Catholics are called to a new, fully conscious, self-appropriated faith.

The first challenge for U.S. Catholics in the New Evangelization is to engage the spirituals, to befriend them. They are not "low-hanging fruit" for proselytizing nor erring sheep to be brought back to the fold. Those who are serious challenge us as to the degree of our own spiritual discipline. Those who may appear to be no more than spiritual vagabonds test our willingness and ability to express and share our faith with them. We cannot afford to be mute about what we believe.

But spirituals will not be interested in hearing correct answers hedged about with all sorts of protective cautions. Rather, they want to hear us speak from the heart about "the hope that is within [us]" (1 Pt 3:15). Careful answers are the residue of history. The spirituals are not interested in answers to past controversies. They want to know what men and women they respect believe, to learn why they believe it and to discuss with them what difference it makes in their lives and for our common life together. ■

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