

Comprehend Your Culture

Risen Life Church

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“First, we need to understand that tolerance is now the highest moral good. In modernism, it was okay to tolerate a person but not agree with their ideas. That’s because truth was objective and external to the person. But in postmodernism, we are told that we must tolerate all ideas. That’s because truth is viewed as subjective and internal to a person; it is a product of language, culture and upbringing. So who are we to disagree with them and impose our ideas – which are only a product of our own upbringing – upon them? The only thing we should not tolerate as postmodern people is intolerance. That’s because intolerance is understood as the worst moral evil. It is to impose our arbitrary meta narrative upon someone else’s narrative. It is to play a power game. It is to do violence upon someone else’s language, culture and upbringing.” (Sam Chan)

Contending for the Gospel in the late-modern Western culture

1. Late-modern, post-modern, post-Christian, post truth all used interchangeably
 - 40 million have “dechurched” in the last 25 years.
 - Greatest shift in US church history. (Graham/Burge)
 - Gen Z is especially at risk. 35% agnostic/atheist/none vs. 30% for millennials and Gen X. (Joshua Crossman, “The Great Opportunity,” Pinetops Foundation, September 2017, greatopportunity.org)
 - The share of young people agreeing that their lives felt “meaningless” increased about 70 percent from 2010-2019, to more than one in five. ¹
2. Skepticism is the default position
 - “Western culture’s slide into secularism was caused in part by an “ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options, across the span of the thinkable and perhaps even beyond” that produced an increasingly fractured culture and individualism.²
 - “We no longer share a common belief system. We have options now – a lot of them. Our society is not only asking *if* we should believe in deity but *which* deity we should believe in, if we want to believe at all. There are so many options to choose from. It’s hard to know which is true, if such a conclusion can even be reached.” (Kyle Beshears)

¹ Jonathan Haidt, *End the Phone-Based Childhood Now*. The Atlantic, March 13, 2024
<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2024/03/teen-childhood-smartphone-use-mental-health-effects/677722/>

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 299

3. Apatheism is also the default position.

- “It’s not guaranteed that your neighbor believes in God, or any god. For some people, it’s not that they disbelieve because they’ve been convinced otherwise. They don’t believe because they don’t see the point. Affluent society tends to all our wants and needs, entertaining and amusing us. We live comfortably and distracted, which keeps us from contemplating the biggest questions of life.” (Kyle Beshears)
- For the purpose of our question, then, secularism leads to apatheism for two reasons: (1) secularism offers us an alternative explanation for the origin of the universe and meaning of life without appealing to the supernatural, thus permitting some people to lack a reason to care about God; and (2) secularism provides the fertile ground for pluralism (diversity of beliefs), thus robbing some people of a reason to care about God in crowded field of competing “truths.” (Kyle Beshears)

4. Goodness is more relevant than truthfulness

- “Opponents of Christianity are no longer simply arguing that it is untrue or illogical, but also that it’s dangerously oppressive. Many of the ethical commands of Christianity the concept of divine judgment fly in the face of the prevailing norms of our culture. These kinds of moral issues are the chief apologetic challenge of our age. More than anything else, they make non-Christians deeply question the beauty and goodness of our faith. Central to our task, then, is learning how to help others see the splendor of God and his purposes by reimagining the world through the Christian story.” (Joshua Chatraw)

5. Pervasive relativism

- “Ethics have become a barrier to believe in the gospel. When our non-Christian friends think of Christianity, they don’t think of good news, salvation, forgiveness, restoration, justice, mercy, or love. Instead, they think of hate, fear, power and violence. They think that Christians are unethical because of their perceived stances on birth control and euthanasia. They see their own views as the ethical stance because they are seeking to empower, liberate, restore justice, and give mercy to the marginalized and depressed. Their views are labeled by words such as love, choice, mercy, freedom, equality, rights, or justice. In postmodernity, Christians are viewed as the oppressors and haters while non-Christians are viewed as the ones on the side of love, justice and mercy.” (Sam Chan)
- “Members of generation Z hold few things more dear than acceptance and inclusivity. They view many moral stances, such as opposing gay marriage, as social stances in line with racism. To them, acceptance means affirmation. If you don’t affirm, you don’t except. This unfortunately permeates all of culture, not just generation Z, where to be considered welcoming to, say, the LGBT community, is code for condoning their lifestyle.” (James White)
- “C. S. Lewis’s apologetic strategy is to invite his readers to step into the Christian way of seeing things, imagine how things look and feel from this perspective, and assess the quality of the Christian narrative. Does this story seem to ring true to life and experience? Does it weave things together in a more coherent and satisfying way?”

Would those hearing this story like to enter and inhabit such a world?" (Alister McGrath, Narrative Apologetics)

- "Men despise religion. They hate it and are afraid it may be true. The cure for this is first to show that religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect. Next make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is." (Blaise Pascal)
- Meaning is also relative and personal. No absolutes.
 - ✓ "Life has a way of tearing through complacency and naïve senses of control and immortality."³ (Chatraw)
 - ✓ "Such attachments lead to envy, resentment, anxiety and even violence" and "they also make us fragile and vulnerable to the inevitable changes and disruptions of life."⁴ (Keller)
 - ✓ "Our cosmic insignificance casts a very dark shadow over our best intentions and selfless acts. What will our efforts come to in the end? Is the answer really, *Nothing?*"⁵ (Chatraw)

6. Expressive individualism and authenticity reign supreme as bases for identity

- "If God is dead, the only audience left to confirm our virtue is one another."⁶ (Smith)
- "Looking within for our identity is impractical. Because our own sense of self is conflicted and evolving. Career and love might call us in separate directions. Even though both present themselves as real desires that might center our identity. To make matters more challenging. Our sense of self also changes over time. And we can struggle to understand our true selves and desires."⁷ (Keller)
- "We may aspire to freedom as a defining virtue, but this can cut against other intuitions involving sacrifice and desires involving community."⁸ (Chatraw)
- "Only if we are approved by someone whom we esteem can we achieve any self-esteem."⁹ (Keller)
- "If our very identity is wrapped up in something and we lose it, we lose our very sense of self."¹⁰ (Keller)
- "Everyone pays homage to something in hopes that it will validate us."¹¹ (Chatraw)
- "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get

³ Chatraw, 77

⁴ Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God*, (Penguin Books, 2016), 92

⁵ Joshua Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story*, (Zondervan, 2020), 99

⁶ James K.A. Smith, From Instagram to Authenticity, Philosopher Charles Taylor Seems to Be "Reading Our Mail", Zócalo Public Square, <https://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2016/11/28/existential-tome-everything-college-kids/ideas/nexus/>

⁷ Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: Finding God in a Modern World* (Penguin, 2016), 124

⁸ Joshua Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story*, (Zondervan, 2020), 88

⁹ Keller, 125

¹⁰ Keller, 131

¹¹ Chatraw, 89

is what to worship.” And if we choose to worship something that can be taken away, it “will eat you alive” sooner or later when it eludes us.¹² (David Foster Wallace)

- “We need someone from outside to say we are of great worth, and the greater the worth of that someone or someone’s, the more power they have to instill a sense of self and of worth.”¹³ (Keller)
- “The assumptions of the current form of secularism dictate that every individual enjoys not only the right but the obligation to choose their own path and identity: it is ugly and foolish to submit to self-proclaimed authorities, and those authorities that try to tell you who you are and what you must do - religious, traditional, governmental – are narrow minded, corrupt, and intolerant.” (D.A. Carson)

7. Plausibility Structures.

¹² David Foster Wallace, *This is Water* (Little, Brown and Company, 2009), 25

¹³ Keller, 125