

“The Gospel in the Secularized North American Context”
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In an entry of the *Journals of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann* during the spring before his fatal illness, I found a doorway into my topic, “The Gospel in the Secularized North American Context.” On April 2, 1982, he wrote, “Christ was killed and is being killed by religion. Religion is the organ which... is at the same time intensifying and hiding from us our deepest passions and sins: pride, hypocrisy, self-admiration, self-satisfaction” (319)¹

The title given to this session is not my own and it makes one major assumption about the topic. This presupposition is that the contemporary setting in which we do our mission work is “secularized.” Typically, “secularization” refers to the process whereby religion is removed from its prior influence and standing in public life. Thus the assigned topic would suggest that this paper is about the results of the “disestablishment” of religion from its proper role, its rightful place, its necessary function--, a status that it had before in North American society.

If that definition is our guide, then we might be tempted to take upon ourselves the godly duty of putting religion back--of restoring to North America that which has been stolen from it. We might be tempted to bring to North America the true “religion.”

If this is our thought, I believe we need a dose of the sanity of Fr. Schmemmann, for he suggests to us that the problem that bedevils North American society--the crying need

¹ As I begin I must footnote two other disclaimers. First, I offer this paper as an exploration into what can be done with evidence provided by non-Orthodox religious polls. Its observations and conclusions are no more than tentative, but I hope they will provoke some thought. Second, the title of this paper is not mine but was given to me. With apologies to those from Canada and Mexico to whom I must look for their own observations, I did not have access to studies beyond the borders of the United States.

that calls for the Gospel in our culture--may not be the relentless process of modern “secularization.” Secularization may only be an illusory enemy. The true challenge may be American “religion,” or more precisely the peculiar religiosity that has developed in our “secularized” culture, that is, a culture in which organized religion has been “disestablished.”

I feel as though I had a peculiar point of view within the Church. After 25 years of Lutheran ministry, having been received into the Orthodox faith, and having been assigned to “mission work,” I have become a teacher of “religion.” I teach World Religion, religious issues, and religion in America at a midwestern community college. My point of view offers a caution against simplistic conclusions about the ever- and rapidly changing North America context. As a topic for mission workers, “contextualization” is better left alone if it is wrong! We have to be careful about definitions of concepts and categories of perception because they shape and control our thinking.

For example and to the first point; ordinarily the secular is defined as the opposite of the religious. Thus, if secularism is “religious skepticism and indifference” (*American Heritage College Dictionary*), then secularism is the opposite of religious faith and practice. Likewise, if “secularism” is a system of thought that denies and discards religious faith (Ladd 23), secularity is the negation of religiosity. But I point out that the basic assumptions of these opposites have far-reaching implications for our missionary witness to the Gospel. If we define the secular as the opposite of the religious, then we will base our mission work on “vacuum” theories of society

I can think of two theories of how Christians should relate to their society that are founded on the theory of spiritual void. One is Richard John Neuhaus' “Naked Public Square,” the image that our public life has been stripped of its proper clothing of religious belief and morality. Under the influence of this image, Neuhaus is proposing a new American “public religion,” a religious faith that can unite Americans under some general, common banner of sacred commitments and divine commandments. Another version of the vacuum approach is the evangelicals’ devil of “secular humanism,” the image that as America has been drained of religion the floods of secular humanism have flooded our land with godlessness. Under the influence of this image, many evangelicals have attempted to mop up this flood of “humanism” preaching the restoration of America as a “Christian nation.”

Vacuum theories would have it that our Orthodox mission is to fill the spiritual void left by secularization. According to these notions, we should promote the “true religion” in the godlessness of American society while fighting against the idolatry of false gods of our culture.

Now vacuum theories contain some important perceptions. Please don’t hear that I am closing my eyes to the gross godlessness, idolatry, and immorality present in American society. My comment, however, is that the American whom we would want to reach with the Gospel do not **see** themselves this way—or better, they may accept that others are godless and immoral idolater—but the term “secular” does not apply to themselves.

Of course, it is difficult to describe the self-perceptions of a whole society—much less a whole continent. However, to get any understanding at all that is based on more

than the anecdotal evidence from my missions and classrooms, I find myself reaching back to the polls of America religious attitudes and habits such as the Gallup polls.

The polls confirm the observation of Church Historian Martin Marty who commented that the recent remarkable shifts in American religious beliefs and belonging have been “within the borders of an ‘all-pervasive **religiousness**’ and a concurrent and persistent **secularism**” (Ladd 23). It is true that the polls show that a slim majority² of Americans believe that religion is losing influence in America life (Pew 6), though 84% said they thought this lack of influence was a “bad thing.” However, when it comes to their own “religion,” Americans continue to **say** they are “religious.” According to Gallup polls (Gallup Brain analysis) over the last twenty years, the percentage of Americans who say that religion is “very important in their lives” ranged from a low of 50.84% (August 1993) to a high of 64.74% in September 2002. In contrast the number who said it was “not very important” ranged from 9.26 (March 1993) to 16.73% in June 1996.

Though secular American society means to banish **organized** religion from public life, the self-perceptions of Americans suggest that they still **believe** they are “religious” persons.

- 85% of Americas said that they have purpose in their lives because of their faith³. (Gallup, “New Index Tracks Spiritual State of the Union” 1),
- 83% of Americans consider themselves religious or spiritual (“Americans’ Spiritual Searches Turn Inward” 1)

²Pew research, March 20, 2002: “Religion’s influence on American life is: Increasing 35%, Losing 52%, Same, 3%, No opinion, 8%

Note that this finding is a return to pre-Sept. 11 results: in Nov. 2001 78% said that religion’s influence was growing.

³ CRRUCS/Gallup Spiritual Index of Jan. 28, 2003 in New Index 1

- 47% say they are “spiritually committed”⁴. (Americans’ Spiritual Searches 1)
- 40% say they have had a “profound religious experience,” according to their self-reports. (“New Index” 1)

In April 2000 (“American Remains Predominantly Christian” 1) 85% of Americans identified themselves as Christians and 73% were members of a church or synagogue⁵, a figure that has remained constant for decades. Likewise, self-reported church attendance has remained stable and stands at 44% have attended last week compared to 41% in 1939 and 49% in 1958.

These figures suggest that Americans do not see **themselves** as “secularized”⁶ persons. Then what about the “religion” in society? Here the figures are not as strong but they still are remarkable considering the claims for a religious “vacuum.” According to a Pew Center poll, almost half of Americans (48%) believe that the U.S has “special protection from God. And almost 6 in 10 (58%) believe that our society’s strength “is based on the religious faith of its people.” Americans are almost equally divided⁷ on the question of whether a belief in God is necessary for one to be a moral person (Pew 8-9)

⁴ But is the sincere or realistic. The Gallup organization is developing an index of eight measures of religious belief and practice to track the went from 67 to 74.15 between March 2002 and Jan. 2003⁴. personally In January, 50% describe themselves as “religious,” 33% said they are “spiritual” but not “religious,” though to about one in three of these, that “spiritual” did **not** have reference to a theistic “God” or “Higher Power” (Americans Spiritual Searches) 1)

⁵ Update: journalist Terry Mattingly reported in his column, “Secularists heartened by recent polls,” that a City University of New York poll added the words, “if any,” when it asked for religious preference. According to Mattingly, a “stunning” 14% said “no religion.” First 14% may be higher than other polls, but I would hardly call it “stunning” as it leaves a “high” 86% with a religious preference. Second, the words, “if any” may also be suggestive.

⁶ Those who see a lessening “religion” may well be seeing the decline of mainline Protestantism. The Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Methodists denominations lost **one third** of their members between 1967 to 2002, mostly young people (Factors in the Slide 1)

⁷ Pew Foundation: “Belief in God Needed to Be Moral”: Yes-47%; No-50%; Don’t Know 3%.

The polls bear out Marty’s theory of an “all-pervasive **religiousness**” in American society, especially in the finding that 8 in 10 Americans say they are religious or spiritual people and that religious faith brings meaning to their lives, that 2 in 3 Americans describe themselves as “spiritually committed, and that 7 in 10 identify themselves with a Christian denomination.

Yet for all that Americans believe about themselves, at the same time, American **society** can be described as “**secularized**,” the result of what Marty calls a pervasive “secularization.” Please note that this secularity has a unique character as Thomas Reeves observes (“Not So Christian” 18) Western Europe has state religions and secular societies. In contrast, America has no state religion but is a religious society. As opposed to Western European situations⁸ our “secularization” amounts to the “disestablishment” of religious institutions in keeping with the First Amendment of the Constitution. The issues of a narrow definition of “secularity” concerning the removal of the power and influence of “organized religion” in the public life of society are beyond the scope of this paper. Yet, again, to the American **perception**, the divorce of religious organizations from society does not equal loss of “religiosity” itself.

Disestablishment of organized religion results in the religious situation that we know so well. Religion has become a matter of private and personal choice. More and more, that choice is not merely between denominations (“religions” in the proper sense) but between one “spirituality” and another. Along with the recent decades of new immigration, this voluntary character of religious life has resulted in an incredible, and ever-increasing religious “pluralism.” A defender of such “pluralism,” Harvard

⁸ Thomas Reeves states, “A truly secular society would have numbers approximating those found in, say, Great Britain, France, or Scandinavia, where interest in God is minimal and church attendance is extremely low (about 2.2 percent in the Church of England on a given Sunday) (“Not So Christian 18)

Professor, Diana Eck, has stated that religion was not lessened but strengthened by being cut off from the government. Eck asserts that the disestablishment of religion was the best thing for religion in America, because the denominations had to learn to promote themselves vigorously in the religious marketplace (Eck 42-43).

Please note that I am **not defending** what I describe, but I am trying to be as clear as I can be about what I see from an academic point of view. In summary, vacuum theories are not able to grasp the complexities of the unique American religious situation. Within our complex context, the religious “pluralism” described by Eck may, in fact, be a far greater challenge to Orthodox mission than secularization. I say that simply because the number of entrants into the religious marketplace and the range of religious wares “for sale” is that much greater and more difficult to address. For instance, even in Rockford, IL, I find myself having to relate to Hindus, Moslems, Wicca’s, and Buddhists as well as all sorts of denominational and “non-denominational” Christians of all kinds in my classroom, and each group has different questions and concerns to address.

In order to comprehend something of what is happening on the religious scene, we can go on to assert that in America, “religion” exists in different forms. These forms include: 1) Voluntary Associations (denominations); 2) Civil Religion; 3) Individual Spirituality.”

Customarily, “religion” is thought to be identical to “religions” and these religions are identifiable by religious “denominations.” Within this definition of “religions,” and under the conditions of “disestablishment,” religions become denominations, voluntary associations of like-minded believers each with its own means and methods of self-promotion. America has a unique way of treating religion in this sense of the word. On

the one hand, the public square is “protected” from the overt struggle of dominance of one religious denomination over against the other by the “secularism” of the so-called “separation of church and state.” On the other, individuals are free to choose (or not choose) whatever denomination suits them.

Identifying “religion” with religious denominations, however, blinds us to the presence and power of the two others forms of religion. The banishment of religious organizations from the public square has not precluded exactly what Neuhaus suggests, a “public theology.” Though Neuhaus doesn’t like the term, Robert Bellah and others have proven the existence of an American “Civil Religion” that unites the nation in common beliefs, values, and rituals. As the school of scholarship has pointed out, the largely invisible Civil Religion shows itself in times of national crisis as well as national ceremonies on holidays, inaugurations, court, etc. This “public religiosity” is, I believe, a sub-set of the larger category of American “popular religion,” the unreflective worldview and values of the mainstream of American culture that includes the themes of distinctiveness, dualism, and destiny.

The third form of American religion is represented by the more vague concept of “spirituality.” According to his February 1999 analysis, George Gallup Jr. states that the trend is for inward spirituality rather than outward religion.⁹ One indication of the way Americans are turning “inward” to their own private religiosity is that 45% report that when deciding how to conduct their lives they pay more attention to their own views rather than that of organized religion. Another statistic that shows how Americans are

⁹Almost 3 in 4 Americans said they thought of “spirituality” more “in a personal and individual sense” than in terms of organized religion and church doctrine in a 1999 poll. (American’s Spiritual Search 1).

turning toward their own opinions in religions is that in 2002, 70% of Roman Catholics said that the teachings of the Church were “outdated.” These Catholics still identify with a church that claims spiritual authority over them, yet they seem to have reason to pay less and less heed to that authority.

The turn inward is in keeping with the typically American attitude of religious individualism. The seminal study of American values, *Habits of the Heart*, shows that such individualism is a profoundly deep and abiding characteristic of American religion. The perception that religion should be a matter of personal choice and that it is reducible to individual experience has undoubtedly accelerated the apparent weakening of the ties of many American individuals to their denominations. At this point, though 50% of Americans describe themselves as “religious,” 33% more say they are “spiritual” and not “religious.” (Americans Spiritual Search 1). To the dismay of Bellah and his school of thought, the trend toward a “spirituality” disconnected from a sense of relationship and obligation to a larger community seems to be gaining in influence (Angrisino).

If this analysis of the different forms of religion in America, is right then those involved in Orthodox mission should keep in mind that religion does not mean one thing but that several expressions of religion co-exist within the secular (that is, compartmentalized) American society. As Orthodox Christians, we may see more clearly than most the secularism of American society and we may and we may discern correctly that Americans are lead astray by materialism, private egoism, subjectivism, and ethical relativism. But Americans, in general, do not see themselves (though they may see everyone else) according to one or more of these global “isms.” In between the Gospel and Americans, we might conclude, is the invisible shield of their own self-

perceptions, and we must take these contextual factors into account in our mission strategy and work.

A variety of arguments can be made to maintain that the polls used so extensively in our discussion are faulty, misleading, and wrong. The data that I have used are primarily the Gallup polls from the new Internet resource, “The Gallup Brain,” because of the Gallup reputation, its impressive long term data base on American religious attitudes, worship attendance, etc., and a new feature that allows one customize topics into trend. In addition I have consulted the March 20 Pew Research Center Poll “The American Struggle with Religion At Home and Abroad.” Both of these polling organizations are hardly Orthodox and so might be criticized in this Orthodox setting. Yet I believe that the polls are useful, even though we may disagree with some of their questions, features, or approaches, because help us step back and take a look at American society and our mission from a different point of view. Using but them might also prevent us from jumping to hasty conclusions from our own biases and experiences.

The polls are largely based on phone calls from a small sample of the American population. Statistically they would claim to be accurate to within + or – 3 points (the odds are 19 out of 20 that they are right) (Robinson 1). However, two factors support their reliability: 1) The polls of Gallup, the Pew Center, and the more conservative Barna Research Group support one another; 2) the findings are consistent and coherent over time. Of course, the wording of questions might produce the same wrong results¹⁰, yet

¹⁰ B.A. Robinson points out that the Gallup polls achieve such a 96% result for religious belief by asked “do you believe in God or a universal spirit [my underline]. The term “universal spirit” is ambiguous and to theists quite different than asking if one believes in a “personal God.” Moreover, if you ask whether people are really certain of God’s existence, the percentage goes down to around 63%. When asked out life after death, the Gallup polls get a 75%, but a poll that asks about definite belief only got a 55% result (Robinson 3)

especially the Gallup polls have tried to reword questions and also to check their results with follow up research such as the Spiritual Index.”

The main objection with the polls is simply that the results are based on self-reports of what individuals will tell random callers over the phone. Are Americans deluding themselves? A hard-hitting article by Thomas Reeves in *First Things*, “Not So Christian America,” concludes that they are. Worship attendance figures are dubious and probably only measure that the respondents felt they should have been in church on Sunday (*Not So* 20). The avowals of moral principles we hear in the polls are inconsistent with the perception (*Not So* 20-21) and evidence¹¹ of declining morality in the society. Individuals may “identify” with a denomination yet that “identification” may mean no more than their parents or grandparents were members of it. The facts are that 85% of Americans state a “religious preference” for Christianity (*America Remains* 1), but in Feb. 2003, 17% of the members of American religious congregations were “actively disengaged.” (That meant they neither attended their church nor had a psychological bond with it.) Another 55% were “not engaged” (attendees but not “psychologically connected”). That left 26% of the members who are loyal, have a sense of personal belonging, and expressed their membership in action like community service (*News Congregational Engagement* 1).

Given these flaws, it might seem that the polls could be dismissed in our mission planning and work. Instead of discounting their findings, however, we might give the results a deeper analysis. The benefit of the polls is not merely to identify the “unchurched” who might be candidates for our work. True, the percentage of those who

¹¹ In 1957, 57% thought that young people have the same sense of right and wrong as 50 years ago.” were as “honest and moral as they used to be.” In March 2002, it was 19% (Pew Research 10)

are not members of religious congregations grew at faster rate in the last decade, a rate of 13.2%¹². True, the percent of “unchurched” now stands at about 47%. Yet, more important, the polls have reveal the self-perceptions of the “churched” as well as “unchurched.” These (false) perceptions are the belief context that I am suggesting that those who proclaim and represent the Gospel should keep in mind.

Even the pollsters admit that as George Gallup puts it, “American’s perceptions of their spirituality are far different from the actual practice of their spirituality.” (New Index 1). Gallup believes that he can measure the inconsistency. He states that while 47% of Americans said they were “strongly spiritually-committed,” only 13% of these passed all nine traits of his “Spiritual Commitment Scale,” a measurement that gets at both external and internal indications of genuine spirituality.

It gets worse, however. Orthodox ethicist Vigen Guororian refers to the studies of James Davison Hunter and Robert Wuthnow that “...vast numbers of Americans today live in real cognitive dissonance respecting their claims to be religious and the conduct of their lives (Guorian 89). The cognitive dissonance is not merely between belief and action: it is between divergent beliefs. Conservative pollster George Barna has concluded “America is transitioning from a Christian nation to a syncretistic, spiritually diverse society¹³ (Creedon 41)

Just as individualism is a characteristic American trait, so Wade Clark Roof shows that American hybrid religion is nothing new: “Religion historically—and particularly in the American democratic setting--- has been one of new combinations,

¹² Remember that Americas are less likely to equate church membership with religiosity/spirituality. Many of the “unchurched” may still see themselves as “religious” people.

¹³ George Barna. *The Index of Leading Spiritual Indications*. Word, 1996 in Creedon.

pastiche, the mixing of official themes and folk themes¹⁴. Now with the expanding religious pluralism, Americans have that many more options from which to choose.

The polls shows a wide “knowledge gap” between those who suppose themselves to be religious and their knowledge of the Bible, teachings, and traditions of their own churches (Easter Draws 2). Into this gap, Americans seem to fill ideas wherever they find them (“America’s Belief in Psychic and Paranormal,” 2001)

- 50% believe in ESP
- 42% believe that houses can be haunted; 38% believe in ghosts
- 33% believe that extraterrestrial beings have visited earth
- 32% believe in clairvoyance (that someone can know the past and predict the future)
- 28% believe that people can communicate mentally with the dead

All the above believes have seen an increase of more than 5 percentage points in the last decade.

My own research of trends (Gallup Brain) shows that the percentage of Americans who believe in reincarnation has gone from 20% in 1968 to about 25% in 2001. Moreover in 1975, 23% believed in astrology, compared to 28% in 2001¹⁵.

Another source from 1998 observes that while 86% at that time claimed to be Christian, the following was also true:

- 72% rejected the notion of absolute truth
- 40% had a New Age (pantheistic) view of God

¹⁴ He recalls transcendentalism, self-help and positive thinking. We could add spiritualism, utopianism, and various forms of divination.

¹⁵The trend goes up and down. It is almost 29% in 1978,, and 25% in 1990.

- 26% believed that astrology was scientific

In general, the polls show that “substantial proportions of traditional Christians subscribe to non-Christian beliefs and practices, such as reincarnation, channeling, astrology and fortune telling” (“Easter Draws Americans Back to Church,” 1999 1), according to George Gallup, Jr. Thus, the faith of Americans is generally superficial, and it is often wrong. Yet Americans do not seem bothered by what Huston Smith¹⁶ calls the New Age “cafeteria approach” (Creedon 43) and Reginald Bibby calls “religion a la carte” (“Easter Draws” 1999 1).

Having reviewed the American context, we can now return to the beginning theme. I suggest that the present challenge to Orthodox mission in America is not secularism, it is the hybrid religiosity of Americans. As we began, I quoted Father Schmemmann who said that our religiosity often covers our eyes to our own sins and provides a means of our self-justification. Under the doctrine of individualism, now coupled with pluralism, each American is claiming and exercising the right to set his own standards for religious belief, morality, and practice.¹⁷ Thus, American religiosity will tend to tolerate, patronize, discount, and dismiss the Gospel we proclaim and we can unwittingly allow that to happen.

The false assumption of the contemporary American religion is that there are multiple “Gospels”¹⁸ and the autonomous individual must choose what “Gospel” suits him from the cafeteria line of a growing pluralism. While definitely widening, pluralism

¹⁶ This is an interesting comment from dean of American World Religions teachers who has exposed so many to other religions and who himself believes in a transcending “Great Tradition” common to diverse religions. He is speaking of the New Age religions and contrasting an “organic faith” that is more like a “work of art” than a “cafeteria tray.” But the image applies to America syncretism in general.

¹⁷ The result is that everyone comes to believe what is true and do what is right in his own eyes. Judges 21:25

¹⁸ Galatians 1:6-9

is nothing new to American culture. The American experiment in disestablishment was a “solution” to the competing diversity of (Protestant) denominations. Still, because of swelling immigration and remarkable shifts of church membership, pluralism now has joined individualism to define the essential character of American religiosity.

The current “solution” to pluralism for many Americans is the naïve conclusion of multiple paths to God. The 18% of Americans who still believe in absolute truth are far outnumbered and overwhelmed by the 75% who accept other religions as having “their own truth” (Pew 10). The pressure toward such universalism is so great that the Pew Research Center found that the 48% who believe that there is only One Way to eternal life are balanced by another 48% who deny this basic evangelical claim (Pew 10).

The analysis of the context of Orthodox mission in America leads us to reconsider the question of **the** Gospel as it relates “in but not of” this context. As witnesses to the Gospel, we can be misled by superficial understandings of secularism. We can also be lead astray by understandings of the Gospel that are subtly influenced by our American context. For example, the underlying assumption inherited from Protestantism is that the Gospel represents a set of propositions to be promoted by “applying” them to a “context.” Since the Gospel represents principles (whether they be “the fundamentals,” “the spiritual laws,” “the doctrine of justification,” “the office of hierarchical authority,” or “the ideal of inclusiveness”), the task of mission is to “spin” these articles of belief in ways that are more “relevant” and attractive for Americans. The result is that the Gospel is shaped to fit the context. The Gospel appears in multiple forms according to the needs and interests of America’s diverse populations.

Not American secularism but American religiosity continually tempts the Church in this direction, because calling for commitment to certain spiritual “truths” is the American religious way. But think of the outcome! Under this definition of the Gospel, Orthodoxy becomes one more “Value Meal” on the menu board of American fast-food religion. Americans can choose the whole package or certain features of it. Would you like your Orthodoxy with icons but not the Holy Mysteries? Would you like it with mysticism but not the veneration of the saints? You take your pick!

His Beatitude, our Metropolitan Herman, writes in his Archpastoral Message on the Feast of Pentecost (6/15/03) that the “Holy Spirit challenges us to quench the world’s thirst, to preach, teach, and heal, and to proclaim boldly that God indeed ‘is above all and through all and in us all.’” Polls confirm that America is indeed spiritually thirsty. In January 2002, George Gallup, Jr. wrote, “The last 10 years have seen an upsurge of interest among the U.S. populace in spiritual matters” (“Americans Feel the Need to Believe” 1). Yet Americans do not seem to be discriminating about where and how they satisfy their thirst. Many are already drinking from impure and poisoned wells.

In his seminal *Ethics after Christendom*, Vigen Guorian asserts that we must find the way between accommodation to the American context and the sectarianism that would pit us against it (Guorian 36). To amplify that thought, we can identify three approaches to an America that the polls show is moving away from Christianity and toward a syncretistic pluralism. One is Guorian’s category of accommodation. Another is sectarian “antagonism.” The third, is to be Orthodox and to represent the true—that is authentic—Gospel in, by, and through a genuine Orthodox life.

We have already broached the subject of the first approach, accommodation. The Church accommodates itself to its context when, in the words of Paul Evdokimov, it “identifies itself with the historical structures of the world” (Evdokimov 52). In our age, these historical structures are not necessarily political but can be social and cultural. For instance, the plethora of Orthodox “jurisdictions” in the U.S, still largely based on ethnic considerations, invites Americans to **perceive** Orthodoxy as a set of “denominations.” Then too, Christos Yannaras warns that we can conform to social models of parish organization whose structures do not to constitute the Body of Christ fulfill the personal needs of separate individuals (Yannaras 224). Nothing in this paper should be construed as suggestion that our mission strategy should be controlled by the polls as if I were recommending this accommodation approach.

On the other hand, Orthodoxy can set itself over against the world. I have called this an “antagonistic approach” because I fear that that is how Orthodox sectarianism looks to the average American. The Church takes this approach, when its message is reduced to criticism and complaint against the culture. This attitude of antagonistic sectarianism is discovered whenever the Church abandons the world and its mission “in” the world for a position outside and above it. This “position” above and outside the world can locate the “True Church” in another century (Czarist Russia) or another moral system (America’s Culture Wars). In so doing, we cease to find Christ in the world (Evdokimov 59), and we deny the power of the Gospel of Christ to transform the world not just to help an elect escape from it (Schmemman 227).

Both accommodation and antagonism in the final analysis fail to grasp the theandric mystery of the Incarnation, the unity of the two natures (without confusion and

without separation) of Christ and His Body, the Church. Accommodation denies divine transcendence, the very essence of the spiritual thirst of our society, according Father Schmemmann (65). Antagonism denies divine immanence and the power of God to change lives and the world. Both of these approaches are misunderstandings of the Gospel and the Gospel mission.

Undeniably, the Gospel is the Truth of the Word of God. Yet, the Church does not “have” the Gospel as a set of divine “truths” but the true Church lives in and through the Truth. The Gospel is a living thing, and not a “thing” but the Life, the Eternal Life of the Kingdom. As Father Schmemmann states, “The *Kingdom of God*, whose announcement precisely as reality and not merely idea or doctrine, stands at the very center of the Gospel, or better, to say, *is the Gospel*” (74).

Our mission, thus, is inseparable from the Gospel and the Gospel is inseparable from the Life of the Holy Spirit in the Church. The Church is the icon of the Kingdom of God. Its Gospel witness is the very Life “of” and “in” Christ, the Life we often call the “sacramental” or “Eucharistic” life. This Life in Christ that brings us into communion with the Holy Trinity (*theosis*), of course, is focused in the Holy Mysteries. We have the fullness of this Life in the Holy Eucharist. Yet, the faithful do not leave this Life behind when they go out “into the world” beyond the temple doors¹⁹. We are meant to become ourselves “icons” so that the face of Christ will “radiate in the faces of those who belong to him” (Evdokimov 55).

As Paul Evidokimov says in his stirring message “To the Churches of Christ,” the Gospel must “rip us out of every sociological straightjacket” (57). Our analysis of

¹⁹ Paul Meyendorff points out that when we become Sunday Christians whose lives do not reflect what we share in the liturgy, for us secularism has triumphed. (Meyendorff 54)

American society implies that Americans will tend to see us as just one more “sociological institution,” one more “church” trying to preserve and extend itself. I am proposing that if we concentrate on what we “have”—the “true” doctrine, the “historic” faith, the “right” number of sacraments, the “correct” morality—then we will fall into the sectarianism of emphasizing what others do not have and/or the accommodation of marketing what we “have” to those who don’t. We will fall into the trap of defining ourselves as just one more self-promoting religious group trying to gain market share in the open American religious market.

In contrast, Paul Evdokimov suggests that the Gospel brings us from “having” to “being” (Evdokimov 57). The power of the Gospel is revealed not so much by the words we have to say as it is manifested by the Life of the Kingdom we are called to live.. Father Schmemmann states, “A theology of mission is always the fruit of the total ‘being’ of the Church and not a mere specialty for those who receive a particular missionary calling (209). In short, mission is not a department, an activity, or an extra agenda of the Church, but the very Life of the Church and its people. To conceive of mission in this way is to find freedom in the Gospel from the presuppositions that bind us to Evdokimov’s “sociological straightjacket” of the postmodern age.

In summary, the conditions of American secularism (religious disestablishment) have created a hybrid religiosity that leads to pluralism in religious form and syncretism in religious belief. The critical issue has become the question of authenticity in two areas: 1) “mixing and matching” of separate and even contradictory beliefs; 2) divorce of action and way of life from professed belief.

An analysis of American religions seems to indicate that Americans “have” a religiosity that protects them from authentic religion. If Americans are to find in Orthodoxy the authentic faith that satisfies their thirst for Eternal Life we must find a way to address that mistaken religiosity. That address, however, will find itself to be effective not so much by words as by the authentic life of the Orthodox faithful in the church and in the world.

The Orthodox mission is not to replace one religiosity with another but to witness to the Gospel that transcends religiosity just as it reveals the immanence of God’s presence and power in the “secular.” The American contexts begs for the faithful to find a “manner of life that is worthy of the Gospel”²⁰ so that the Orthodox indeed in their very **being** and not just in their saying and doing are salt and light to the world. With great insight into the postmodern situation, Evdokimov says, “The only message which is powerful any longer is not the one which simply repeats the words of Christ, the Word, but the one that makes him present” (55). In other words, our mission in our American context is to be the Sacrament of God to the world in an authentic, that is **Orthodox**, way of life, a way that represents the Gospel and reveals the Kingdom of God to the world.

²⁰ See Guorian: [St. Basil] was more interested in exploring forms of community and discipline that would enable Christians to live the gospel and show others the way to the kingdom of god. It is my contention that this is the point on which a new *modus vivendi* of the churches ins North America and much of Europe must turn in our time as well.”

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