

Lady Gaga in the Christian House: Secularism in the Orthodox Family
ReCatechism 5
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As Orthodox Christians, we believe that Jesus Christ is the Lord and Saviour of our souls. Our Lord is the only one who has not sinned. All others, due to their human weakness, fall into sin at one point or another in their lives. If we imagine that all these figures are an icon of Christ, some icons are not as sullied – tainted, tarnished, corrupted – than the others. We see the love of God and dedication to Him in some pictures; in others, the viewer can't help but see how far away they are from God.

Yet, because of the society we live in, it's not easy being a Christian today. Then again, it wasn't easy living as a Christian during the first 3 centuries, as the Church was persecuted against by the Roman authorities. We hear of people like the Israelites in the times of Moses and Elijah, the Pharisees in the time of Christ, heretics after Christ, humanists today, *Lady Gaga herself*: they all belong, in one way or another – to the topic I'd like to speak about this evening: *secularism*.

If we ask, “Is Lady Gaga an icon of Christ?”, some people might laugh at the thought. Lady Gaga was chosen as a “model” for secularism because of her being a great example of secularism itself. She was raised a Roman Catholic but is known to defame crosses in her music videos. She follows Kabala, a Jewish heresy. She is an advocate of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered people, sins which are condemned by both the Old and New Testament (*a reminder: not the people, but the sins*). One person online said it best: “I think she is part of a cult of personality – she worships herself.” I think we should pray that she receives some enlightenment, along with everyone that espouses secularism. Yet, it would be naive of us to think that she doesn't have an effect on many people in today's society – some of which see her as a role model and, scarier still, a *hero*.

Even with the above said, it is important to know that yes, indeed, Lady Gaga – and every person, no matter how ‘sinful’ they might be – is created in the image of God. There is hope for everyone, regardless of how deep they have entered into the pit of despair and sin.

So, with that in mind, the acrostic tonight, as almost every presentation I give, is the following:

Sketching it out – Defining the word “secular”

Educational centres – Where do the ideas come from

Children, adults and everyone else – The participants

Understanding the process – How it happens

Ladder of secular descent – From fad to everyday occurrence

An answer to the “Patchwork Quilt” Phenomenon

Riddle, problem or non-issue? – What do Christians do, if anything, as they live in a secular world

Sketching it out – Defining the word “secular”

The word *secular* comes from the Latin word *saecularis*, meaning “of this world.” (Oxford University Press, 2011) It is not merely that there is religious scepticism or indifference; rather, there is no connection with religious matters at all. It also extends to the fact *secularists* (people who espouse secularism) believe religion should be excluded from civic affairs or public education – the separation of Church and State.

This type of thought process is something foreign to the spirit of the ancient philosophers, the Jews of the Old Testaments, Christian societies, Islamic nations, and the list goes on. While many societies have a religion and belief system as their basis, there are exceptions: Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus, Enlightenment thinkers Benedict Spinoza, Voltaire and John Locke and U.S. founding father Thomas Jefferson are all disciples of secularism, in one form or another. The trend has been alive more today than ever before.

Secularism not only discounts religion, it completely eliminates it as a “non-entity.” *I wouldn't use the word “enemy” easily, but they are the enemy of religion. Secularism is there to be ‘god’ without God.*

Educational centres – Where do the ideas come from

During the debate on abortion and homosexuality, there is a belief that the religious community (mainly, the Christian community) had it all wrong when dealing with the issue: rather than fighting in a courtroom, they should have fought the issue where the opposition did: *the classroom*. From a very young age, children are learning about secular ideas in their own classrooms at school. This is because today's lawmakers were yesterday's children and teens in classrooms, as they were being taught this by their teachers. While not every teacher is at fault (there are hundreds of devout, faithful Christian teachers who do not espouse any type of secularism), it has not been unknown for children to start reading books about “the third gender”, “the two-daddy and two-mommy families” and other such topics because the school boards have mandated it. Secular ideas do not pop out of nowhere: they are fed to children in schools.

Another big “learning centre” for secularism is the media and the Entertainment Industry. It is cited by Statistics Canada that “virtually every Canadian has at least 1 TV set and the majority have 2 or more.” (Statistics Canada, 2006) It has played a pivotal role in the socialization of children of the 20th and 21st century, not only in Canada and the United States, but all over the world (with people watching things like *the Royal Wedding* and the last episode of *Friends* all the way in Asia and Africa, when it was almost impossible to do a century ago).

We've already seen various pictures of Hollywood stars that are glamorized by “Entertainment Tonight”, “ETalk”, “TMZ.com” and by hundreds of other media outlets. Their opinions are more valid than anyone else's ... simply because they are “famous”. Now, I'm not saying that watching the Emmy's or Oscar's is a sin – that's just ridiculous. However, when we glamorize the people around us as being “more

important” or “idolizing” them and make them more important than God, this is when there is a big problem. These facts alone show how much power television has over the life of every citizen of the world...along with its friend, the Internet.

It’s something we “can’t live without” today: it helps us with our banking, sending messages and talking with people across the globe, it even keeps us entertained as we play games of chess with people we’ve never met before. The Internet is a powerful tool and can be used for a lot of good. Unfortunately, it’s also a tool that can be used to sink people further and further into the abyss of destruction. According to Jerry Ropelato of *Top Ten Reviews*:

“Every second 28,258 internet users are viewing pornography. In that same second 372 internet users are typing adult search terms into search engines. Every 39 minutes a new pornographic video is being created in the U.S.” \$3,075.64 is being spent on pornography **a minute**. To make things worse, there are over 100,000 websites that offer child pornography and 1 in 7 youths are being solicited for sex online. (Ropelato, 2011)

The internet is not only there with this temptation, though: it also is a bastion for falsehood when it comes to who Christ is, how we should treat our neighbour and fostering a climate of secularism (while making us accept it as “how things should be”).

There are, of course, the more traditional “educational centres” for secularism, such as books and magazines, but I think I’ve said enough about this for now.

Children, adults and everyone else – The participants

Participants of secularism can be divided into two categories: *willing* and *unwilling*. The *willing* participants are those who have made a choice to be away from God. They are:

- **Atheists:** People who believe there is no god – or, more correctly (as His Eminence likes to point out), people that make themselves into god
- **Agnostics:** People who believe there is a *possibility* of some type of “higher power” or “god”, but do not know who/what/where he/she/they are

Yet, secularism threatens to not only involve those people who wish to be a part of it. Secularism is reaching out to anyone who will “bite the carrot” and join the party. Some of these people include the so-called **CNE’s** (Christmas-Nameday-Easter Christians). How are they parts of secularism? Simple: **they are lukewarm Christians**. This is not intended to be a judgment on the “CNE Christians”, but it is a reality. They remember the Church when it is convenient or “necessary” (Christmas, namedays, Easter, sacraments, funerals, memorials), but it is not a presence in their lives. Jesus uses a strong quote when it comes to lukewarm Christians (who have existed since the Church’s founding on Pentecost): “because you are lukewarm – you are neither hot nor cold – I will spit you out of My mouth” (Revelation 3:16). Strong language from the Lord – but He doesn’t mince words. Thus, lukewarm Christians become (at first) unwilling participants in secularism; then, it becomes part of their daily life.

For both the willing and unwilling, there's a process that happens for people to travel on the road of secularism. What is it? Well...

Understanding the process – How it happens

People such as Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Max Weber said that “the modernization of society would include a decline in the levels of religiosity.” (Secularization, 2011) An example of this was something that I witnessed about 2 years ago. A person came to a Church here in Toronto, wanting to become a *koubaro* for a baptism. He was told that he was married outside the Church. When I tried to explain to him that he couldn't be a *koubaro* for that reason, his mother interjected: “My son is a great Greek Orthodox Christian! He goes to communion every Holy Saturday in the morning!” This person is an example of the second category I mentioned above. Yet, this process did not happen overnight. This process had a beginning.

The number 1 reason that secularism exists is that Christians – you and I – sometimes forget to show love to God and our neighbour. “God is love”, St. John the Theologian tells us. If we do not tell people this (and more importantly, *show them* that we love them), how do we expect them to feel at home in Church, to feel the love of Christ? This is why people who are looking for this love and acceptance leave the Church and search for places that they think will provide them this love. It could be as simple as joining a club, a fraternity, a sports team – or as deep as switching faiths, becoming agnostic or espousing atheism.

Another reason is that our level of catechism for Christians is so low. Many Orthodox Christians believe that if they have went through the present Sunday School system, they're “okay” when it comes to knowing the Faith. Things like *Re-Catechism* are here to dispel this myth. Baptisms for adults need to have that necessary catechism that precedes it. If we just baptize people without them knowing the faith, we face secularism when it could have been avoided. If people don't know why we have services, believe *what* we believe, understand the theology, how do we expect them to stay?

A third reason is that people see the Church as a place we go to on Sunday mornings and feasts. ‘The Church is the people’, as St. Ignatius of Antioch tells us. If we see the Church as one another – if we see each other as brothers and sisters in Christ – then we can move forward, united, as a family whose head is our Lord in Heaven. If we see the Church as a place we have to go to early on Sunday morning, including the fact no one shows us love and we don't understand, who would want to come? Becoming a lukewarm Christian is pretty easy: that's why Christians need to know that *everyone needs to make an effort* to be a Christian. If not, secularism is easy to espouse to.

Another reason still is that many people equate all Christianity with the stuff seen on television: lawsuits against dioceses and clergy, “healing crusades”, judgment of nations (e.g. Pat Robertson said that Haiti suffered those tragedies because it made a “pact with the devil”), and other such Protestant ideas are what others see. They don't know that Orthodox Christianity is nothing like what they see...but we're all painted with the same brush.

A last reason for this taking place is that prayer has ceased to be a “conversation with God” but has become mechanical. Metropolitan Anthony Bloom says: “Life and prayer are completely inseparable. A life without prayer is a life which is unaware of an essential dimension of existence.... The value of prayer consists in discovering, affirming and living in accordance with the fact that everything has a dimension of eternity and of boundlessness.”

(Note: Having said the above, there are various Christians who come to Church every Sunday that could be classified as “lukewarm”, but that is another talk).

Ladder of secular descent – From fad to everyday occurrence

In the past, the USSR was known for their firm stance on secularism. They wanted to stop the Orthodox Church in spreading the Gospel – their ultimate goal was to eliminate the Church’s presence from their lands. Prior to WWI, there were over 54,000 Churches; by 1941, only 500 churches remained open for people to worship. Churches were demolished, seminaries were closed, monasteries were destroyed, faithful were persecuted, a great number of priests were shot or sent to labour camps.

In Canada, it was only a few years ago that secularism was more of a fad. Today, we see everywhere not only a division of Church and State (merits of which are debatable, as Canada has so many faiths and cultures), but we find an attack on Christianity. It’s almost as if North American culture is trying to make up for years of favouring Judeo-Christian ideals and has begun a journey away from these thoughts and espousing everything else – especially secularism.

One of the things that helps make secularism a daily occurrence is the phenomenon of the “Patchwork Quilt”. So, what is this? It’s not about blankets.

An answer to the “Patchwork Quilt” Phenomenon

This takes place not only with youth and young adults, but with people of all ages. A person sees positive qualities in others (such as movie stars, millionaires, etc.) and adds their character as one which should be emulated, regardless of any negative qualities they might have. For example, the “quilt” could take their parish priest because they see him as a very good, ethical person. However, on that same quilt could be a musician who is an atheist, because of their ability to make money and the fact the star is “so popular”. In the end, the priest and the musician are on the same level, and the person has accepted them both. The negative qualities aren’t seen as things we should change, but just as “part of a person we need to accept”.

This is why the Church – the people of God – needs to present good role models for us, for children, youth, young adults and even the elderly. Every single day, we have Saints that are celebrated on the Church calendar. Taking the time to read their lives and the Scriptural readings associated with the feast will automatically give us an icon of how we should act. The Apostles spread the Gospel: should we not share the “Good News” with the world? Martyrs sacrificed their lives for Christ: should we not sacrifice for the

Lord? Ascetics denied their passions: should we not “deny ourselves” and live for Christ, showing love to our neighbour? The Holy Unmercenaries were philanthropists: should we not be philanthropists all throughout the year (and not only Christmas and Easter)?

The “patchwork quilt” is not what Orthodox Christians should see as the model. The “quilt” tells us that “it’s ok that people make mistakes, we should live with them.” Pencils have erasers, Christians have confession. Would any parent want their child to have as a role model a person like Tiger Woods – a great golfer but a husband marred with charges of infidelity? We can’t have it both ways; therefore, let’s choose the role models that are God-fearing and God-loving, rather than those who have themselves as the centre of their lives.

Riddle, problem or non-issue? – What do Christians do, if anything, as they live in a secular world

As I finish this evening, I’m pretty sure we can all see this is a problem in our society. It’s not a riddle that can be solved by simply finding out a “cookie-cutter” solution. It’s not a non-issue, because we’ve already lost so many of our people – either to agnosticism, atheism or the CNE phenomenon.

As we live in a secular world, we should remember that – in everything we do – we should see Christ. At the beginning of the presentation, different pics were shown. The people in the pics were obviously very different from one another. Some dealt with Christ and the Church, some were sports players and TV stars, some were from the music industry. Everyone in all the pictures were called to emulate the Person in the first picture – *everyone is called to become an icon of Christ*. Although we see Lindsay Lohan being ushered to jail or Lady Gaga in the crazy dress, we should see Christ. It’s just, as Metropolitan Anthony Bloom said:

The world in which we live is not a profane world; it is a world which we know only too well how to profane, but in itself it comes from the hands of God, it is loved by God. The value which God attaches to it is the life and death of his Son, and prayer manifests our recognition of this fact, our discovery of the fact that in the eyes of God every person around us, everything around us has a sacred value and, being loved by God, becomes precious to us. Not to pray is to leave God out of our existence, — not only God, but all that He signifies for the world He created, the world in which we live.

Being a Christian is hard when so many things that have their root in secularism are around us. However, no one ever said it would be easy to be a Christian. That’s why Jesus gives us the greatest weapon to combat secularism: “In this world, you will have tribulations. But be of good cheer! I have conquered the world.” (John 16:33) If we are united with Him, secularism can never win the battle for the hearts and minds of the human race.

“What are we going to do about it?” is the question I ask all of you, as we start the Q and A.