

What secularization feels like

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Late last summer I moved from a small town on the Canadian prairies, part of Treaty 7 territory,¹ to the nation's capital. The move was a bit of a chore, even though a fellow named Russ drove a truck containing all my family's belongings across the country so I didn't have to. Before Russ showed up, I did not know that loads on moving trucks do not go on and off directly as they would if you or I were driving our own things. I had thought that a driver would load a trailer with the belongings of one or more families in one part of the country, drive it to another part of the country, and deposit each load in turn. This is not how it works. Instead,

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some bits of wire and silicon converse with each other to figure out how to move things across the map, wasting as little fuel and driving time as possible. Fuel and driving time are both costs—and costs, the bits of wire and silicon are told, must always be minimized.

The result is something like an amoebic merry-go-round. Things get on and off, and the future beyond the next stop or two is undetermined. Our things, destined for the eastern side of Ontario, first traveled south to Calgary, where the driver loaded more things, then north to Edmonton to both drop off and pick up things, then south again to Calgary, where more things were dropped off. This, at least, is how I remember Russ's account when we finally met again near the Quebec border. After Calgary the truck headed east to Medicine Hat to pick up more things. There finally and resolutely its nose was pointed east across the prairie provinces. Just after the truck entered Ontario, the bits of silicon and wire demanded a stop in Thunder Bay and then Toronto before the truck headed southwest to Kitchener. Until 1916, Kitchener was known as Berlin, but it was not good to be

German in 1916, so in that year the city shook free from its Mennonite roots and adopted the name of Earl Kitchener, a British field marshal famous for his African triumphs. I doubt that my family's things took much issue with this history as they looped back north and east on highway 401, making a stop in Kingston before docking at our home on the edge of the nation's capital. Our things had been on the truck for the better part of a month, presumably winning and losing friends and absorbing historical errata along the way. When we parted ways out west, Russ could not have told me that this would be the way of things. The gods had not yet informed him, for they had not yet received the necessary oblations of data.

As our things slunk their way east, my family and I had time for a leisurely drive across the country. We went camping, watched cowboys, and visited a Benedictine monastery with a hundred-year stockpile of pottery clay. We even had enough time to spend several days doing business with a lawyer, a locksmith, and our new congregation's administrative assistant. Oh yes, and we had enough time to spend a full week with Grandma and another full week in our new home without anything but our camping equipment—stainless steel bowls, inflatable sleeping mats, a large tent, and rain jackets.

I had thrown out all of our food in North Dakota, because our van was crammed. It had been impossible for me or my wife to climb close enough to our infant son to sooth him during his regular verbal protests. If there is any glitch in the system administered by wire and silicon, it is just the fact that when your things are loaded onto the truck, the driver cannot tell you when they will reach their destination. That date is constantly recalculated, depending on new shipping requests. Eventually the driver is ordered to drive home, and after dropping off our things and making a final stop along the Ottawa River in Pembroke, Russ headed back to New Brunswick. We finally had what we needed to prepare a decent meal.

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But none of that is about secularization; none of it has the least bit to do with religion and its supposed banishment from public life. Except, of course, that it does.

When I tell people that I have moved from Alberta, they assume this means the city of Calgary. You know already that this was not the case; I have said that the town I left was small and that it was on the prairies. Calgary is curled into the prairie grassland by the Bow River, but by Canadian standards it is not small. I have not yet told you much else. In actual fact, as opposed to the pseudo-facts that swirl around presidential politics, the town we left had a population of 3,320. To serve that population and the surrounding farmland, it had two high schools, two grade schools, one small hospital, two bars, five restaurants, one

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A fifteen-minute drive down the road from our old town would take you to the closest neighboring prairie outpost. It was originally a Catholic settlement, complete with a large house for women religious. Our town was Protestant. Our town did not have a convent, but it did have a Bible college, one of the oldest in western Canada and at one time the largest in the country. From there missionaries went out to every nook and cranny in the world. Then forty or so years later, they came back to a retirement of Bible study classes and growing tropical trees indoors. Having braved the jungles and mountains of far-off

lands, they spent their sunset years being purified by the Canadian cold in mobile homes and postwar bungalows, some dying saint-like without money for a funeral.

At one point during our stay in this little town, my wife and I hired a crew to put a new roof on our house, a small postwar bungalow clad in yellow stucco. We thought, given the reputation of roofing crews, that it might be a good morning for our children to play indoors. There is a certain set of vocabulary we hoped to withhold for their future enjoyment. What actually transpired was that the crew spent much of the morning debating the relative merits of various Bible translations. Had our kids been outside, they might have learned something of the linguistic prejudices of King James's translators or the pros and cons of inclusive language.

Originally the town was lower down, on the banks of a creek. Sometime about 1912 it moved upland to squat beside the Canadian Northern Railway. You could see the hills of Zion from there—but as of 2014, our little town had not yet ascended them. There were the usual party houses propagated by a fertile mix of boredom and oil money. There were kids who spray-painted penises on the high school, the dollar store, the old high school, stock trailers, sidewalks, and moving railcars. There were occasions when the police had to corral drunks. There were nurses in the emergency room that treated patients who had overdosed on illicit substances. The band Trooper once played at the hockey arena, and enthusiastic fans set fire to a pile of leaves after the show. I assume the stimulus for this arboreal conflagration was the band's eternally enduring anthem, "Raise a Little Hell." An off-duty police officer stomped out the fire. "The town wasn't quite heaven," an ex-pastor once told me, "but it was pretty close." He lived with the retired missionaries in the mobile home park.

Now my family and I call Ottawa home. As cities go, Ottawa's reputation is not particularly licentious. It is, obviously, a government town. Recruiters and realtors call it a "family town," which is their way of avoiding the term "boring." Ottawa's museums are conservative. Some of its buildings are historic, but its architecture is generally muddled and lackluster. The city's center is not a street but a canal. People paddle it in the summer and skate it during the winter, when the tourism leaflets boast "the world's longest skateway." And yet this place has no desire to climb Zion's hills. We cannot see them. When I visit the café near our church, there are people whose clothing marks them as Jews and Muslims. The other day in the space of three blocks, I saw a woman in full burka and one enjoying the spring sunshine in full bare-skinned glory. In this place, guns are occasionally used to kill people rather than deer or gophers. Yet not all of this is secularization either; some of it is nothing more than the difference between a population of 3,000 and 1,000,000.

Belief in God has become one option among others

Near the beginning of his massive book on the subject of secularization, a lanky Quebec-born philosopher suggests there are three senses in which we might see secularization at work around us.²

First, we might see ourselves caught in a tidal drift from a premodern society where the political realm, despite its being labeled secular, was dependent on some acknowledgment of God, to our modern social arrangement, where such acknowledgments are irrelevant. There is ample evidence of this shift in Ottawa, on the surface at least. The municipal government has recently banned the traditional prayer before its meetings.

So secularization could refer to that. Or, second, it could refer to an alleged decrease in religious practice resulting from a rise in education, science, or whatever. This once-commonsense belief

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seems hard to link with facts. If we find ourselves entranced by this vision of secularization, we move beyond the evidence of people’s actual practices and into the wishful realm of lawyers, bureaucrats, and the disaffected offspring of fundamentalist preachers. Religious forms might be changing, but it seems unlikely that we are on a train headed off into an areligious promised land where science stops faith at the province line.

The third sense, the sense of secularization that the lanky philosopher is most invested

in, is less alarmist but no less significant. It is one that denotes our experience of the religious life as a life occurring within a clear sense of alternatives. To experience secularization in this way is to have moved from a time when it took great effort to disbelieve in God, to our own situation, where belief in God is one option among others; it is, to quote the philosopher, “no longer axiomatic.” But to this we must add one addendum: the absence of the axiom does not result in an obvious, gut-churning sense of loss. There is no divine vacuum in our secularized hearts. Rather, for most of us something quite like spiritual fulfillment comes from within this world, from the gritty beauty of friendship or art or the view of the Ottawa valley from the hills on the Quebec side.

Not long ago a terrible news story shocked our city. It was alleged that a member of the national police force had chained his son in the basement of their home. According to newspaper reports, when the eleven-year-old was rescued, he weighed only fifty pounds. The case has since gone to trial, so one morning I

saw splashed across the front page of a city paper the revelation that the father had also subjected his son to the ministrations of an exorcist.

Exorcism has been with Christianity from its earliest days. In the seventeenth chapter of Mathew's Gospel, Jesus is reported to have cast a demon out of a boy. The boy had epileptic seizures, and his family reported that the demon would take control of him, causing fits and flopping the child into the open fire. Some Christian communities today continue Jesus's legacy under the new heading of "deliverance ministry." One can be delivered from a range of hard-to-pin-down afflictions stretching from depression to a diverse assortment of sexual temptations. At its most tame, exorcism/deliverance is nothing more than praying for sufferers to be released from oppression by forces beyond their control. It can be more elaborate, though, with screams, thrashing on the floor, wild incantations, and the parading-about of crosses. The subtext of this particular Ottawa news cycle seemed to be that the father's resorting to exorcism confirmed that he was a monster. If it was otherwise, the public would face the possible existence of forces beyond their control.

It is true that much attributed to the demonic in the past now has other explanations. One can only imagine that today the beneficiary of Jesus's deliverance would have found the epilepsy diagnosis sufficient. Ockham's razor cuts quite well, which is something of a surprise, since we can't yet fully control the onset of seizures. If we could, we would not need to confiscate the driver's license of those who suffer them. What is true in this small sense is also true at the social and political level. Western governments pulled what levers they could to make the Arab Spring stick. It didn't. So we are now taking away their keys. The situation is at present such that one senses a metaphysical squeeze, a compression of the notion of causation, the denial of the possibility that something might—as Aristotle would have believed—be prompted by more than one agent. Russ and his digital overlords delivered our possessions, God needed not be thanked. Thus a resort to exorcism is taken to be of a piece with a resort of violence. The metanarrative cords that bind any openness to the transcendent with violence are thick indeed. Should they break, well, chaos is at the gates.

It is in such an environment that members of my congregation sometimes describe the process of informing their colleagues about their faith as “coming out as a church person.” Though the responses they receive are varied, there is one that shows up with a peculiar regularity: the hope that being a church person is a matter of culture. My fellow congregants find colleagues willing to celebrate their Mennonite cultural roots but much less enthusiastic about their holding actual theological beliefs or engaging in Christian practices. Cultural peculiarities are something a secularized society knows and, in a general sense at least, appreciates. Part of this response is surely an effect of the fact that culture can be commodified. “Mennonite” is now a point of attraction for

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tourists and furniture buyers in places like Kitchener—née Berlin. Culture is subject to the analytical probes of social scientists. It is deemed safe and so is welcomed in the parades that liturgise inclusive democracies. In short, culture is subject to the leading institutions of modern life: the market, the engines of science, and the state. It is this subjection that renders it safe for public consumption. Religion, itself a category of the social scientists, and theology are not. My congregants are welcomed as Mennonites, with their love of borscht and four-part harmony, but questioned as church people. Religion and theology, after all, imply an openness to the transcendent, which though

we hate to admit it, is beyond the reach of our modern institutions. It lies somewhere outside the demarcations of the quantifiable, perhaps in territory that Canadian public discourse once called “barbaric cultural practices.” It is us but it is not us.

One of the rituals that comes with moving to a new locale is introducing yourself to the neighbors. On the fringes of a city, as we are, this ritual takes on seasonal regularity. Our neighbors work for the federal government, military, national police force, and other security agencies. These entities shuffle employees around like checkers. It is the case then that summer brings a level of home-swapping here that I had only seen before on TV

shows. My wife and I have learned to be coy about my occupation. I am a pastor.

My wife is less shy than I am. She once mentioned to a neighbor at the park that her husband was a minister. Her conversation partner seemed surprisingly impressed. I say “surprisingly,” because those of us in the ministerial ranks are sometimes a bit embarrassed at how easy it is to join. No quality control extends across all brands. Ours is a self-regulated industry.

We have to scroll down through my wife’s conversation a little to uncover the root of the surprise: it was that our neighbor assumed my wife’s partner was a *cabinet* minister. It seemed more plausible to her that I would be in the government’s inner circle than that I would be a member of the clergy. It’s true that many churches are closing their doors; however, there are still many, many more of these ministers than the other kind. Perhaps the surprise was rooted too in the fact that when clergy make the news here, it is mostly in connection with litigation or criminal investigations. Congregations and their networks wrangle over ownership of church buildings. Historic denominations process abuse-related lawsuits. The most famous member of the clergy in our city is a priest who was convicted of theft and fraud. Apparently his gambling addiction was difficult to fund. One might wish that the plethora of buildings and institutions named after saints or religious orders, or even the stories of divine love that lie beneath Western culture, would provide a counterweight to these contemporary tales of woe. That is wistfulness and romance. They do not.

Homeless in a technological society

A prominent social critic of the previous generation—from Bordeaux, where all critics should be from—describes our era as one dominated by “technique.”³ For him, this concept implied a quest for efficiency, with its attendant works of universalization and mechanization. Such forces are hardly limited to the transcontinental movement of goods. National capitals are obvious centers for such developments. What is national policy, if not the disregard for small places and local rhythms? What is a modern liberal nation, if it is not the pretention that history is merely grist between the political wheels of contemporary sentiment? We

have thrown off our imperial overlords, political and social, but are now fast becoming subjects of a new efficiency, one of our own choosing but one that tolerates no exceptions.

Clergy feel these forces too. We do so even as we maintain that our speech about the transcendent has purchase. In the small town from which I moved, some churches, in an attempt to keep up, enacted programs imported from urban centers on the far side of the Atlantic. The other day someone called our church office

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from a phone bank in Texas, offering our congregation “biblical content” on a “Netflix-like platform.” If we do not experience secularization as the total disappearance of religion from public life, or the obsolescence of spirituality, or even as the evaporation of overarching norms and narratives, we experience it as a sense that our search for meaning and our acknowledgment of the transcendent are choices made from a buffet or from the results of a web search.

Like all buffets—or web searches, for that matter—the religious choices on offer are circumscribed. Not only are the offerings largely limited to private life, but they have mostly been appropriated and made tolerable

to the foreign palates of modern technocratic consumers. I’m sure that some of my congregants would love “biblical content” on a “Netflix-like platform”—from Texas. But I doubt that the fellow from the phone bank would show up to do a funeral. I don’t think he would hold the hand of a dying woman and nod as she says she lived her faith, even if she didn’t speak about it. He probably would not put words to our shock on the Sunday morning after a child was found chained in a basement.

My family’s things have now been here in the Ottawa region for more than a year. My hunch is that Russ continues his driving and episodic returns to New Brunswick. He had other ideas, but I think he’s still driving. I think he’s still driving, but I actually doubt that he ever returns home. Few of us ever return home. His home now is the world of silicon and wire, ocean-spanning optical fibers, and mobile phone signals. His home and mine is the

transcendent crushed into the material, rooms of enchantment flattened by the pressures of vast metaphysical seas. It works perfectly. Exchanging transcendence for transience is a deal we wanted. Nevertheless, now we the secularized pray—we cannot not—that somehow the governing algorithms would find it in themselves to make new homes for us. We pray for homes sturdy enough and expansive enough to contain both the vicissitudes of life and the haunting sense that there is something just beyond the reach of calculation.

Notes

¹ Treaty 7 was an agreement between Queen Victoria and several, mainly Blackfoot, First Nation band governments in what is today the southern portion of Alberta. It was concluded on September 22, 1877; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_7.

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

³ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Knopf, 1964).

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