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Homeless Hearts

Faith and the Modern Self

In 2007 many wondered why anyone would sit in a near-silent cinema for nearly three hours to watch a documentary film about Carthusian monks. *Into Great Silence* (in German, *Die Grosse Stille*) took us inside the mother house of this most austere of the Catholic orders, La Grande Chartreuse, over six months. A community of two dozen contemplatives live as hermits, spending up to eighteen hours a day in their self-contained hermitage (or cell), aside from daily mass and strenuous night offices together in the Abbey Church. Carthusians gather only on Sundays for a fixed period of relaxation and chatting, and on Mondays for a long ramble together during which they alternate talking in pairs. Meals are shared like other monks only on Sundays and feast days of the Church year and only then in silence, with a reader. Once a year there is a full-day community hike with a picnic lunch. No wonder the Carthusian website makes clear that no one really chooses this life, but that it chooses them.[1]

The film was profound and moving, and I know I was not the only one who saw it twice. The faces of the monks, on which the camera dwelt from

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1. See the Carthusian Web site, with photographs and details of each Charterhouse. A link to the remote Vermont Charterhouse, of striking modernist design, is worth following for more detail about the spirituality. Online: http://www.chartreux.org/en/frame .html/. For removing the gloss from this potentially romantic-seeming life, see Maguire, *An Infinity of Little Hours*. For an account of how the Carthusians look post–Vatican II, see Skinner, *Hear Our Silence*.

time to time, were serene and hence beautiful, even the less photogenic ones. The patience, deliberateness, and collectedness of the life were plain, evoked by the loving attention of the camera to minutiae of the daily round, also the external elements. Long takes of the monks praying and reading, also still-life scenes lingering on the few items in a monk's fruit bowl, or the dish draining on his sink in a shaft of sunlight, recalled the intensity of the Dutch painter Vermeer's simple interiors, while the heavy snow of these remote, high alps starkly set off the wood fire-heated cells, and the inconceivable spiritual adventure taking place within them.

Thomas Merton, the Trappist, wrote about Christian faith today from the perspective of a strict monastic life in his poem "The Quickening of St John the Baptist," and his words came to mind as I sat in the dark and took in the even stricter vision of his Carthusian cousins.

> Beyond the scope of sight or sound we dwell upon the air,
> Seeking the world's gain in an unthinkable experience.
> We are exiles in the far end of solitude, living as listeners,
> With hearts attending to the skies we cannot understand,
> Waiting upon the first far drums of Christ the Conqueror,
> Planted like sentinels upon the world's frontier.[2]

But not all were moved by *Into Great Silence*. Some Protestant friends of mine refused to see it, while David Stratton, Australia's leading film critic, referred in his review to the monks' "wasted lives." Stratton is certainly agnostic if not atheist. He was struck by the film at the level of cinematography (certainly) and curiosity (probably), but at bottom he just could not fathom it. Clearly these men "planted like sentinels upon the world's frontier" ought to be doing something more useful—more self-justifying perhaps. Stratton was disappointed that "what the monks really did," *obviously* the manufacture of their signature green Chartreuse liqueur, was not on show—apart from a glimpse of the Prior handling an invoice at one point![3] Here I detect the imaginative patrimony of Richard Dawkins—and Ebenezer Scrooge. Here is the brave new world of our modern West standing before the mystery of faith with incomprehension, and a measure of frustrated annoyance.

Many others were intrigued and affected by this film, however, drawn through it to a sense of something that is presently "an unthinkable experi-

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2. In Merton, *Tears of the Blind Lions*.

3. David Stratton and Margaret Pomeranz, "Into Great Silence." Stratton's comment about "wasted lives" was broadcast but not transcribed on the Web site.

ence." *Into Great Silence* challenges our modern, secularized Western self. This is a self that began to emerge from the late Middle Ages, and especially since the Enlightenment, which nowadays is ill at ease before the horizon of mystery—a little irritated, perhaps, but maybe also a little fascinated.

In this chapter I am going to begin exploring the religious and spiritual transformations that have brought us to this state of affairs—transformations that have given us a modern world vastly better that what went before in so many ways, yet at the expense of leaving many of us with what I am calling homeless hearts. I will focus on a tight cluster of related trends. First, and most obviously, there is *secularization*, understood as the disembedding of faith from an encompassing religious culture. Second, in tandem with secularization, we experience a widespread and fundamental *loss of community*. Third, the rise of *consumer culture* to become the imaginative horizon of our late-modern West has significantly shaped human identity and aspiration. Then, fourth, we will consider the profound impact consumer culture has had on religion and spirituality, shaping certain *standard options for faith*. From these beginnings I want to go on in chapter 2 to consider how God has been culturally annexed by the agenda of secular modernity. And from there, in chapter 3, I consider how modernity's drive toward certainty and closure has become a new sacred reality requiring the repression or exclusion of whatever is unsure and errant.

The monks of *Into Great Silence* make a highly contemporary statement. They demonstrate an abiding faith that is more personal than the undifferentiated religious belonging of pre-modern Western life, but also more integrated than the religious individualism to which modern Westerners have become accustomed. But before we seek the roots, test the intellectual credentials, and draw the consequences of that abiding faith in part 2 of the book, we need first to understand how faith is faring in the crucible of modernity.

SECULARIZATION AND THE DISEMBEDDING OF FAITH

Our story begins with the break up of an integrated religious civilization and the emergence of religion as a discrete category among other social institutions and private lifestyle options, in modern Western nations committed as never before to the life of this world. This break up has a technical name: *secularization*. And it could be said to have begun with a democratizing of the monastic ideal.

Even before Martin Luther left the cloister to marry and unleash the great secularizing flood of Protestantism, the Catholic reformer Erasmus was

calling every Christian to be as serious as the monks of his day were supposed to have been. In *The Manual of a Christian Knight* (his *Enchiridion*, of 1501), Erasmus—himself an Augustinian priest—chides a layman for excusing himself by saying "I am not a priest, I am not a monk." "Yes," comes the retort, "but are you not a Christian?" Erasmus commends to the laity a measure of detachment towards personal property and a generous spirit, seeing this as the properly universal meaning of monastic poverty.[4] In this sober and serious spirit the early-modern European turn toward everyday life began with its universal trend towards responsible "individualized faith," away from a less-differentiated "tribal faith."

A century ago, Max Weber famously identified secularization with the passing of a baton from monasticism to Calvinism. The monks' rational asceticism was effectively handed on in new, Protestant dress to become the basis of a disciplined, secular workforce serving a this-worldly human good, and focused on the creation of wealth. In the booming economies of new nation-states, this became the spirit of modern capitalism. There were more pious Methodist, Baptist, and Quaker versions, with some Protestant groups adapted to lowlier niches in the economy, along with the more assertive Calvinistic mood of Puritanism, all of which gave rise to a widespread, purposeful, unostentatious vocation in the realm of business and affairs. This redefined sense of a calling in life further secularized into a conception of innate "sacred" order and obligation to be found in society, business, and family, though no longer with any necessary place for God, grace, Church, or worship. Weber points to the "utilitarian prudentialism" of Benjamin Franklin, for instance, secure in his own moral superiority, as a type still clearly recognizable in our own day.[5]

Franklin's Enlightenment contemporary, the Scots philosopher David Hume (1711–1776), was explicit in his condemnation of other-worldliness in religion, and "the monkish virtues" in particular. The great historian of ideas Charles Taylor helpfully points out just how

> much of the historical practice of Christianity ran afoul of the new ethic of purely immanent human good: all striving for something beyond this, be it monasticism, or the life of contemplation, be it Franciscan spirituality or Wesleyan dedication, everything which took us out of the path of ordinary human enjoyments and productive activity, seemed a threat to the good life, and was condemned under the names of "fanaticism" or "enthusiasm." Hume distin-

4. Cited in Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom*, 90.
5. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

guishes the genuine virtues (which are qualities useful to others and to oneself) from the "monkish virtues" ("celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude"), which contribute nothing to, even detract from human welfare. These are rejected by "men of sense," because they serve no manner of purpose; neither advance one's fortune, nor render one more valuable to society, neither entertain others nor bring self-enjoyment.[6]

Here is the imaginative (or *un*imaginative) root of film guru David Stratton's problem with *Into Great Silence.* His disapproving bewilderment captures the social, cultural, economic, but also religious and spiritual, realignment that is secularization.

Unpacking Secularization:
From Tribal Faith to Individualized Faith

I would like to offer an example to try and set the scene, as I begin to tease out what secularization means, how it *feels*, and from whence it comes. A short while ago—at lunchtime, on the day of writing—I took my sandwich and apple down to a shady spot by the lake at St. Mark's National Theological Centre in Australia's national capital. On the way back to my office, I stopped in at an outdoor chapel that we have tucked away among the eucalyptus trees to sit quietly for a short while. On arriving, however, I was greeted cheerily by a woman sitting on the altar. This altar is rough-hewn from a huge log, and situated in front of a tall, freestanding cross. I smiled awkwardly and said hello back, then I sat on one of the benches ringing the open space to pray, but I found myself preoccupied. "Surely she knows it's an altar, and that you don't sit on altars," I thought. "You wouldn't try something like that in a mosque," I thought.

The woman, one of the many lunching government workers and day walkers who pass through our site, was middleaged and what you might call "alternative" in appearance. I found myself rehearsing in my mind a familiar assessment of New Age spirituality: that its exponents concoct a private spiritual perspective based on bricolage, utilizing resources from various religious traditions to cobble together a cosmology and spiritual practice suiting their own individual experience and preferences. And if that is your spiritual profile, then why not sit on an altar? All such sacramental symbols are at best props nowadays, rather than authoritative signs marking out the sacred in which we are bound up as part of a community. I could even imagine an

6. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 263.

active Christian member of the St. Mark's community, perhaps a younger student, either not knowing or not caring that an altar was something special. And, of course, for many Protestant Christians there are no special places or sacred objects.

I suspected that were I to have said, "Excuse me, but I'm a priest on the staff here, and this is a Christian chapel, and you're not supposed to sit on the altar," the woman might have climbed down. But that would have been a more or less gracious response to a concerned individual, rather than the startled recognition of ecclesial authority or even of sacred epiphany: "surely the Lord is in *this* place—and I did not know it" (Gen 28:16). And what of my own response? I did not rush forward in unreflective reaction, as I might have done to put out a fire or to rescue someone from harm. Instead, by sitting and saying nothing, I affirmed, ultimately, that it did not matter enough to make an issue of it—that the woman's right to her own private spiritual expression was at least comparable with that of my own catholic preferences, and that I accept the inevitability of such relativism in a secular age.

In light of all this, what about my own personal religious convictions as a catholic-minded Anglican? I have to acknowledge that I am in the minority among my fellow Anglicans in holding such catholic views. They are essentially private religious opinions, albeit ones of which I have become rationally and imaginatively persuaded. I have sought to commend these convictions liturgically, theologically, and pastorally in parish appointments over the years, though usually with limited success. They are not an unquestioned part of Anglican identity in general, and they certainly cannot represent the same quality of conviction that would once have emerged from being soaked in a community of catholic belonging since infancy. So for me to have approached the woman on the basis of my catholic convictions would, by comparison with the embedded faith of pre-modern times, have represented one abstraction being challenged by another abstraction.

In tacit acknowledgement of this whole state of affairs, what is called being "pastoral" now takes the place of religious conviction in the mainstream Western Churches. We clergy nowadays are supposed to be *nice* to people, probably to ensure that we do not risk any more of our fast-collapsing market share. Since our clientele is now entirely voluntary, we cannot afford to *upset* anyone. Whereas in a more traditional religious society a priest would not have hesitated—like the leading nineteenth-century high-churchman John Keble, who, despite being an assiduous pastor (and especially attentive to the

parish children), "never hesitated to put his stick across the shoulders of any boy who neglected to touch his cap to the Vicar."[7]

So it is no longer obviously inappropriate to sit on an altar, and such restrictions are policed (if at all) more with a view to issues of decorum in a social context rather than any visceral instinct or taboo. Charles Taylor reminds us that in medieval Europe the Blessed Sacrament was perceived to be charged with sacred power. It was regularly and reverently viewed in *Corpus Christi* processions, but actually receiving the sacrament was widely considered to be risky. Hence real unease greeted the Reformation novelty of frequent communion, *and* in both kinds (i.e. bread *and* wine). Being near the sacrament in those days was like our approaching live electric wires today.[8] But for us, while we might still sing the fourth century words of that Anglo-Catholic hymn to the real presence, "Let all mortal flesh keep silence," we will not *feel* about the Blessed Sacrament as our ancient or medieval forebears did. If we are accustomed to receive communion in a mood of recollection, and approach the wider sacramental action with reverence for its rituals, vessels, and furnishings, we are unlikely to do so in the unreflective blush of a taken-for-granted, tribal faith. Today, on the contrary, many Anglicans dunk their host in the chalice like a pastry in coffee because it offends their sensibilities to drink from the common cup. This is a telling instance of God having to fit into existing priorities of health, decorum, and, I suggest, religious privacy, accompanying an associational rather than organic view of Church and worship. This is individualized rather than tribal faith—but so is mine, too. I am as much the dweller in a secularized world and a representative of its characteristically individualized faith as the woman sitting on the altar.

How are we best to understand these religious transformations that the Western self has undergone? Charles Taylor talks about the replacement of yesterday's "porous self" with today's "buffered self." The "porous self" of pre-modern times was open to the sacred mediated through participation in a unified vision and a set of ritual practices at the heart of social life. This is what I am calling tribal faith. It gave way before the "buffered self" of modernity —an independent, even sovereign self that *chooses*, including the choice of an individualized faith. God is no longer the embracing context of life but simply an entity one might reason towards out of a pre-formed self operating in a purely natural, secular context.

7. Battiscombe, *John Keble*, 178.
8. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 73.

Taylor acknowledges that this "buffered self" can be a quite satisfactory self, sharing the modern goal of finding closure and control in the face of life's unwelcome elements (more of this in the next two chapters). Many are sustained in an in-between state of half-belief by their involvement with nature, the arts, and music.[9] The cause of human rights also galvanizes many against the ready catharsis of violence. There is a healthier body-consciousness, too, and the wellness movement, all constituting gains for the "buffered self"[10] against often-harsher religious claims of the past. So the "buffered self" offers a metaphysically neutral chill-out zone that many are unwilling to relinquish, resisting any pull of mystery back toward some form of more "porous self." It represents a tolerable materialism, and perhaps a hard-won self-acceptance, with little sense of loss. Secularization has acted as a ratchet for these "buffered selves" who cannot imagine going backwards, to before the individualizing turn.[11]

If many find this to be a liberating and empowering way of being, however, others find it isolating and narrowing. For these homeless hearts, as I am calling them, a kind of melancholy or accidie (Greek *akēdia* registers this whole state of affairs as limiting and impoverishing. Taylor argues that it represents a malaise to do with meaning and purpose.[12] Despite the way that many cope and others even seem to thrive in such conditions, he points to the difficulty many have in maintaining a meaningful sense of the whole of life in the face of aging, death, and the loss of loved ones. This is not averted by the endless lifestyle variations available to explore in what Taylor calls our "Nova world," or entirely dulled by the consumer-driven pursuit of individual happiness that is today's main official agenda. Consequently, many still feel the pressure of something more in life, demanding their attention in joy and sorrow. "Our age is very far from settling in to a comfortable unbelief,"[13] Taylor concludes, noting today's widespread experience of what he calls "cross pressure" from belief and unbelief.

In an extended discussion of what I am calling the homeless heart, Dutch theorist Peter Sloterdijk explores thoroughly the sense of alienation and the yearning that emerges for secular selves "that are not really touched by the vitalism of consumption, sport, disco fever, and free sexuality." Sloterdijk

9. Ibid., 360.

10. Ibid., 676.

11. Ibid., 289.

12. Ibid., 303.

13. Ibid., 727.

concludes that "[t]his inner level of death is what was earlier called 'nihilism,' disillusionment and violent despair stemming from the feeling of emptiness and arbitrary craving." The posture of skepticism and irony in life that is his prescription for coping with these trends—a posture that he traces in its various manifestations since the ancient cynics—represents a powerful protest against the emptiness and chronic dissatisfaction registered by many homeless hearts today. Yet Sloterdijk, the skeptic, nevertheless has to admit that faith achieves the same end. "Religion is not primarily the opiate of the people but the reminder that there is more life in us than this life lives. The function of faith is an achievement of devitalized bodies that cannot be completely robbed of the memory that in them much deeper sources of vitality, strength, pleasure, and of the enigma and intoxication of 'being there' must lie hidden than can be seen in everyday life."[14]

I assume that the woman sitting on the altar was a post-religious spiritual *bricoleur* of the New Age variety, fully secularized in her attitude toward religious authority while unwilling to settle for the complete worldliness of atheistic materialism. She felt there was something more going on than that. As for me, the affronted Anglo-Catholic, my own religious perspective is equally a personal choice, shaped by a mixture of life experience, learning, and personal disposition, against a (typically Anglo-Catholic) background of dissatisfaction with the radically secular option. We were birds of a feather, really.

Now, this is a very interesting state of affairs. I want to explore it a little more deeply, drawing some insights from three disciplines in the human sciences.

Unpacking Secularization:
Sociology, History of Ideas, and Anthropology

From *sociology* we draw four key themes that help explain this state of affairs. The *history of ideas* provides two linked accounts of what drives secularization, from the late-Middle Ages onwards. From *anthropology* we discover how the scope of our felt experience in life and faith changes as the society around us tightens or loosens its grip on us, hence diminishing or enlarging our options for self-expression.

I begin here with the leading sociologist of religion, José Casanova, who identifies three aspects of secularization, which he describes as a sociological

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14. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 277.

theory of how societies modernize.[15] The first, employing the key sociological concept of *differentiation*, refers to the increasing diversification of modern Western social structures and groups. This is seen in the separating-out of religion from spheres of life with which it was once intertwined, chiefly the state, the economy, and science—all of which become increasingly independent, while religion itself becomes what it has never been before: a separate sphere of life. This phenomenon of differentiation is also evident in the way religions themselves diversify and specialize. Different ethnic or class groups gravitate to having their own religions, likewise states and geographical regions. It happens even within religions, as we see for instance with the main Anglican parties of "high," "low" and "broad Church." So out of a religio-political-economic-cultural matrix emerges a differentiated modern world with many centers, only one of which is the new type of thing called "religion." The Protestant Reformation, the rise of the modern nation state, the market economy of the new middle classes flourishing thanks to trade with Europe's colonial empires, and the rise of science as an independent authority structure—the real bite in Galileo's controversy with Rome—all variously express this fact of *differentiation*.

Second, Casanova points to the collapse of religion's claim on individual allegiance. This refers to the much-vaunted statistics revealing a decline in churchgoing throughout the modern West. It also encompasses challenges to faith posed by the emergence of atheism, which in modern times became a widespread possibility for the first time among Christian rank and file. There is also the annexation, hence the dilution and deadening of religion by its formal association with modern states—an association representing a stage on the way to a more fully differentiated secular world. Secularization has advanced further, however, and now the social glue that religions once provided is no longer needed. Today the global economy and the priorities of consumer culture provide sufficient social glue, while the surviving state Churches (like the Churches of England and Sweden) are the ones hemorrhaging the worst, and struggling the most to find a new *raison d'être*.

Third, Casanova mentions the influential privatization thesis, according to which self-expression and self-realization are now the West's "invisible religion" (Thomas Luckmann's phrase). This represents the last stage of a privatizing turn away from God at the center of public reality. Instead, we have an officially secular public world in which God is unnecessary, or more correctly optional. Some minimum of shared meaning and values is demanded by

15. Casanova, "Secularization, Enlightenment and Modern Religion."

social integration but, beyond that, the meaning of life has become an entirely private matter.

Charles Taylor gives us a fourth aspect of secularization from the perspective of sociology.[16] Like Casanova, he points to the structural emancipation of various spheres of life from religion, adding the educational, political, and recreational realms to those Casanova identifies. He mentions also the falling-off of religious belief and practice that makes many feel nostalgic for a bygone religious age. Taylor's distinctive perspective, however, which he devotes his book to exploring, is secularization understood as the imaginative shift that makes faith a *choice*, an option—even for the staunchest believer—where once it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, or at least to be affected profoundly by the Church's influence in every sphere of life. This fourth aspect of secularization is the emergence of choice as a key social determinant and expectation—as a new human right, in fact. I will have more to say about choice in the discussion of consumer culture two sections hence, and the identification of some standard current options for faith following on from that.

Another perspective on secularization can be obtained if we move on from what sociology can reveal to the history of ideas. Once again, Charles Taylor proves a reliable guide. He identifies two linked perspectives on the historical trajectory of the Western mind towards modernity and secularization.[17] First of all, he acknowledges an influential thesis looking chiefly to the late Middle Ages and its nexus of changing ideas about God, philosophy, the human person and society, from which modern atheism and nihilism are understood to emerge as consequences. He calls this perspective, associated most recently with the brilliant younger minds of the Radical Orthodoxy push in theology, the "Intellectual Deviation" story, and he likes it. I will be discussing this account early in my next chapter, because it brings into clear relief a number of important things about modernity as an imaginative system. Taylor, however, prefers a different, though partly overlapping account.

He attends to the same broad imaginative transformations in the modern West—the disembedding from religious patterns of life, also from the kind of tacit assumptions that underpin a society's view of the world and itself—with reference to what he sees as modernity's key organizing idea: that of *reform*. Taylor's preferred story of secularization, which he calls "The Reform Master Narrative," can be seen to interweave with and complement

16. Taylor, *A Secular Age*.
17. Ibid., 773–76.

the "Intellectual Deviation" approach. But it views reform as the main driver, turbo-charging the West's turn toward more individually shaped religious belonging and believing. Of course, it is not that change is a new thing. The study of history cures that misapprehension. But the modern world elevates change to the status of a moral imperative and virtually deifies progress. Only more recently, among the many wrecks of twentieth-century history, has this modern dogma been assailed by doubt—though in the forward march of our technology and consumption habits, modern Western faith in change remains undiminished.

A further perspective on the phenomenon of secularization can be found if we shift attention to anthropology, attending to the way human experience is shaped by the social matrix embedding it, and how changes in the latter affect the former. Mary Douglas provides significant theoretical insight about this. I refer to her classic discussion of worldviews according to standard types of family system, considered against the extent of self-expression typical of the surrounding society in which these family types are located. This simple comparison throws up a comprehensive range of recognizable human life patterns based on a grid typology.[18]

So, for instance, a family system that bases personal identity on one's position in the family, with a socially restricted approach to self-expression in speech, would go with a conservative traditional society of reticent, role-defined individuals, who probably feel secure and settled in their tacit belonging. Douglas talks about "the bog Irish" in this regard. On the other hand, a family system placing a premium on the personal and the individual in its approach to members, and accustomed to elaborated speech patterns, would reflect a more progressive and liberated arrangement attuned to individual success and self-realization, though perhaps at the expense of some performance anxiety and some uncertainty in the face of too many life-options. This recalls the significant transition of Western society in the 1960s, as social roles loosened up, recalling also the difference between working class and middle class aspiration—for instance, the reliable, traditional worker and "good provider" with his wife at home versus today's go-ahead young couple who see themselves as having "a relationship." In the latter case we have a reliable recipe for the homeless heart.

Douglas hones this typology into her influential account of "Group and Grid." The type of cosmology we inhabit—our basic orientation toward life

18. Douglas, *Natural Symbols*. The two typologies referred to are represented graphically on 50 and 84 respectively.

and the world, if you like—can be predicted. This prediction is based on the extent to which a shared classification scheme governs individual options in our social milieu—that is, a strong or else weak "Grid"—cross-referenced with the extent to which this scheme is enforced—that is, a strong or weak "Group." So, for instance, "strong Group and Grid" reflects a highly controlled society with communities embedded in a largely cohesive worldview, while "weak Group and Grid" brings to mind a plural, unregulated society of individuals guided by private beliefs. *In terms of social structure, viewed anthropologically, this is the shift that sociology of religion traces in its theory of secularization.*

We have been considering the individualizing, isolating, and volatilizing of faith, which has contributed to the widespread reality of homeless hearts. I want to step aside now from faith and its disembedding to look more generally at the modern Western experience. First, I want to consider how our sense of community has drained away, leaving many people isolated and anxious. Second, I will be trying to unpack the highly formative consumer culture that has emerged to imaginatively dominate the modern West, offering to fill the void of meaning, faith, and community that modernity and secularization has opened up.

THE LOSS OF COMMUNITY

The rise of the modern individual is at the expense of belonging to community and to place. I offer a typical example from my own residential locality (I cannot call it a community). The suburb outbound from us had long been served by a Neighborhood Watch Group (i.e., an association of civic-minded residents meeting regularly to keep up with local trends in property crime, and committed to "keeping an eye out" in the interests of protecting the neighborhood from burglary, vandalism, etc.). That group folded after twenty-one years because of "lack of interest from young people," as its former secretary lamented in the local news, hoping that one day the service might revive. The young people in question are the young singles and professional couples who are flocking to the new apartment buildings springing up in Canberra's inner-North, displacing the older homes typical of these former working class areas. These Gen X and Y newcomers have opted to live conveniently near to their city jobs, and in the relative anonymity of apartment life they are free for active social and sexual lives.

To be sure, young urban Westerners seek out ecstatic tribal experiences in the club and rave scenes, and subcultures remain important options for many (from extreme sports to music preference to the celebration of iconic

narratives, like the "Trekkies"); but this represents volitional rather than organic belonging on the part of those whose identity is primarily individual. The involvement of my young co-residents with the quotidian actual local community is limited, like my own, to minimal patronage of the corner grocery and the fish-and-chip shop (for those without an identity focused on a glamorous or athletic self-image). Perhaps the alternative café scene nearby promoted some identification with the locality, or the adjacent greenbelt affording an enjoyable walk or cycle ride to and from the city; but if so, that is more about young people choosing to live somewhere in tune with an existing self-image (or one to which they aspire) rather than anything to do with actual geographical belonging.

None of us newcomers, whether baby-boomers, Gen X or Gen Y, could begin to make sense of the "Neighborhood Watch world" of yesterday, involving sustained relationships with others whose long-term identity is invested in the locality, an attitude of vigilance toward other people's collections of old personal property, and attending bring-a-plate suppers, which are more about maintaining social bonds than transacting business. Rarely in today's English-speaking West would you find *urban* dwellers interested in this—apart from short-term activism perhaps—or quite intentional local schemes to rebuild social capital. Consequently, all sorts of civic groups, service clubs, and community-based congregations are going the way of the Dickson Neighborhood Watch. Many of us are reasonably content to dwell in this "zone between loneliness and communication," as Charles Taylor puts it. Regarding the predominately younger crowd from my apartment building, Taylor is dead right that "[n]ew consumer culture, expressivism and spaces of mutual display connect in our world to produce their own kind of synergy."[19] And that is that.

Sociologist Robert D. Putnam explores this phenomenon in the United States, as the great civic generation, the baby boomers' parents, vacate the stage. With them vanishes their energy for joining, volunteering, identifying, and "schmoozing" (i.e., socializing and networking). While the Internet, grassroots religious conservatism, and the rising phenomenon of self-help and personal support groups tell against the trend, a lot of this follows a narrowly personal agenda, while any embrace of causes often means little more than receiving a newsletter and perhaps writing a check. This has an effect on the nature of human experience, as "[t]hin, single-stranded, surf-by interactions are gradually replacing dense, multi-stranded, well-exercised bonds."[20] This

19. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 483.
20. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 183–84.

all represents a risk to the American way of life, according to Putnam, who hopes Gen X will turn this around. But it is hard for people to go back to an earlier, less differentiated way of life, as we saw also in our discussion of tribal faith giving way to individualized faith.

Among the causes of this trend, Putnam identifies the time and money pressure on young two-career families, the effect of suburban sprawl (both in terms of commuting time and the separation of work from community), the isolating effect of television and electronic entertainment and, overall, the generational change already mentioned, away from the taken-for-granted-ness of civic engagement.[21] Reading carefully, television is the big killer. Putnam notes (striking me with the shock of recognition) that if you say TV is your primary form of entertainment, it marks you as one of the most socially disconnected.[22]

Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, offers a theological account of this turn away from community in tandem with secularization. When identity is what you make for yourself, community is what you establish by contract, and the sacred is a private opinion of little or no public import, then nothing outside yourself has much claim on you or offers any meaning that can embrace you. The "social miracle" as evident in the medieval guilds is ultimately Eucharistic, according to the Archbishop (here following the Church historian John Bossy), while today there is no objective reality external to our own self-creation that can offer us grace or call us into judgment. We have lost "the iconic eye," as he puts it.[23]

I had a sense of this in 1996 when we happened to be in Florence as the seven-hundredth anniversary of the Duomo was being celebrated. Even though Brunelleschi's remarkable fifteenth-century dome powerfully prefigures modern science and engineering, and while Italy is now a highly secularized modern state, nevertheless the whole scene strongly recalled the pre-modern world. In festive mood, the town guilds were all out in force in their various ancient costumes, parading before the Archbishop of Florence on his dais, while the whole city streamed through the cathedral, kept ablaze with candlelight and open all hours. People seemed at least a little nostalgic for the integrally sacred and communal bygone world evoked by this occasion.

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21. Ibid. See the helpful summary and pie chart on 283–84.

22. Ibid., 231.

23. Williams, *Lost Icons*.

CONSUMER CULTURE AND THE ANXIOUS INDIVIDUAL

The loss of community I have been describing, like the shift from tribal to individualized faith also characteristic of modernity, is widely recognized as anxiety producing. Existentialism registered the extent to which the brave new world of meaning-making individuals was emotionally exposed. Søren Kierkegaard famously concluded that the swoon of possibility confronting Enlightenment moderns, and the sense of powerlessness that this challenge to subdue reality in the making of personal meaning can generate, is at the root of modern anxiety.[24] So-called "freedom" regularly pays the price of a homeless heart.

The post-modern language regularly used of our late-modern, global world refers to the completion of a process that Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and other nineteenth-century prophets intuited at its advent, according to which all given systems of meaning—from metaphysical systems and cosmologies to cultural totalities and religious faiths—come to be understood chiefly as human creations. It is over the ruins of these former certainties that today's Westerners must pick in order to make what meaning they can. We have all become *bricoleurs*, charged with crafting our own selves by the choices we make, no longer simply falling into a ready-made identity. There is no home for us other than the one we choose, adapt, or create for ourselves from the huge range of options and resources available in the marketplace.

Secularization and the Emergence of Consumer Culture

This cultural and social state of affairs is strongly correlated with the way Western economies changed across the twentieth century. The Fordist economy based on finely-tuned factory production, emerging from the rise of modern capitalism that Weber analyzes, has given way to an economy in which consumption is center stage. Consumption is not just an option—not just the acme of immoral materialist excess that the moral critics of globalization and the green lobby regularly accuse it of being, with vocal support from

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24. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*. Kierkegaard's account holds up well according to the wide-ranging historical, cultural, and clinical analysis of anxiety offered by Rollo May in *The Meaning of Anxiety*. My conclusions about abiding faith and spiritual maturity, in chapter 6 below, echo May's conviction that integrated, generative, creative, and mature selves only emerge by facing the threat of non-being and otherness, and struggling through the resultant anxieties. Anxious adherents of the false sacred (see chapters 3 and 6 below), on the other hand, typically avoid this challenge and opportunity.

the Churches. It is not commodities that are the key, as if consumer culture is primarily about *stuff*. It is really about the *process* of consumption, the creation and transfer of desire, and the endlessly deferred becoming of individuals who have no other home than the global market and the dreams it peddles. If the global market is God, then the commodity is its sacrament.

Karl Marx noted how workers lost control of the means of production as cottage industry gave way to industrialization, becoming alienated from their labor and their trade skills when they became wage-earners in factories. The new cash economy meant that commodities had to be purchased, with their value related to that of other commodities by a market removed from the originating context of those commodities. Hence the "commodity fetish," referring to the naked quality of these products separated from the conditions of their production. So the evolving capitalist system contributes to the disempowerment, isolation, and hence anxiety of the workers, in a life of consumption alienated from production.

There is more to it than that, of course. Max Weber's account of secularization finds the roots of modern capitalism in Puritanism's turn towards the world. While this accounts for the transfer of religious zeal to the realm of production, however, the shift from production to consumption is harder to source in the stern Puritan vision. Yet consumer culture, too—positively celebrating Marx's commodity fetish—can in fact be seen to draw its energy from the secularizing of Western Christian imagination.

The individualizing turn we have examined also had a pietistic, inward element, and that is the key. It gave birth to modern self-consciousness and favored the cultivation of interior states, where identity came most reliably to reside. With the waning of a Puritanism based on dogma, morality, and judgment, from the Cambridge Platonists of the English Civil War period onward, a more generous assessment of human goodness and divine benevolence emerged, and an emotional ethic of Christian sensibility took shape.

Romanticism came to regard this new sensibility and emotionality as the truest indicator of godliness, just as its liking for gothic horror in fiction nicely transferred the nastier aspects of Puritan doctrine to the secular realm. Romanticism was an enormously self-preoccupied and navel-gazing movement after all, which in the period from the French Revolution through the Napoleonic Wars threw up a range of emotional states, from sweet melancholy through *tedium vitae* to *Weltschmerz,* for the creative but troubled souls of British letters to enjoy.[25] Their needy interiority mined the realms of nature

25. Here I am indebted to Sickels, *The Gloomy Egoist*.

and culture for resources to voice, sooth, and divert their inner burdens, in a way, which with hindsight, looks quite consumerist.

Puritan virtue in an increasingly secular environment evolved into good taste for the middle classes, which like virtue had to be demonstrated. Hence the rise of fashion, on the back of Romantic artistic creativity and an energetic cloth trade, as a major arena of self-creation and self-justification before the newly sacred judgment of taste. This trend was further stiffened by a Wesleyan-inspired need for one's inner truth to be made visible. So the "proper" middle classes, inheriting the Puritan mantle (as we have seen from Weber), demonstrated their assured moral superiority (especially over the decadent aristocracy) through rightly intuiting and virtuously following the path of good taste. Their imaginative focus having been turned inward, however, and now primed by Romantic restlessness and its exaltation of the artistic and the creative, which threw up lots of new things to try, the secular middle classes where set on the path of consumption as on a religious exercise.

Thus, by a roundabout route, we come to what Colin Campbell, whose detailed account I have been seeking to follow here, calls "autonomous, self-illusory hedonism"—a hedonism of the mind, more than an obsession with actual commodities: a culturally-propelled, self-definitional longing to make imagination into reality, hence driving the endless consumption of novelty. Americans like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau hated Benjamin Franklin's utilitarianism, which is the path Weber identifies as leading from Puritanism to the spirit of modern capitalism in its productive mode. They do, however, represent this other path, which from Puritan beginnings secularizes remarkably via the inward turn of Romanticism into the spirit of modern consumerism.[26]

In the Grip of Consumer Culture

The result is that consumption becomes a social responsibility with its own logic.[27] Commodities, having lost their context in the means of production, find a new context thanks to advertising, which provides its own system of signification. The reason this has worked so spectacularly has to do with the way things are now marketed. To be sure, new populations are drawn into consumption as globalization takes hold (e.g. motor cars in China, deregu-

26. Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*.
27. See Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 32–72.

lated smoking in the developing world); but in the West it is largely through creating lots of new markets within existing populations.

Think about it. If you can create distinct age groups whose identity, dreams, and hence spending priorities require the production and consumption of whole different product lines for their expression—with three distinct subcultures from the age of ten to the age of sixteen, for instance, each with its own wardrobe, music, magazines, films, and toys planned and marketed to fit each niche—then you can sell a lot more *stuff*. And if households fragment and proliferate then this variety of identities, and the consumption upon which each of these rely, can in turn proliferate. For instance, a whole system of production in the extended-family household ending in the family meal, which was the only possible meal available for everyone in the household, now becomes several meals of different types and sources eaten in one or two-person households. And many of these households will in turn rupture and diversify over time so that more and more goods are needed to create the new lifestyles and support the new relationships that emerge.[28] All this is good news for the economy, with every increase in social instability and isolation paying dividends. Advertising serves this individualizing and destabilizing of bonds by playing on insecurities, annexing—and hence eroding—cultural symbols, and relentlessly commodifying minority cultural perspectives in the interests of niche marketing.

Needless to say, political action that might limit the powers of markets at the government level, or distract individuals from the anxious, self-seeking treadmill of consumption toward community involvement and even political action, is rendered increasingly deviant and unlikely. As the Anglo-Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman summarizes it, "There is the nasty fly of impotence in the tasty ointment of freedom cooked in the cauldron of individualization."[29] Bauman refers to our era as "liquid modernity." The image has to do with chronic orchestrated instability, fluidity, and impermanence as today's guiding cultural norms. At the root of it all is the economy and the shift from "heavy modernity" in the Fordist era of production to "liquid modernity" in the new era of fast-moving global capital, purely utilitarian and short-term bonds, and the cultural totality that consumption is becoming.

Bauman employs imagery to evoke the transformation. The era of heavy ships gives way to that of pilotless aircraft,[30] and corpulent capitalists yield

28. Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 78.

29. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 35.

30. Ibid., 58, 59, 128, 183–84, 200, 214.

to skinny networkers, while heavy luggage is replaced by cabin baggage only. More concretely, savings books give way to credit cards, faith to chronic mistrust, deviance and rebellion to the seeking of shelter. Likewise, abiding institutions as a focus for life-long attention and commitment are undermined until our own bodies become the most enduring things we know across a lifetime marked by relentless change, and hence today's universal body fixation in the West.

Similarly, common causes give way to spectacles and patriotism to "patriotainment" (we may not be willing to serve in the armed forces of our country, but we will swell with pride at a World Cup victory).[31] Community is romanticized and toyed with, but it cannot be tolerated as a serious option, with today's taste for "carnivals" providing "séances for people to gather together to hold hands and call back the ghost of deceased community from the netherworld . . . safe in their awareness that the guest won't outstay its invitation."[32] Groups with strong connective tissue are now regularly replaced by "swarms," linked only by rapid mimicry of others' desires.

The Sorbonne theorist Michel Maffesoli insists that post-modernity replaces modernity's individualism with a new tribalism;[33] but there is not the structure and shared long-term memory necessary for real tribalism. Bauman's image of swarming is a better way of understanding how individualism remains at the center of post-modern human being in the West, coupled with Maffesoli's own observation that late-modern individualism has become less promethean.[34] Indeed this weakening is essential, so anxious individuals will keep consuming. Identity is what you are condemned to make by negotiating this endless plethora of choices, ensuring what sociologist Ulrick Beck unsparingly calls the "solitary confinement of the ego."[35]

The virtues of endurance are now replaced by those of transience, and the capacity to compose an identity across time is undermined. An example will help make the point. There is an advertisement showing in Australian cinemas at the time of writing, no doubt targeting the younger demographic more reliably than television advertising. It is an advertisement for a mobile- (i.e., cellular-) phone network, produced in realistic animation, and saying

31. Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 75.

32. Ibid., 76.

33. Maffesoli, "The Return of Dionysus."

34. Ibid., 24.

35. Beck, "On the Mortality of Industrial Society"; cited in Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 37.

nothing directly about mobile phones at all. Instead, it celebrates the one-day lifespan of the adult stage of the common mayfly, portrayed as emerging from the water, flying about the jungle, sporting with another mayfly, and romancing a mate, at last enjoying the sunset (i.e. of its life). A faintly reverential, youthful voiceover commends the insect's earnest and untroubled inclination and wherewithal to "seize the day." No doubt the carefree, experience-oriented and hedonistic life of the ideal young consumer is being evoked here, of which the mobile phone is an indispensable accessory. I also suspect the invitation is to jettison whichever other mobile-phone plan you might currently be on (never more than two years these days, anyway) for a new carrier whose "product" is not a phone plan but actually a more imaginatively satisfying image of your life. And, of course, brand loyalty does not matter if you are a creature constructed day by day via new desires. Bauman observes that eternity has lost cultural meaning, and that in liquid modernity the tyranny of *carpé diem* replaces the pre-modern tyranny of *memento mori*.[36]

Bauman's disturbing conclusion is that we ourselves have become commodities, investing in our own self-esteem and social membership as the only conceivable vocation in service to the sovereign market. Hence the characteristic post-modern unhappiness whereby old-fashioned Western guilt over the breaking of generally accepted rules now becomes a perpetual sense of inadequacy, because we can never catch up with constantly shifting, market-driven ideals of the perfect self and the perfect life. Confidence and connection are sapped as people learn to negotiate life without the sense of boundaries, reticence, and realism that governed needs and desires in earlier generations, delivering at least a modest satisfaction.[37] This is the disillusioned, depressed mood of today's homeless heart in the grip of a manufactured, marketed, restless anxiety. This commodification of selves is increasingly evident in the worlds of work and relationships.

Gone is "the career" as a long-term adventure of identity formation bound up with a particular local community, a profession or trade, a workforce of long-term colleagues, an enterprise committed to a worthwhile cause or product, and a respected body of skill. Gone too is the type of character and personhood that can only be crafted by such long-term engagements, weaving a narrative of solidarity that is maintained in season and out. Flexible, short-term, and profit-driven enterprises shorn of social context or commitment to the staff are increasingly the norm, creating a great mass of

36. Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 104 ("seize the day" replaces "remember your death").
37. Ibid., 94, 46.

isolated, over-mortgaged, stressed, and anxious Westerners living under threat of redundancy. Fear of being left behind in a world of unrelenting change creates a new priesthood of reckless managerial adventurers whose regular failures are rewarded, because "steady as she goes" is the only unacceptable course. The human ecology of workplaces is destroyed despite regular claims that disembedded workers constantly redeployed in flexible "teams" can do more with less. "Delayering," "vertical disaggregation," and "re-engineering" are among the Gnostic words of power that unlock managerialism's mythical cosmos of success, while in reality good businesses, utilities, and public entities are gutted and reliable workforces are traumatized and decimated.[38] Pliancy and superficiality mark the new starting points of upward mobility on today's "Snakes and Ladders" board, while loyalty and experience mark the way down.

There are counterexamples, of course, as in the extraordinary recent memoir of an American corporate high-flier cast on the scrapheap who at the age of sixty-four finds a new life, community, dignity, purpose, and identity by working at Starbucks, which emerges as a company with a heart for the outsider and the disadvantaged that still seems to do great business. Loyalty might just pay dividends after all. But this is such a striking story precisely because it is so against-the-grain nowadays.[39] At the time of writing, however, even Starbucks has begun large-scale staff layoffs as the discretional expenditure of one-time customers has been trimmed in response to increased fuel prices (though in Australia Starbucks is doing its best for the casualties, offering them compensation, counseling, and help with finding new jobs).

Relationships are also significantly caught up in commodification. What sociologist Anthony Giddens calls "the reflexive project of the self" refers to today's imperative of self creation, and sexuality is now normally understood to serve that end. Giddens talks about "the pure relationship," "plastic sexuality," and "confluent love," all referring to the deregulation of sexuality from wider family and community obligations and its emergence as a kind of free-floating erotic field offering enormous possibilities for constructing a satisfying lifestyle.[40] Giddens rightly welcomes an end to many stifling repressions encoded in bygone sexual roles and identities, and the recovery of the erotic as a new energy in Western culture; but he is not oblivious to the anxiety that today's normative instability and impermanence in sexual relationships has created.

38. See Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*.

39. Gill, *How Starbucks Saved My Life*.

40. Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*.

Zygmunt Bauman champions traditional marriage as an antidote to today's sexual commodification of persons, and as a reliable basis for the identity-formation that consumer culture programmatically undermines. From shopping for sexual partners on the Internet to breaking up by text message ("easy come, easy go") to wife-swapping as an increasingly popular means of sexual consumption (because it is less risky than free-range adultery), Bauman sees a widespread trend to avoid the risk of commitment and continuity, which alone build skills for relationship, family life, and wider sociality. Partners and now children are reduced to consumer vehicles for individual fulfillment, as part of a lifestyle package commodified in terms of personal satisfaction and well-being. Hence alterity, mystery, and respect are overcome by the logic of commodification, with its attendant redundancy and wastage. The fear of AIDS, according to Bauman, focused a diffuse cultural disquiet over sex losing its former bearings in a larger context of human commitment.[41]

Once again the economy and the cultural logic of late modernity are never far away as the chief rationale for these trends. The commercially profitable sexualization of commodities is the key here, as Bauman points out using the example of selling cars. "After the era in which sexual energy had to be sublimated in order to keep the car assembly line moving came an era when sexual energy needed to be beefed up, given freedom to select any channel of discharge at hand and encouraged to go rampant, so that cars leaving the assembly line might be lusted after as sexual objects."[42]

In the two areas mentioned, of work and relationships, there is a ruthlessness abroad that Bauman identifies as typical of liquid modernity, and a major cause of the homeless heart. It is interesting to see the way bygone social capital is celebrated nostalgically in films and television series today. For example, the 2004 Swedish film *As It Is in Heaven*, about the rediscovery of community through singing together in a church choir, set in the remote wintry north of Sweden in a small town long blighted by loveless religion and dysfunctional relationships, has been the longest-running film in Australian cinema history. At the other end of the scale, however, and more accurately reflecting the liquid modern state of affairs, are the popular "reality television" vehicles such as *Survivor*, *The Weakest Link*, and *Big Brother*. The message in these programs is that social ecology is a thing of the past, and that it is everyone for themselves. These morality tales for our times also teach that virtue is no longer rewarded and that life is about blows falling senselessly

41. Bauman's fullest assessment of these issues is in *Liquid Love*.
42. Ibid., 57.

on the undeserving. The life-skills they commend are how to second-guess, blindside, and overcome others in a lifelong struggle for limited resources, and that being "in" is everything—our worth is defined by inclusion, and denied by exclusion. Bauman points out that in George Orwell's original version of Big Brother, in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the point of totalitarian control was to keep people in, as was the case throughout the "heavy modern" period. Now television's *Big Brother* and his cognates in the "liquid modern" era concentrate on the othering and exclusion of undesirables—with keeping people out.[43] I will have more to say about modernity and its characteristic exclusions in chapter 3 below.

This serves to introduce some more general fears that typically accompany today's culture of consumerism, according to Bauman.[44] Rather than face the fact that, despite our Enlightenment overconfidence, we cannot fix our world, and as we awaken to terrorism as the downside of globalization, we demonstrate what he calls "the Titanic Syndrome." That 1997 disaster film was popular because it allowed widespread but unspoken fears about the modern West being in immanent danger to find expression. The collapse of social order in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005—so quickly that the social order might as well never have existed in the first place—was a sobering, real-world demonstration that these fears are justified. The sense is abroad, though often unacknowledged, that the nation-state—that quintessential Enlightenment creation—cannot help us when the chips are down.

For every individual taking serious issues such as climate change to heart, in a way that might mobilize political will for change, an array of substitute fears are created to obsess and hence distract the homeless hearts of rank and file modern Westerners: the pedophile, the stalker, the serial killer, the illegal immigrant, let alone obesity and other health issues that preoccupy us. The gated community and the tank-like SUV are standard ways that consumer culture ministers to these fears, selling us an illusory invincibility. Ironically, perhaps, though actually inevitably, climate change itself is being exploited to produce a niche market for environmentally friendly and even carbon-neutral products, services, and utilities—in the latter instance selling a scarcely verifiable promise, as is the case with every other commodity nowadays. On sale is not so much a dish detergent that will reduce algal blooms in rivers, or a

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43. See, e.g., Bauman, *Liquid Fear*, 22–29; Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 145; Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 26–30.

44. For this discussion I draw on Bauman, *Liquid Fear*.

ride on the allegedly carbon-neutral bus, but chiefly a self-image that puts you among the righteous, or at least salves your conscience.

Faith is a further casualty of this whole state of affairs. The abiding experience of a lifetime, against which the promises of faith might be confirmed, scarcely seems credible any longer.[45] Faith no longer makes sense as a necessarily long-term undertaking in what is now such a short-term world. It is not allowed to make sense. However, human beings cannot be likened to mayflies at all, as in the advertisement I mentioned earlier. We humans do not live to consume furiously for a day against an absent horizon of meaning. Rather, we are composed in reliance upon past ages across a lifetime normally long enough to build significant relationships and social capital, and for a good number of us to establish an institutional footprint in the ongoing history of our kind. In other words, to make a difference. The culture of consumerism is the sworn enemy of any such humane and humanizing vision. What are some of the key ways that faith plays out today?

CONSUMER CULTURE, CERTAINTY, AND FAITH FOR THE HOMELESS HEART

In a pre-modern culture there would have been little religious choice, apart from the allowed range of expressions within a religion itself. So one might (though not always) have the choice of whether to marry or seek the cloister, and if the cloister then as a monk or a friar, perhaps, or if as a monk then in a stricter or laxer religious order. And people certainly made religious choices and struggled with religious doubts throughout the biblical period and Church history. In our own time, however, the choices are more fundamental, concerning one's bedrock religious identity.

To reiterate aspects of our earlier discussion, secularization announces the end of religious belonging as a given of one's time and place, and its disembedding from the communally-shared structures of everyday life, so that religious involvement becomes a choice. Further, today's religious pluralism means that our choice at some level has to take other options into account. Even cradle church members normally have to make choices on their way to becoming active adult participants in their formative traditions. Religious individualism and merely associational religious bodies are the unavoidable norm today, with expressive individualism undergirding every religious identity—even for those who are culturally or philosophically drawn to a

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45. Bauman, "Faith and Instant Gratification," in *The Individualized Society*, 153–60.

more organic understanding of faith. The American sociologist Peter Berger famously announced this state of affairs three decades ago, pointing out that the root meaning of "heresy" is "choice," so that today all religious believers have become "heretics."[46]

Since then the unquestioned allegiance given to any type of objective authority has declined even further, as the sociologist Steve Bruce points out.

> Once culture was defined by experts. Now we accept the freedom of personal taste: I may not know much about art but I know what I like. In the late 1960s claims for personal autonomy moved to a second stage of matters of personal behavior: I may not know much about ethics and morals but I know what I like to do and claim my right to do it. In the third stage the same attitude is applied to areas of expert knowledge: I may not know much about the nervous system but I know what I like to believe in and I believe in chakras and Shiatsu massage and acupuncture.[47]

This deepening "heretical imperative" plays out against the background of consumer culture that I have been setting out, with its characteristic obsessions and anxieties. The result is clearly a riot of religious diversity, but I want to mention three characteristic types of religious response today. They represent diversity in terms of beliefs—ranging from certainty to skepticism, and from involvement to detachment—but at another level they have a lot in common. All of them manifest expressive individualism at work creating meaning, with a greater or lesser drive to comprehensiveness, and an eye to their utility in fostering the successful living of life. I refer to *conservative Christianity*, *consumer spirituality*, and *atheism*. The latter comes in two forms that I am calling "atheist chic" and "atheism-lite," both of which are consumer options not much different from consumer spirituality—apart from their content.

Conservative Christianity

The rise of fundamentalism and Pentecostalism is a sign of the times. Conservative Christianity is a powerful option for the homeless heart, offering community and certainty where these have been eroded, and an institutional authoritarianism that protects and re-assures many—though at the expense of many others who are ill-treated and excluded by it. Fundamentalism is a kind of nouveau-tribalism that defines insiders at the expense of outsiders,

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46. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, 1–31.
47. Bruce, *God is Dead*, 86.

and around the world it provides a rallying cry for those who are bypassed in the global economy, ghettoized, and devalued, and who are seeking identity and empowerment.

Muslim youth in the West, for instance, who feel isolated and adrift between the old world and the new, are drawn to fundamentalism for identity and empowerment, even if involvement with jihadism could well cost their lives. The collapse of communism also generates fundamentalism when the old order seeks to revive tribal enmity in the hope it might cling to power, as in Karadzic's demonizing of Muslims in the former Yugoslavia.[48] Being hated strengthens the fundamentalist group. Class resentment is a factor in both these cases, as it was when militant English Puritans smashed tombs of the ruling classes under cover of clearing churches of religious symbols.[49]

The emergence of American fundamentalism as a major religious option, nowadays defining itself against liberal secular elites through the so-called "culture wars," reflects the collapse of a reassuring form of life and the search for a new religious expression retaining the key "old-time values." Lynchburg in Virginia, for instance, home of the Jerry Falwell phenomenon, has been described as the sort of "new South" community where those who have lost their connection to the land and to traditional community life seek to recreate it through fundamentalist Church involvement. Fundamentalist Church life there is described in one anthropological study as communitarian rather than ideological, in the sense of putting people over principle, family-oriented, patriotic, and socially conservative—though one-time taboos like divorce are more acceptable, showing that this is a significantly contemporary phenomenon.[50] The embrace of creationism by this religious demographic does not necessarily reflect a studied commitment to scriptural inerrancy after weighing up all the evidence (just as atheism is not necessarily thought through, of which more shortly). Rather, cultural isolation and a sense of dissatisfaction with the modern world, the government, education, liberal elites, and other obvious targets of frustration come out indirectly through the invincible stubbornness of creation science. This ideology is a pawn in a larger game rather than an end in itself.

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48. See Morton, "Manufacturing Ancient Hatreds."

49. See Wilding, "Something Better," 215.

50. Ault, *Spirit and Flesh*. See a similar point, about the role of conservative religion maintaining identity for displaced Southerners elsewhere in the United States, in Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-First Century*, 23–24.

Fundamentalist community meets a sociological need, with fundamentalist believing following fundamentalist belonging. Indeed, in America the political culture is such that religious sub-groups can create worlds of their own, sharing a religious vision that is rarely challenged. For example, in Lynchburg fundamentalist church life, as studied by the religiously skeptical sociologist Steve Bruce, an entire subculture has been created. One's social life is confined entirely to the church, one's television watching is limited to the fundamentalist Christian network, one's holiday is spent at the Christian theme park, and the education of one's children is through fundamentalist schools and universities, all contributing to maintaining a coherent sub-world more like a medieval community in its totality than anything you could find in Britain or continental Europe today.[51] While it may appear that such continuing religious vigor is a powerful counterexample to the secularization thesis, it is more correct to see American fundamentalism as a response to secularization and proof positive that it is *working*.

There is also a rising fundamentalist mood in the Catholic Church where "new ecclesial movements" such as Opus Dei, the Neo-Catechumenal Way, and Legionaries for Christ, along with unofficial apocalyptic, sectarian conventicles, such as Australia's "Little Pebble" and "Magnificat Meal" movements, represent highly disciplined enclaves offering more intensive belonging and believing than normal church membership allows, and often at the expense of almost total separation from the wider Church. The endorsement by Pope Benedict of the Latin mass is exciting many conservatives in Catholic blogdom, and the disdain of these enthusiasts for "normal Catholics" is often plain—as it must surely be, for instance, to readers of Christopher Pearson's regular diatribes on this issue in his column for *The Weekend Australian* newspaper. These movements and trends reflect the dualism and authoritarianism of a more recent official Catholic Church profile, as the liberalizing trends of Vatican II strike many Catholics and their leaders as inadequate means for maintaining a powerful, distinctive Catholic culture.[52] Vatican support for Catholic conservatism, however, has not been matched by Vatican leadership in the clergy child abuse crisis, which in America and throughout the world has revealed a psychological immaturity and abusive edge to much Catholic Church life.[53] Dissident Catholics, such as Hans Küng and Jacques Pohier—

51. Bruce, *God is Dead*, 225–27.

52. See Collins, "Catholicism and Fundamentalism."

53. See the devastating critical analysis by a retired Australian Bishop, in Robinson, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church*. For the American situation see Cozzens, *Sacred Silence*.

the latter having left the Dominicans because he felt he could not "grow up" emotionally in the conservative Church and the conforming, disempowering totality of clerical culture—point to the costs of religious conservatism and its stifling obsession with psychological security and certainty.[54]

David Jenkins, a controversial Bishop of Durham in Margaret Thatcher's England, who suffered much at the hands of Anglican fundamentalists—those he called "certainty wallahs"—describes fundamentalism as a psychological problem, neurotic in nature, turning men "whom I thought of as some of my most decent and efficient priests into angry, disagreeable and hostile *little* men."[55] Zygmunt Bauman believes that the agony of choice in a liquid modern, consumer age makes fundamentalist groups attractive: "Their allure is the promise to put paid to the agony of individual choice by abolishing the choice itself; to heal the pain of individual uncertainty and hesitation by finishing off the cacophony of voices which makes one unsure of the wisdom of one's decisions. Their bait is that of . . . a world unambiguous again, sending unequivocal signals; that is, of an identity no longer multi-layered, multi dimensional and 'until-further-notice.'"[56]

Many isolated young people in the West experience a need for religious certainty and psychic security, which is ministered to by fundamentalist churches full of like-minded young people whose worship is often cast in the form of entertainment events.[57] The connection with today's spirit of consumerism is strong here, as I will be suggesting in the next section. For now I mention a striking cover image on one edition of the themed Australian journal of social criticism *Griffith Review*, titled "The Lure of Fundamentalism," featuring a good-looking young woman worshipping at Sydney's bigger-than-big Hillsong Church, with head thrown back and hands on heart, lost in isolated ecstasy.[58] The young man next to her is miles away, locked into his own expressive individualist moment. This image of a young woman in religious rapture is plainly sexual, too, like Bernini's seventeenth-century *Ecstasy*

54. See two moving and informative memoirs: Küng, *My Struggle for Freedom*; and Pohier, *God—In Fragments*.

55. Jenkins, *The Calling of a Cuckoo*, 152.

56. Bauman, "Modernity and Clarity," in *The Individualized Society*, 57–70, 70.

57. Porter, "Beyond the Cathedral Doors," 183. Porter's critical analysis of the uniquely conservative and powerful Anglican Diocese of Sydney is continued in *The New Puritans*.

58. This cover picture can be viewed on the journal's Web site. Online: http://www3 .griffith.edu.au/01/griffithreview/past_editions.php?id=83.

of St. Teresa sculpture, in Rome's Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria. Both women are clearly following the religious road to a very nice place of their own private enjoyment. But there is a further dimension in the Hillsong picture, evident if you look inside the journal at an advertisement for Griffith University facing page 7 and make comparison with a very similar picture you will find there. Here we see another handsome young woman gazing out at us from a Griffith University classroom—looking very pleased with herself, we are told, because she has opted for a university that has attracted some national teaching awards. Both girls have chosen environments where their needs are clearly being met. One of these environments is religious while the other is educational, but both of them are consumer-inspired vehicles for expressive individualism.

It is interesting, too, that Hillsong offers a "prosperity Gospel" promising that worldly and spiritual success go together. This is more generally true of the Pentecostal movement, especially where it serves as a modernizing agent in the developing world. It fosters disciplined communities of hard-working, domestically-engaged men and hence builds the kind of virtues Weber associated with modern capitalism. Similarities with the role of American fundamentalism in creating alternative social capital are clear. Women in particular benefit from Pentecostalism in the developing world, as a movement that delivers them from the worst excesses of patriarchal culture. It also serves formerly tribal cultures, as in Africa, with a social space to negotiate their transition to the more individually-oriented, self-reliant, post-tribal world of modernity. Thus Pentecostalism emerges as one of the key modernizing movements of our times,[59] and hence as a dimension of secularization.

Consumer Spirituality

To summarize, consumer culture "constructs every person as the author of his or her own identity, expressed aesthetically through the consumption and display of commodities."[60] This culture is more powerful than traditional cultures in its agile appropriation of cultural fragments. Our eclectic dress, home furnishing, and decoration, and the international scope of our diets, music, and holidays in today's West amply demonstrate this appropriation, as every culture is mined for saleable symbols, tastes, images, artifacts, and experiences that can be consumed apart from any profound encounter with the

59. See Martin, "Evangelical Expansion in Global Society," and "Pentecostalism: A Major Narrative of Modernity," in *On Secularization*, 26–43, and 141–54.

60. Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 30.

host culture. Religions are a type of culture, made up of symbols, languages, practices, and stories, and these too are mined for what Western consumers can make of them. This annexation of religion by Western consumer culture is ultimately an economically-driven process which unseats authoritative traditions and beliefs that were once inhabited by communities, and makes them into resources for personal spiritual consumption. This is now a universal Western phenomenon, both inside and outside the Churches. The New Age movement is quite explicit in drawing resources for personal wellbeing from many religious traditions, without regard for their strict logical compatibility. Religious symbols are also widely decontextualized apart from any obvious spiritual motive—from the classics of sacred music used as soundtracks for action films to crucifixes worn as bling, following the lead of Madonna ("I like the crucifix because it has a naked man on it").

A 2007 film, *The Darjeeling Limited*, provides an amusingly perceptive illumination of this phenomenon. Three rich, Gen X brothers from America travel across India by train on "a spiritual journey" of family reconciliation, spending big and sampling a range of Indian spiritual practices to aid them in their goal. But when it comes to the real thing, as in the Hindu funeral of a drowned boy they are invited to attend in a traditional village, having tried but failed to save the boy's life, they are shown to be what they in fact are: outsiders to a coherent but essentially impenetrable religious world (though they try to look the part by dressing in their first-class sleeper pajamas). Eventually the brothers find their widowed mother, who has become a Catholic nun high in the mountains; but despite her faith language and apparent embrace of the convent's local mission, she decamps and leaves her sons when they need her, just as she always has in the past, proving that she too is not actually being transformed by the spirituality she has chosen. Vincent Miller is unerring in his analysis of this whole trend.

> In its desire for self-fulfillment and freedom of choice to meet its own needs, the therapeutic self is precisely the consumer self. Its engagement with the world is one of choosing the goods most consonant with its own particular *lifestyle*. In this culture, religion, like other commodities, serves to fill-in the identity of the consumer. It can do this only insofar as it confirms the fundamental form of the self as consumer. Thus, the form of religion we have been discussing—abstracted sentiment divorced from practice— is ideally suited to this world. It supplies the veneer of meaning and conviction of which modern existence so often deprives us,

without disrupting the underlying forms of our lives—our obligation to consume.[61]

The fundamentalism discussed in the last section would represent a choice by someone whose need for meaning and a unified experience of life was great, reflecting a higher level of anxiety perhaps, so a whole religious identity is chosen "off the rack." Many others are less anxious, and these are the ones who are more likely to pic-n-mix religious elements. Australians, for instance, are not noted for being an angst-ridden people, and their typical religious reticence is culturally conditioned. Recent literature on spirituality in Australia suggests that a search for meaning is too cerebral a concept to capture the reality, though a hopeful attitude and good inner feelings—the sort of things noted in the earlier discussion of secularization, Romanticism, and the roots of consumerism—prove to be important for those Australians who look to religion and spirituality. Australian priest and sociologist Gary Bouma discerns a preference for "celebration, not cerebration" and a shift "from an emphasis on orthodoxy—correct belief—to orthopassy—correct feelings."[62] Younger Australians are likewise found to be in the typical modern Western business of crafting an identity from the commodities on offer, feeling free to draw widely on religious resources without acknowledging any religious authority beyond their own personal choice. But while the homeless heart is present among Generation Y in Australia, there is not a strong sense of loneliness or melancholy reflected in the statistics. Spiritual resources are sought by some, but many seem to manage their anxiety and stave off questions of meaning "perhaps indefinitely, by short-term, low-level meanings, by a lifestyle filled with 'distractions' and 'noise'."[63]

So we discern a range of consumer responses, from those who desire a whole religious identity to give them meaning and identity, through to those content with what we might call "meaning-lite," such as many young Australians who might pick at disconnected religious beliefs (such as reincarnation, which appears to represent an unexamined folk belief rather than a reflectively settled conviction) but do not seek more actively to cobble together a spirituality or embrace a religion.

Nothing in this discussion is meant to deny the reality of encounter with God through consumer spirituality, however. There are surely many for whom

61. Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 88.

62. Bouma, *Australian Soul*, 92, 93.

63. Mason, *The Spirit of Generation Y*, 335.

a strictly incoherent and inconsistently inhabited spiritual universe neverthe-less mediates a real sense of identity, compassion, and useful purpose—a qual-ity of life that any catholic-minded theologian or pastor would identify with the presence of God. Indeed, in what we might regard as the limiting case of consumer religion, an American nurse called Sheila Larsen famously informed sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues that she had made up her own spiritual perspective and practice that she called "Sheilaism." Nonetheless, Sheila testified to the personal healing she received through her DIY faith, also believing that her work as a nurse was used by God to help others.[64] Even if this is possible, however, there are other things that consumer spirituality makes much more difficult. I mention four of them.

The burden of Robert Bellah's classic study of this whole phenomenon is that today's Americans who cobble together spiritual and religious ele-ments may be genuinely plumbing significant spiritual depths, *but they will not normally have the language to articulate those depths*. A whole life-giving, community-sustaining web of traditional meaning, linking the divine with the historical, also the community and the nation with individual thriving, is being lost to America. In this new context, therapeutically-and-technically-minded individuals, who are "trained" to think about life in terms of what they can get for themselves, "cannot think about themselves or others except as arbitrary centers of volition. They cannot express the fullness of being that is actually theirs."[65] Vincent Miller insists, however, that we must not accuse all who approach religion and spirituality this way of selfish narcissism. It is difficult, even for the well-intentioned, to let religion be more than "a deco-rative veneer of meaning over the vacuousness of everyday life in advanced capitalist societies."[66]

A second consequence of consumer spirituality is that by separating reli-gious beliefs not only from the fuller canons of sacred narrative and doctrine that make them coherent, but also from the context of community belonging, support, and practice apart from which no genuine religious believer would recognize their religion, the chances of being transformed by those beliefs in any significant way is effectively removed. This is a religious or spiritual life answering to no authority but that of desire constructed by market forces that determine our sense of who we are or wish to be, with no objective claim available to challenge, surprise or transform us. Vincent Miller concludes

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64. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 221, 235.

65. Ibid., 81.

66. Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 225.

that "spiritually we are trained to seek, search and choose but not to follow-through and commit."[67]

Third, it is unlikely that the spiritual consumer will see herself or himself as contributing to their own religious tradition, taking responsibility for its life, or consciously participating in its mission.[68] The consumer-minded Church is not going to be fixed by superficial managerial solutions about the recovery of its relevance to life today when the very spirit of life today prevents Christianity from being taken really seriously, whole, and entire by the great majority of its own adherents. Their spiritual imaginations are more likely to reflect consumer culture than something more comprehensive—something that might make life into a calling, and overcome the power of the commodity form.

And here is my fourth point. It is not likely that anyone formed by consumer culture, and who approaches spirituality and religion in its spirit, will be willing or able to mount any significant challenge to consumer culture. This is the particular burden of theologian Jeremy Carette and religious studies scholar Richard King in a powerful polemic against the annexation of spirituality by consumer culture. They refer to "capitalist spirituality" as the "spiritual" vision, the guiding imaginative worldview, of today's global market and its ruling ideology of neo-liberalism—which allows some wealthy individuals and less than a thousand large corporations to shape the present and the future in their interests. Carrette and King identify the eight aspects of this "capitalist spirituality" as atomization, self-interest, corporatism, utilitarianism, consumerism, quietism, political myopia, and thought control (referring in particular to the way individuals' private thoughts are accommodated to this system).[69]

Consumer spirituality is thus the new opium of the people or, to update Marx, it is today's "Cultural Prozac."[70] Individuals more or less lost in life are quieted and turned inward, learning to cope with alienating features of today's bottom-line culture rather than rising up against that culture. So the typical approach to systemic problems in our therapeutic age, which is learning to cope with them rather than to step out of our powerless interiority and confront them, co-opts the elements of religion. And this co-opting is what spirituality amounts to today—to therapeutically packaged body

67. Ibid., 142.

68. Ibid., 212.

69. Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 21–22.

70. Ibid., 138, 77.

parts scavenged from the corpse of religion. "Spirituality becomes," according to Carrette's and King's confronting assessment, "a GMR—a Genetically Modified Religion—the tasty food additive that makes neo-liberalism more palatable."[71] Their call is for genuine religious traditions genuinely inhabited, that will galvanize people to take back meaning-control from the markets—for "new 'atheisms' that reject the God of money."[72] And now, what about the older, more familiar atheisms?

Atheism(s)

There is far too much involved in this topic to do other than make a few remarks at this point. I will be looking in more detail at the imaginative roots of unbelief in the next chapter and posing some of its questions to my own emerging perspective on faith in chapter 5. For now I simply want to link atheism with the immediately prior discussions of conservative religion and consumer spirituality—highlighting the continuities and suggesting that atheism in two main forms emerges as a product of late-modern, global culture in tandem with that culture's characteristic forms of religion and spirituality.

The first type or mood of atheism I am calling *atheist chic*. It has found a great champion in Richard Dawkins, who I choose from a vocal group of writers reacting against the worldwide resurgence of conservative religion after 9/11. Much is wrong with Dawkins' militant diatribe, *The God Delusion*,[73] in which this leading evolutionary biologist turned popular-science writer makes his case for science against conservative religion by venturing well outside his area of expertise. He writes in an insufferably bullish and superior tone, declaring all religious people to be deluded fools. He hints regularly at a certain grudging fondness for reasonable Anglicanism (we "reasonable Anglicans" know how to deal with his type, however, so he cannot afford take us too seriously). He also affirms the literary merit of the King James Bible. But otherwise he is angry and dismissive. And having closed the front door to conservative religion, he closes the back door to the French deconstructionists and anyone else who, with a modicum of epistemological subtlety, presumes to question a rigid distinction between science and religion, referring to them as "franconphonies."

71. Ibid.,132.

72. Ibid., 178.

73. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*. See, e.g., the frank and helpful critique by Lash, "Where Does *The God Delusion* Come From?"

This is an exercise in what Peter Sloterdijk calls "pugnacious reason," which is anything but dispassionate and scientific. Rather, it "is from the start an activist and untranquil reason that at no price lets itself be made fluid and *never* subjects itself to the precedence of what is common, universal and encompassing."[74] Interestingly, however, its contempt for widespread religious sentiment does in fact reveal religious roots, which Charles Taylor identifies in the spurned Evangelicalism of emergent mid-Victorian skepticism. Self-responsible rational freedom was an Enlightenment obligation, which under Romantic influence acquired "a kind of heroism of unbelief" that dared to face the bitter, unconsoling truth, to which specifically Victorian priorities added a high and ultimately compassion-driven view of science and technology in the service of human betterment. "Thus," as Taylor concludes, "the turn from religion to science not only betokened a greater purity of spirit and greater manliness but also aligned [the Victorians] with the demands of human progress and welfare."[75] And the roots of this purity and honesty, though now turned skeptical, were Evangelical. It was an alternative ethical vision, an "imperious moral demand not to believe," that turned these Victorians away from the faith of their fathers.[76]

Today this sort of reaction still seems right to many in the West—this sense that science and religion are at loggerheads and that decent, thoughtful, liberal-minded people ought to think as Dawkins does. In other words, they want to look the part, and Dawkins' book is the necessary accessory. I suspect that a great many people who either did not or could not read Stephen Hawking's 1988 bestseller *A Brief History of Time*, but who bought it so they could demonstrate their openness to the latest ideas and their favored rational persona more generally, are like those who eagerly bought *The God Delusion*—or *The Da Vinci Code* for that matter. It is about self-creation via commodity acquisition, in this case the book staking a claim that the one who buys it belongs among the "cool kids." Hence my category of atheist chic.

As conservative religion serves some in their search for a confident identity, so its mirror image packages others in the posture of "ethical unbelief."

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74. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 545.

75. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 405.

76. Ibid., 406. Darwin's theory put the skeptical cat among the religious pigeons in England, because the argument from design had loomed so large in the English religious imagination, supporting the connection between God and the world's underlying order that had been re-minted at the Enlightenment. See Cupitt, "Darwinism and English Religious Thought."

Referring to the growing popularity of Dawkins's militant atheist crusade in America, English religious journalist Andrew Brown makes an astute assessment along these lines. "Dawkins-type atheism has a distinct social role over there," he writes. "It is fundamentalism for the college-educated, offering the same kind of certainties, and a similar range of enemies, in a world that has grown threatening, impersonal, and insecure for everyone."[77] This continues a trend identified by Steve Bruce, who argues that Darwinism was not widely popular in nineteenth-century America because people had examined the case carefully but, rather, because "the very idea of evolution resonated with the self-confidence and growing prosperity of the era."[78]

This skeptical mirroring of conservative religion, which Dawkins uncritically recycles in our day, was not lost on prominent nineteenth-century critics who saw this reaction as offering little advance on the religion it despised. Kierkegaard accuses both the rigidly orthodox believer insisting on historically certain religious origins and the freethinker who denies them of both fearing what he calls "inwardness"—both having sacrificed a genuine faith that can cope with uncertainty in favor of a brittle and superficial one that is prey to anxiety.[79] Nietzsche's critical interpreter and inheritor Max Scheler, in his classic discussion of the bad faith and turbo-charged *Schadenfreude* called *Ressentiment*, is convinced that the skeptical mood remains locked into revenge against its own religiously-believing past, so that claims to the metaphysical truth of a mechanistic worldview (such as we find in Dawkins) are "only the immense intellectual *symbol* of the slave revolt in morality."[80] Nietzsche himself is at his most savage on this point, lambasting skeptics for their failure to be free of the spirit they despise.

> These deniers and outsiders of today, these absolutists in a single respect—in their claim to intellectual hygiene—these hard, severe, abstemious, heroic spirits, who constitute the pride of our age, all these pale atheists, anti-Christians, immoralists, nihilists, these spiritual sceptics, . . . these last idealists of knowledge, these men in whom the intellectual conscience is alone embodied and dwells today—they believe themselves to be as free as possible from the

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77. Brown, "Review of 2007: Press."

78. Bruce, *God is Dead*, 107.

79. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 142–43.

80. Scheler, *Ressentiment*, 124.

ascetic ideal, . . . and yet, . . . this self-same ideal is *their* ideal too,
. . . they themselves are its most spiritualized product . . .[81]

Nietzsche's point here is that the alleged free thinkers, like Dawkins, remain idealists, committed to the objectivity of truth, and in that sense they perpetuate what he saw to be a key religious delusion. Others today of atheist leanings are less stubborn on this point, however, and their tone is not the rigid certainty of old-fashioned skeptics. Rather than the hardness—perhaps more correctly the *faux* hardness—of atheist chic, there is a lighter, less aggressive, less certainty-obsessed version.

What I am calling *atheism-lite* is more or less convinced in its perspective, but its tone and approach are different. Taylor identifies an atheistic trend of this sort in the nineteenth-century Romantic mood of expressive integrity found in the poets Goethe and Matthew Arnold—of self-completion through the pursuit of art and culture, perceived to be a more reliable path than traditional religion, but also less rationalistic than scientific atheism.[82] Taylor acknowledges that the rationalistic and Romantic forms of atheism blended in Marxism, which found extraordinary power in combining "scientistic materialism with the aspiration to expressive wholeness."[83] But Marxism is not a live option in today's liquid modern West, so I will not pursue this merging as a serious possibility.

An example of atheism-lite is the counter-movement of young American Hemant Mehta, the self-styled "friendly atheist," who is troubled that the hostility of today's militantly rationalistic "new atheist" writers risks spoiling the message. His popular blog and speaking program follows the success of a widely reported stunt. Mehta "sold his soul" on eBay, with the successful bidder being given the opportunity to try and convert him.[84] This is a playful, ironic, and, in that sense, post-modern version of atheism which is convinced but not dogmatic. Mehta is successful at attracting a sympathetic hearing from religious conservatives (even getting published by them) because they do not experience in him the hostility of their "evil twin," channeled for them by Richard Dawkins.

My favorite writer of this stamp is England's "atheist priest" Don Cupitt, whose post-Christian philosophy and spirituality has evolved over the quarter-

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81. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 126.

82. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 408–9.

83. Ibid., 409–10.

84. Mehta, *I Sold My Soul on eBay*.

century since his infamous "taking-leave of God."[85] He has heeded Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, abandoning philosophical idealism and embracing those who Dawkins calls "franconphonies." The post-modern philosophies of "outside-lessness," which understand all meaning and truth as human constructions entirely within the bounds of our languages and forms of life, with no wider objective truth deemed necessary, yield a spirituality aiming at a non-anxious, joyful, and expressive life, content with finiteness and ordinariness. Cupitt calls this "solar living," understanding today's spiritual and ethical imperative to be simply the pouring out of our life in creativity and compassion. It is a very chilled, Buddhist vision, metaphysically gossamer thin.[86]

Cupitt was trained in the natural sciences, but his formative studies in the philosophy of science taught him that science too is full of myths and orthodoxies, with its authority confined to its method. He extends the later Wittgenstein's commitment to ordinary, everyday language as the key to philosophy in a fascinating original project, uncovering what he believes to be a coherent but entirely non-foundational philosophy of life and plain man's religion in the range of speech idioms that have grown up around the word "life." It is stoic but also joyful, and neither conventionally religious nor militantly atheistic.[87] Cupitt has great regard for ordinary people who just get on with it[88]—the sort of people who provide the main funeral trade for English and Australian clergy, for instance, who come to the Church for traditional rites of passage but are really looking for resources to "celebrate the life" of their deceased loved one. The Church and its faith provide software on these occasions, for a spiritual vision that requires no hardware—no infallible creed, Pope or Bible, though no infallible Richard Dawkins either. The emphasis is on living and loving and getting on with it, and not on intellectual closure—whether orthodox or atheistic. I will have more to say about this approach in chapter 5.

The bricolage typical of consumer spirituality is also very much at work in atheism-lite, with many people happy to be more or less atheistic or unbelieving while still hedging their bets. So atheism-lite can also refer to

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85. I wrote the first critical study of Cupitt. See Cowdell, *Atheist Priest?* I have followed Cupitt's extensive publishing program subsequently, which has led far from the ground covered in that early study.

86. See, e.g., Cupitt, *The Way to Happiness*; and Cupitt, *The Great Questions of Life*.

87. For a good overview of this program, with a list of over two hundred and fifty of today's "life idioms," see Cupitt, *Life, Life*; see 143–47 for the list.

88. See, e.g., Cupitt, *The Meaning of It All in Everyday Speech*.

those who might express an opinion suggesting religious or spiritual beliefs when approached for a survey, while in reality this opinion is not held at all deeply—like the third of young Australians who claim to believe in reincarnation,[89] which may simply reflect a reluctance to entirely let go of personal immortality while, otherwise, orthodox Christianity has been entirely abandoned. The religiously skeptical sociologist Steve Bruce makes much of the way surveys into religious or spiritual belief and practice regularly overstate the case. People may simply choose the least specific response available, or affirm some religious belief or other so as not to seem impolite or crass. He is also concerned when surveys incorrectly assume that if "respondents show evidence of considering anything more precious or abstract than the dishwasher they are being religious."[90]

Bruce believes the typical posture today to be just plain indifference, rather than much actual rejection of belief. Atheism lite is effectively what these people embrace, though "embrace" is perhaps too active a word. Secular modernity in the West simply does not require religion or spirituality to be comprehensive categories. If people believe or disbelieve this or that relic of orthodox faith, it does not necessarily imply firm belief, or else firm atheism. What I am calling atheism lite is a way to conceive the broad range of non-Dawkins-style options, from convinced and articulate though not ideological or hostile atheism (e.g., Don Cupitt), to the relatively untroubled, post-religious habits of many ordinary secular people in today's West. Some of these tend to the "meaning lite" that "sort of believes" in "something or other," while others lean more to the unbelieving end of atheism-lite, though they are not dogmatic about it. Consumer spirituality is well represented at both ends of this spectrum, with Christians as well as atheists doing their own pic'n and mix—the beliefs may vary, but the consumer dynamic is the same.

TO CONCLUDE

The flight from the monastery, more generally from the religiously embedded world of pre-modern times, has led to the brave new world of individualistic Western modernity. But freedom and autonomy nurse many fears, and the homeless heart is a regular consequence. Faith remains in various forms under the anxious aegis of consumer culture, mirrored by parallel types of atheism. On the way to part 2 of this book, and my case for the recovery of faith in

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89. Mason, *The Spirit of Generation Y*, 149.
90. Bruce, *God is Dead*, 191.

strong and abiding form, I want to look in more detail at some aspects of faith in the modern world. Modernity with its emphasis on certainty, closure, and control has itself set the agenda of faith, in particular influencing faith's perceived content. The modern impact on our sense of God and the sacred will be the subject of chapter 2, while chapter 3 will go more deeply into the motives and consequences of our hitching the sacred to modernity's star.

Looking ahead to part 2 of the book, my aim there will not be the recovery of tribal faith, as if that were seriously possible, nor the uncritical championing of individualized faith, though that probably has to be the starting point of an abiding faith for the future that I will be commending. Rather, the post-tribal but also post-individual faith of the Carthusian monks we met through *Into Great Silence*, and other examples, point to a new synthesis. Such abiding faith is a profoundly contemporary option, whether or not it appears in old-fashioned dress. But it also reveals an ancient pedigree and an unbroken tradition through the period of modernity—albeit an underground one. More of this in due course; for now, the fate of God under modernity.