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**Faith, Facts, and Feelings:  
Christian Persuasion in our Post-Secular Age**

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**Abstract**

The case for God has never been stronger whilst at the same time belief in God is waning amongst Australian youth. What this highlights is not so much a problem with the Christian story but with its communicators, who are struggling to navigate the questions and challenges introduced by our unique cultural moment. When it comes to making significant decisions, the social science literature bears out a complex relationship between facts and feelings as to how people form resilient faith. Effective Christian education needs to take this research into account, inasmuch as it reveals a thoroughly biblical anthropology. This talk explores the relationship between the attractive *what* of the Christian story and the compelling *why* in giving reasons for our hope. Essentially the art of Christian persuasion is learning how to tell the better story of the Scriptures such that it connects with the felt questions of our time (relevance), and such that it connects to reality in the myriad ways in which God has given strong testimony to the truth of our message.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

What is the place of Christian persuasion in our post-secular age?

Academically speaking, the case for Christianity has never been stronger, and yet at the same time belief in God is waning amongst Australian youth. What this highlights is not so much a problem with the Christian story but with its communicators, who are struggling to navigate the questions and challenges introduced by our unique cultural moment. We stand at a critical juncture in the history of Christianity, and the culture of the West continues to change rapidly. New technologies are adapting how we relate to each other and the world, and new secular philosophies are causing tremendous shifts in our moral landscapes. The pace of change is so great that reflection on the impact of these phenomenon is almost made obsolete by the time you have sufficient markers from any body of research.

Here in Australia, the Faith and Belief report from the McCrindle research firm shows that there is a rapidly growing percentage of our younger population who are walking away from traditional religious affiliation (McCrindle 2017). This shift follows similar trends observed in other Western nations like USA and Canada (Pew 2015). Sociologists refer to this phenomenon as the rise of the nones, and beyond the sheer collapse of mainline protestant denominations and the death of cultural or nominal expressions of faith, there are various reasons for their departure from the fold. Christianity is considered by many to be intellectually vacuous and morally dubious. McCrindle and NCLS continue to illuminate the current barriers, census after census, study after study (McCrindle 2017, Pepper 2018). Whether the Church's doctrine, like beliefs around sexual ethics and Hell, or the behaviour of Christians, like hypocrisy and sexual abuse, Christianity is seen to belong to a bygone era. Skyscrapers now dominate the cityscapes as symbols of the success of secular modernity, and old Church buildings serve as nostalgic symbols of our former religious selves, or as Nietzsche described it in his *Parable of the Madman*, as sepulchres for the decaying corpse of a murdered deity (Nietzsche 1882). Drawing together the various lines of data it seems appropriate to diagnose Australia as thoroughly post-Christian in attitude, where religion has largely been ticked off our national bucket-list.

But in jettisoning belief in God and the Christian story, Australians have had to fill the void with new answers to the deepest questions of our human existence. The objective has been to pursue the good life on secular shores, where you can make sense of life without reference to God. But is it working? And how can Christian educators do their part in responding to this phenomena and the challenges of belief in our cultural moment? These questions warrant further exploration and are the subject of this paper.

The state of our culture doesn't dictate whether the gospel is *good news*, nor whether it is *true news*. So even if the Church is scrambling, or has gone silent, and even if some future-casters are predicting the death of denominations in a generation, this moment is also pregnant with opportunity. If only Christians have the eyes to see the opening. If only Christians have the courage to find our unique voice and message again. And if only we incline our ear to the Holy Spirit in search of faithful and fruitful methods that flow from what our study of God's word and our study of His world.

## 2. SIFTING THROUGH THE SANDS OF SECULARISM

As something of a diagnostic metaphor for making sense of these turbulent times, take these closing words of Jesus from the famed Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel:

<sup>24</sup> Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup> The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. <sup>26</sup> But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. <sup>27</sup> The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

Jesus' metaphors are always shallow enough for children to play and deep enough for scholars to plumb. Jesus here summarises in a few sentences the rise and fall of civilisations, as well as the triumph and tragedy of countless personal lives. His argument is simple. Storms are inevitable. But whether or not the fury of the elements wreaks havoc upon our structures depends entirely upon what we have chosen to build our lives. Do we build upon the foundation of God's sacred story, of which Jesus is the centre, or do we search for some new philosophical grounds?

Western civilisation has become a prodigal culture. Roughly a dozen books in the last two decades alone have argued the what we love most about the West has little to do with the Enlightenment or even the Industrial Revolution, but has everything to do with our Judaeo-Christian roots. This is a recognition that can be traced by natives to the West as well as observers from the East, and spans across various philosophical lines of thought, from Christian and secular quarters (D'Souza 2007; Dickson 2011; Hannam 2011; Hill 2005; Holland 2016; Johnstone 2017; Mengalwadi 2011; Schmidt 2004; Sheridan 2018; Stark 2006). The best of the West, they argue, is an *inheritance*. Concepts like universal human dignity and human rights trace back the language of Genesis and the *Imago Dei*. Education and healthcare for all follow a similar lineage. Historically unique virtues like humility have no strong ancient foundation outside their elevation in the New Testament. Social welfare and individual charity are founded upon the Judaeo-Christian ethics of justice and generosity. Even the scientific revolution is wrapped up with religious underpinnings, as the catalysts of those movements, the progenitors of their fields, were driven by the logic and language of Genesis to believe God had endowed this universe with intelligible laws as a divine lawgiver, and that they were commanded to study God's world in order to make it more fruitful. These gifts that have been bequeathed to Western civilisation all flow out of the legacy of the Christian story.

Enlightenment style thinkers brashly claim this inheritance, confident they can keep the riches of their Judaeo-Christian heritage, even as they uproot from the Christian story in search of adventure in new philosophical lands. The Enlightenment was seen to usher in a sort of *Secular Exodus* from the West's slavery to religious captivity.

So what has become of the secular project?

Defining secularism is fraught with difficulty, which is why most intellectual historians speak of secularisms in the plural. Charles Taylor's genealogy of secularism offers a useful working definition, however, for a secular state, secular person, and secular age (Taylor 2007). A secular state is one where no religious doctrine is privileged in the public sphere. Sadly this is often interpreted to mean that a separation of Church and State equates to a bifurcation between private and public life, so that the only explanations allowed in the public space are those that do not appeal to religious language.

Secular thinkers have done remarkably well over the past two centuries filling in the theoretical gaps to parse out such explanations. Drawing from the fields of cosmology,

biology, and evolutionary psychology, the secular story now offers a reasonably coherent set of answers to the classic questions every worldview needs to answer—origins, meaning, morality, and destiny (Zacharias 1998, 219). With a viable secular alternative to God's sacred story, the confident belief that permeated the academy in the 1960's and 1970's became known as the secularisation thesis: that the more educated people became, the less religion would play a role in society. Even Christian sociologists like Peter Berger argued in the late 1970's that secularisation would completely colonise Western civilisation, and from there the rest of the world (Berger 1979).

However, as the decades rolled on the *Secular Exodus* has become the *Secular Wanderings*. Just like God's nation Israel, wandering in the desert, there are grumblings. For after the initial excitement of throwing off religion in what Oxford philosopher, Isaiah Berlin, called negative liberty (Berlin 1969), the absence of all constraint, or an unbridled autonomy, it seems secular people have awakened to deeper and unsatisfied thirsts. Only now, with a disenchanted universe, no miracle water can come from a rock.

Australian journalist Greg Sheridan has a powerful line that captures the link between our broader culture and our social imaginaries: "Humans beings are formed in a culture, and a culture without God will form different human beings" (Sheridan 2018). And when you parse our the secular story with purely scientific answers to the deepest questions, secularism gives birth to a culture without a soul. Everything that we consider to make up the thick aspects of who we are as humans, everything we love the most, what Francis Schaeffer called the "mannishness of man" (Schaeffer 1972), cannot be explained on secularism, or rather is explained away (Mohler 2015). Love, not the supreme ethic, merely a neurochemical reaction serving evolutionary survival. Justice, not an objective hope, merely a relative social standard from person to person, culture to culture, and era to era. Freedom, not a real agency, merely an illusion of choice from an illusory consciousness. Rationality, not following the evidence through to a warranted conclusion, but merely a neural pathway preprogrammed by biological determinism (Keller 2016).

A secular view of the world tends to deny the deepest things of who we are, setting the mind's beliefs at war with the deepest experiences, intuitions, and longings of the human heart. It drives a wedge between facts and feelings, creating a terrible dissonance for seculars to either ignore or embrace. We're told the we have no purpose, even though we're obsessed with searching for one. We're told that there is no meaning to life, even though we cannot live without one.

It was Victor Frankl, the Jewish psychiatrist who endured Auschwitz, who observed that without a sure *why* for our existence, we cannot survive the suffering and hopelessness of the *how* (Frankl 1959). But that is where a thoroughgoing secular story leaves you: without an enduring *why*. And the psychological effects on the emerging generations have been devastating. Young people right across the first world, experiencing the best living conditions of any generation in the history of human civilisation, are exhibiting skyrocketing rates of anxiety and depression (Lawrence 2015). The most connected generation has become the most lonely generation (Cigna 2018). Even though there are obvious technological and sociological factors associated with these outcomes, when compared to the wellbeing of those with intrinsic religiosity, it seems disbelief has had communal repercussions (Spencer 2016). Just as Jesus predicted with his metaphor, people have become more fragile.

Cue the meteoric rise of Canadian professor and psychiatrist Jordan Peterson, who in coopting God's story, but reading it through a psychological and therapeutic lens, has

animated a generation of young seculars by restoring to them a *why* in the face of the inevitable nihilism of the secular story. To a generation raised on moral relativism—indoctrinated to believe there are no binaries, no boundaries, no fixedness, and no givens—Peterson serves as something of a secular sage or wisdom teacher, pointing out there is a moral grain to our universe. You can make your own choices, but you cannot choose the consequences of those choices. There are benefits of choosing to go with the moral grain of the universe, and there are all manner of psycho-social splinters if you choose to go against it. As something of a commentary on the irony of our cultural moment, is it not fascinating that those who once sought unbridled freedom from all constraints are the very same ones who have catapulted Peterson's book to the New York Times bestselling list. Its title? *12 Rules for Life*. A rehashing of the 10 commandments, only with 20% interest..

It seems humans cannot escape the other half of Isaiah Berlin's freedom equation, *positive liberty* (Berlin 1969), which means not the absence of all constraints, but like a fish to water, or a train to its tracks, the embrace of the right constraints that lead to human flourishing (Berlin 1969).

Jesus' calculus seems inescapable.

A life with God: *the rock*. A life without God: *shifting sands*.

And even if our secular neighbours deny God's existence, they still have to live in God's world (Schaeffer 1968). That means everything in creation conspires against any secular tendencies to explain all of life only through a scientific lens. The world is charged with what Peter Berger calls "signals of transcendence" (Berger 1970), or what Taylor call "solicitations of the spiritual" (Taylor 2007). These are ways God is breaking into people's otherwise immanent and materialistic outlook, like rays of sunlight piercing the dark clouds. And so beauty and mathematics, love and rationality, justice and freedom; these are just some of the reasons why the secularisation thesis has failed, as the secular story has been unable to eclipse the religious dimension of human experience. It has failed Taylor's challenge to explain these phenomena without impoverishment (Taylor 2007).

The world is not becoming less religious as once predicted by sociologists half a century ago. Rather the opposite is true. Globally speaking, the same sociologists now trace how religion has undergone a resurgence (Berger 1999). Which is why—excepting Western universities which remain the strongest ongoing staging ground for secularisation—Western cultures are being forced to engage with religious perspectives and dimensions of life (Thomas 2005).

This unexpected enduring coexistence of secular and religious perspectives, of competing stories, has led to a new phenomenon: what Taylor describes as the sense of everything being cross-pressured (Taylor 2007). That those who believe in God are constantly plagued by doubts, and those whose currency is religious scepticism are constantly haunted by the spectre of God. Why? Because, that there are alternative stories, secular and religious, means everyone now can imagine the world through the lens of the other. With meaningful explanations from both sides, a brazen confidence is impossible to maintain for those with even the slightest inkling towards intellectual integrity. Everyone is haunted by a view of the world they reject, and in a culture that is post everything—post-modern, post-truth, post-Christian—this conflict is the zeitgeist of the new post-secular world (Habermas 2008; Graham 2017; Taylor 2007).

Let me offer something of a case study with the recent Notre Dame fire in Paris. There we were, at the beginning of Holy Week, with the entire world arrested in their tracks

to watch the spire ablaze. Why? Is this not just an old building, and one connected to an institution that is hated amongst so many in the secular West for its hypocrisy and opulence, and for a litany of sacred crimes scattered throughout Church history? The demise of this cultural icon should be cause for celebration, especially in a thoroughly secular nation like France. Yet the world mourned. There were Parisian seculars singing hymns in the streets (Clement 2019). Why? Because the fire stirred in our collective memory this abiding sense of something lost in the West: the ghost of our human soulfulness. The fall of that sacred spire serves as a global metaphor of the West's now diminished view of what it means to be human, as we have amputated the divine image that once animated us.

Nowhere is this captured better than in the opening words of Julian Barnes' memoir, *Nothing to be Frightened Of*: "I don't believe in God, but I miss him" (Barnes 2008).

The borrowed inheritance of this prodigal culture is running low. We face unprecedented challenges to the future of our civilisations and cultures in the West, and sifting through the secular sands, it seems their thinkers are bankrupt when it comes to the spiritual, philosophical, and moral resources required to build a stable foundation. As confidence for the good life life apart from God crumbles, what does Jesus offer this post secular age? What does our gospel have to offer? And how do we reach our post-secular age?

### 3. THE LOST ART OF PERSUASION

Enter the lost art of Christian persuasion.

Travel back to book of Acts and consider the verbs used to describe how Jesus' first followers went about spreading Christianity. What were they doing? Reasoning. Arguing. Debating. Disputing. Convincing. Proving. Preaching. Proclaiming. Of the myriad verbs used to describe the spread of Christianity, over three quarters carry strong notions of persuasion (Dulles 2005). The spoken faith of our apostolic forefathers was not dispassionate discourse in the public sphere; it was logic on fire, driven by a compassion as deep as the Mariana Trench.

Apologetics is this theological sub-discipline of commending and defending Christ in a manner that is itself distinctly Christian, or on its own terms (Stackhouse 2006, 161). Drawn from the world of jurisprudence, the Greek term *apologia* meant to give an answer; to make your case; to offer your defence before the magistrate.<sup>1</sup>

After the Lord's ascension the early church over the first few centuries began to use two symbols in speaking about Christian advocacy: *the closed and open fist* (Ashford 2017, 448). The closed fist represented *dissuasoria*, the negative side of apologetics focused on defending against objections. The open fist represented *persuasoria*, the positive side of apologetics that uses intellectual, aesthetic, and relational creativity in commending the gospel to those who at first cannot receive it as good or true news (Guinness 2015, 253).

Now, sadly, this discipline has often been left to a few intellectual champions of the faith. The *fidei defensors* or codename apologists: Justin Martyr, Ireneus, Augustine, Aquinas, and Anselm. But it is worth noting that apologist is not an office or label in the New Testament. It was not something that someone was, so much as something that all Christians

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter 3:15-16, "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to **give an answer (apologia)** to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander." Cf. Paul's five formal *apologias* (Acts 21:40-22:29; 23:1-11; 24:1-9; 25:1-12; 26:1-32).

had to do. As much as perhaps it worked in previous generations for the Christian masses to cheer on from the stands as their intellectual gladiators fought in the arena of ideas, we need to revive this lost art of Christian persuasion for our post-secular age as the task of all Christians (Guinness 2015, 37). Together we must take up the Apostle Peter's injunction for public Christianity: "to always be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks you to give the reasons for the hope that you have, but to do this gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15). In the language of J. Warner Wallace, a convert to Christianity through a forensic investigation of the gospels, "We don't need one more million dollar apologist; we need one million one dollar apologists" (Wallace 2017, 203).

Therefore, in terms of our training as educators, and the educational spaces we map out, serious questions need to be asked. How are we preparing teachers to be theologically nimble enough to give an answer to any student who asks? And how are we creating learning spaces that invite questions, doubt, and serious investigation? And when it comes to ethical Christian persuasion, of what do we need to be mindful?

The theme of this research conference is *Reason and Relevance*. Why should you take Christianity seriously as a live option for belief (reason), and why should you want Christianity to be a live option (relevance)? I would be hard pressed to suggest a better summary for charting a way forward in Christian persuasion for our post-secular age, except to suggest that we have to flip the script. Why? Because of what we have learned about how people form beliefs and make decisions.

#### **4. THE ANATOMY OF MAKING DECISIONS**

Ben Shapiro, the Jewish conservative political commentator in the USA, has become famous amongst young people the world over for his slogan, "Facts don't care about your feelings" (Shapiro 2014). Contextually speaking, Shapiro is critiquing a certain brand of persuasion that is based upon emotive reasoning without any anchor in scientific or philosophical reality, seeking to correct an imbalance in political discourse where emotive assertion is a substitution for substantive argument. But as self-evidently true as his slogan may be (since facts are incapable of empathy), when it comes to humans forming their deepest beliefs, it seems faith has something to do with both facts and feelings.

Across the millennia of moral philosophy there have been numerous models suggested for how the passions (or our heart and intuitions) relate to reason when it comes to making moral judgments. In his masterpiece, *The Republic*, Plato argues that the right order of morality happens when reason rules over the lower passions; a sort of proto-rationalist approach to moral calculation (Plato 2011). David Hume flipped Plato's script, arguing that reason only serves at the whim of the passions (Hume 2003). As a contested third option, Thomas Jefferson seemed to argue in one of his letters that nature endowed humans with the mind and the heart to serve different ends; reason for answering scientific questions, and the heart for the everyday pursuits sparked by moral questions (Jefferson 2019). They are, in essence, non-overlapping magisteria. So which of this three models is correct? To which faculty must we primarily aim our *persuasoria*?

In his research on moral thinking, the secular Jewish psychologist, Jonathan Haidt, sought to empirically test these models, exploring whether feelings or facts play a greater role in shaping people's beliefs (Haidt 2012). His findings are unambiguous, with Hume's model vindicated as the victor (though Haidt softens the slave language to say reason is more of a

dignified servant to the passions). He summarises the research in his now famous metaphor of the rider and the elephant.

As it turns out, when it comes to making moral judgments, *intuition comes first and strategic reasoning second*. The elephant, representing our subconscious and intuitive processes, sets the direction, and the rider, representing our conscious reasoning, tends to go along for the ride. Or to put it another way, if you are placed in a situation that calls for you to make a decision, you will almost immediately and intuitively react, and only after having come to the judgement will you call upon your conscious reasoning, which acts as a sort of presidential press secretary whose job it is to publicly justify your emotive tweets.

Now this is a huge and controversial observation. Our reasons are rarely the reason we arrive at a moral judgment. But because we have moved through the intellectual epochs of the Enlightenment, rationalism, and empiricism, our commitment to thinking we are primarily cerebral is a hard belief to dispel. Haidt calls it the rationalist delusion: the persisting false belief that we are super rational creatures simply following the evidence where it leads Haidt (2012, 103-106). The moral science data suggests otherwise.

Without knowing it, though, Haidt is profoundly Anglican for a Jewish agnostic. Why? Because Scripture never reduces humans to logical calculators, or simply brains on legs. Rather we are embodied creatures, with various parts to our humanity; heart, soul, mind, and strength.<sup>2</sup> And when it comes to our moral beliefs and actions, the heart seems to steer the ship. At a time in the ancient world where Plato's reason ruled the philosophical scene, Jesus said: "*For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander...*" (Matthew 22:37). Furthermore, the Apostle Paul wrote in the chapter of Romans that we suffer from a worship problem. Our hearts are oriented away from our Creator and toward created things, or idols, which leads to a darkening of our hearts, and a suppression of the truth, and a curving inwards of our love from God and neighbour to ourselves (Romans 1:19-27).

The biblical data on these ideas is vast, and was powerfully expressed in the anthropology of Augustine of Hippo on the will and the affections; a thought carried forward by the great thinkers of the Church. Listen to how Dr Ashley Hull, an expert on Thomas Cranmer, the English Protestant reformer, summarises his anthropology: "*What the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies*" (Hull 2002).

Sadly, for a long time in large pockets of the evangelical church, we have lost sight of this biblical anthropology. Our faith formation has been stunted by the cold rationalism of the Enlightenment, where we think all we need to do to get people to change their beliefs or moral direction is to give them clear theology and good reasons. Now theology and thinking are part of the problem, but it's not enough to just lead with arguments and ideas. Because we are primarily worshippers and lovers first, some theologians are leading a revival of a more embodied discipleship that takes this fallen anthropology seriously, employing liturgy and practices and disciplines and community in a bid to train our visceral elephants to respond differently in the first place (Smith 2016). Haidt's research drives home this need.

Which is also why we need to imbue our Christian persuasion with a tailored approach. If we want to reach people with the gospel, then we cannot simply line up apologetic arguments against secular arguments and see which barrage wins the intellectual duel. Because we possess what Haidt calls *motivated reasoning* we apply different metrics in

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 22:37.

evaluating evidence (Haidt 2012, 97-99). If we want something to be true, we ask the question: *can I believe it?* If we don't want something to be true, we ask the question: *must I believe it?* Depending on whether we *want* to accept something or not, we unconsciously change the bar for evidence. So we need to be aware that there are deeper forces, moral and spiritual, that play a significant role in a person hearing the gospel as good and true news.

Now, interestingly, this is where Jesus comes to the fore with an antidote. Across the interactions recorded in the four canonical gospels Jesus asks hundreds of piercing questions that force people to come face to face with their motivated reasoning. And visibly, from the text, it often has a kind of percussive effect, leaving a person disorientated but perhaps more open to consider what they believe from a new footing. But in addition to helping expose our motivated reasoning by well placed questions, let me share practically three elements we need to get right to engage in ethical Christian persuasion for our post-secular age: the *relevance, reasonableness, and accent* of the Christian story.

## 5. THE RELEVANCE OF THE CHRISTIAN STORY

First, the relevance of the Christian story.

Given that the secular story offers a way for people to make sense of life without reference to God, the biggest challenge we face is the apathy produced when secular Australians find God wholly irrelevant to everyday life (Starke 2017, 39). Moreover, the New Atheists of the previous decade have an enduring echo in the public sentiment towards religion as a whole. Although they added nothing to the atheist war-chest of arguments against God's existence, what the New Atheists successfully accomplished was a shift in ideological tactic. Rather than simply argue there were no good reasons to believe in God as did the classical (or old) atheists, the New Atheists argued that the existence of *belief in God* was a net loss to society, and that the crimes of the Church were the product of this defunct belief system itself and the intellectual behaviours it fosters. What this amounts to, when one considers the concept of motivated reasoners, is a malaise of negativity towards Christianity in which young generations have been formed, which means to try and launch with reasons why you should believe the gospel is to try and persuade people of a reality they conceive of as irrelevant and bad news.

Since humans are inherently storytelling creatures, the most urgent task of Christian persuasion is to retell the Christian story afresh in such a way that its goodness becomes evident to all as it speaks to our felt questions. Consider the greatest questions of our time. Freedom: what does it mean to be free? Identity: who are we really? Meaning: what makes life worth living? Satisfaction: how can I be truly happy? Hope: where do we look to fix what is wrong? Sexuality: how do I make sense of my desires? These are not sub-themes of the Christian story. They are central to the storyline from Genesis to Revelation. And because of the subtraction stories—the tales of de-conversion—are framed by the language of courage and growing up beyond fairy tales, a counter-narrative is not an optional extra.<sup>3</sup> Christians possess in the Scriptures a *better story* than our secular neighbours when it comes to answering life's ultimate questions in such a way that leads to human flourishing, so we must learn to tell it. For in speaking to people's questions through the lens of the Bible we get to tear down their false stereotypes, and in their place whet their appetite for the God who is there. To show that Christianity is a house you want to come home to, with a Heavenly Father

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 29.

to whom you can run to be embraced by grace. Good theology should always provoke the imagination to worship.

To commend Christ, rather than aim at evidence first, instead we should take aim at the imagination, and steal past what C.S. Lewis described as the watchful dragons of our motivated reasoning (Lewis 2000, 118). Where the secular story sets the heart and mind at war, the Christian story makes peace, shedding light on all the deep things about who we are as though the sun was dawning to light up the landscape of reality (Lewis 2013, 140).

Nowhere is this light more desperately needed than when it comes to the hard questions from which Christians tend to run from in the public sphere, or tend to speak only with a political voice rather than a pastoral and persuasive one. Jesus is *good news* for every aspect of human life. So when it comes to questions of gender identity, sex, and suffering, the Christian story carries good news that connects with best social science data we have.

All of this is why the 17th century philosopher and scientist, Blaise Pascal, stressed the need for such a shift in persuasive tactic in commanding Christianity: “We must make it loveable, to make good men hop it is true; finally, we must prove it is true” (Pascal 2003, 52).

Of course this assumes that we know *why* the gospel is good news; that we are familiar with our own Christian story. In terms of faith formation in Christian education, we have an urgent task to stress the centrality of the memorisation and rehearsing of our own story, especially amongst a biblically illiterate (although due to the advent podcasts and celebrity pastors a theologically committed) generation. This practice will embed young people in their own story, giving them the interpretive resources for making their way in the world as wise actors, as they learn to ask their hard questions not just of the story, but within the story. This seems to me to be indispensable to surviving the cross-pressure of our post-secular age as a cognitive minority (Harrison 2017, 72).

For years I have been working with Dr. David Benson on a 5 scene framework for understanding the Bible’s big story: *Created for Good, Damaged by Evil, Restored for Better, Sent Together to Heal, and Set Everything Right*.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this is a helpful curriculum tool to start with in developing within your students a sense of how the Bible makes sense, at different points in the story, of their everyday experience.

By leaning in to the relevance question, by showing that God is good and that Christianity is good news for every area of life, we will do a lot to dispel the horrendous caricatures of God and the gospel that keep people from wanting to believe, and open them up to genuinely investigate: *Can I believe this?*

So we need to lead with the relevance of the Christian story.

## 6. THE REASONABLENESS OF THE CHRISTIAN STORY

Second, the reasonableness of the Christian story.

Social media and internet forums are inundated with the false impression that Christianity is more hoax than history. That to believe in God is akin to believing in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. You may want it to be true, but it’s just a psychological crutch for the weak. Nothing more than a delusion. The famed atheist intellectual, Bertrand Russell, was once asked in an interview, hypothetically, what would you say to God if it turns out He does exist and you stand before Him on judgment day? Russell’s answer was quintessentially British: “*Sir, why did you not give me better evidence?*” (Russell 1974, 26).

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<sup>4</sup> <http://bit.ly/BibleBigStory>

As something of a counter-perspective to Russell half a century later, Os Guinness declares that we “stand at the dawn of the grand age of apologetics” (Guinness 2015, 15). Why? Because, academically speaking, never in history has the case for the existence of God and the truth of the Christian story been stronger than it stands right now.

Take Russell’s own field with the hallowed halls of philosophers. A little over a century ago Nietzsche announced that God is dead in philosophy. Secular universities around the world were filled with naturalistic philosophers, and the case for God was thought to be abandoned. But in a relatively recent paper, the award winning atheist philosopher, Quentin Smith, bemoans the revolution in analytic philosophy sparked by Christians like Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne (Plantinga 2019; Swinburne 2010). Since the late 1960’s he traces the explosion of theistic philosophers in secular philosophy departments around the world, and admits their rigour of argumentation, as they revive old arguments and develop new ones, is the reason the case for God is on the rise. Smith concludes that God is not dead in academia, but is alive and well in the academic stronghold of philosophy (Smith 2001).

Or take the realm of scientific discovery. A century ago it was popularly believed that our universe was eternal, existing in a sort of steady state model. Bertrand Russell considered this simply as a brute fact (Russell 1964). One reason why a cosmic beginning was so strongly resisted by secular intellectuals like the British astrophysicist Fred Hoyle was because to admit that the universe had an absolute beginning allowed a divine foot in the door (Curtis 2012). It sounds too much like the claim of the ancient Hebrews, who went against every other major religious and cosmological account, when they wrote, “In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth” (Genesis 1:1). But subsequent predictions, models and discoveries, from Einstein to Lemaitre to Hubble, eventually led to a scientific revolution around the middle of the last century. A new consensus began to emerge, arguing that our universe—time, space, matter, and energy—came into existence out of nothing at a finite point in the past. And this effect of the virgin birth of our universe, this contingency, requires an explanation (Craig 2008, 96-156). So too did the subsequent discovery of the highly improbable and exquisite fine-tuning of the original conditions of our universe to allow for intelligent life (Barnes 2008; Craig 2008, 157-204). This data is what leads many agnostic and atheistic scientists to at least tip the hat and admit that the universe “appears” designed, or that our existence may even be a complex simulation (Moskowitz 2016). That we really are in the matrix, so to speak.

Or take what we know of our own nature through the social sciences. Meta studies of the past few decades of research shows a strong correlation between intrinsic religiosity (what we might call religious devotion) and the various markers that measure wellbeing, especially in places where Christianity is culturally dominant (Spencer 2016). In discussing this data on Sam Harris’ podcast, the atheist economist, philosopher, and physicist, Robin Hanson, said, “*Religious people are just better off on pretty much all our standard metrics. They live longer, they earn more, their marriages stay longer, they have less crime. They’re healthier. Everything goes better for religious people on average. That’s a real puzzle if you think they’re just all making a big mistake*” (Hanson 2018). The Christian story, it seems, along with Christian community and disciplines, just fit the contours of our soulishness in a way that leads to human flourishing. Given the climate for seeing Christianity through a negative social lens, then, and the particularly weightiness of the social sciences in people’s

decision making, case making from the social sciences in general has never been of higher importance to the task of Christian persuasion (Harrison 2017, 173).

Or take, finally, the gospels in the New Testament. A century ago the German school of liberal theology owned the New Testament field, and it was popularly believed that the gospel sources were largely legendary material, and not reliable. That thesis is now significantly weaker, due to a mountain of new data from the relevant fields supporting the eyewitness status of much of the testimony on the gospels (Baukham 2006; McGrew 2017; Williams 2018). The people who told these stories had to have been there to know the fleshy details that permeate the accounts. And these witnesses appear to be of sound mind and honest character, and had a lot to lose by every meaningful measure if they falsely reported what they saw. Their willingness to suffer for their testimony, with no historical hint of anyone recanting, at the very least substantiates their genuine belief about what they saw. And the alternative hypotheses to explain things like the resurrection of Jesus just can't account for all of the reliably established historical facts (Licona 2010; Wright 2003).

Now these observations do not amount to proofs. None of the Christian evidences are of a kind that *prove* God's existence undeniably to every observer. God's chosen hiddenness, and our human finitude and fallenness, means that Christians should be the first to foster intellectual humility, and be somewhat comfortable with the epistemic fog of uncertainty. But what these evidences do achieve is to serve as serious clues, or pointers, that invite someone beyond mere nature and open them up to believe in something beyond (McGrath 2012, 93). The goal of Christian persuasion here is not to argue someone into belief, but to show the intellectual adequacy of the Christian story to explain all the available evidence, and the inadequacy of the secular alternatives to do the same (Packer 1958, 34).

Secular cartographers essentially annex our deepest intuitions and experiences (Smith 2014, 2), which means the more as educators we can help students reflect on them, the more we create space for God's solicitations. Because this is God's world, and reality is on our side, Christian educators should invite and create space for students' legitimate questions and doubts about the crazy things in the Christian story (Kimball 2016). We should even steel-man their objections, and name Christianity's fiercest opponents and the best arguments against what we believe. Why? Because in the face of intellectual doubts, the biblical prescription is investigation of the sources. Faith isn't built on this air but facts. And so to foster a generation of genuine truth seekers is to do the work, albeit subversively, of Christian discipleship, as those on the side of truth ultimately listen to Jesus (John 18:37).

So we need to follow *relevance* with the *reasonableness* of the Christian story.

## **7. THE ACCENT OF THE CHRISTIAN STORY**

Third, and finally, Christian persuasion has to be done with the distinct accent of the Christian story. Since the medium is the message, there should be a beautiful marriage and harmony between the gospel and the one who bears it. Pragmatically, this is especially needed in Australia since McCrindle's research highlighted how Christian behaviour was the biggest barrier keeping Australians from seriously investigating Christianity (McCrindle 2018). How sad when one reflects upon how Jesus' intention would be that our love, and our Christian ethos of community and hospitality, would be the very thing that draws people towards Christ (John 13:35). Various lines of research have shown how when it comes to deciding what to believe, plausibility structures function communally (Chan 2018, 41-44). If you become part of a community that you aspire to be like, their beliefs are far more

believable. And if some of the greatest symptoms of the secular wanderings are psycho-social in nature, what would it mean for secular refugees to find refuge in Christian community, where they can be loved through their depression, helped to overcome sources of anxiety, and set in a web of rich relationships to mitigate their loneliness? If tribalistic tendencies are tearing down our social and political discourse, what would it mean for people of the cross to model intellectual humility and conversation? It seems Christian institutions are uniquely placed with the social and spiritual resources endowed by God to meet the need of our cultural moment, if we live out in our educational spaces the kind of “one-another-ing” that the New Testament consistently commands.<sup>5</sup>

But beyond utility, the apostolic era treated tone as theological. Peter says we are to persuade with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15). Paul says that the right recipe for any answer is for it to be seasoned with the distinctively Christian flavour: *grace* (Colossians 4:6). How we speak is as much a reflection of our gospel as what we say, so if we are to frame God right in our fractured world, Christian truth must always be spoken with a Christian accent.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Confidence in the secular story’s ability to deliver a promised land is waning. The inheritance of this prodigal culture, the souliness of who we are, is ebbing away. And seculars are starting to grumble at an entirely immanent frame. The universities and colleges of our nation have been the stronghold of secularism, and a staging ground for the erosion of Christian faith and with it, the annexing of what it means to be human. But all of that can change. All of that must change. And we have the opportunity to map out a new future.

The question for our time is whether the Church and Christian institutions in Australia will be warmed again with logic on fire, and whether all Christians, and especially educators, will take up the task of Christian persuasion in our post-secular age: to demonstrate the relevance, reasonableness, and accent of the Christian story. On the outcome of that question, much depends.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. John 13:35; Romans 12:10, 16; 14:13; 15:5, 7, 14; Galatians 5:13; Ephesians 4:2, 32; 5:19, 21; Colossians 3:13, 16; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; 4:18; 5:11, 15; Hebrews 3:13; 10:24-25; James 5:16; 1 Peter 1:22; 4:8-10; 5:5, 14; 1 John 1:7; 3:11, 23; 4:7; 2 John 1:5.

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