



Practicing Faith with Adolescents: Searching for Grace in the Stuffness of the Secular

A young man is riding a bus in New Orleans. He is the narrator of Walker Percy's novel *The Moviegoer*. His attention is drawn to an attractive young woman on the bus. He thinks: "Am I mistaken or does the corner of her mouth tuck in ever so slightly and the petal of her lower lip curl out ever so richly? She is smiling—at me!" He imagines them meeting, then fantasizes a romantic encounter. But he knows that nothing could come of his fantasies.

Then it is that the idea of the search occurs to me. I become absorbed and for a minute or so forget about the girl. What is the nature of the search? you ask.

Really it is very simple, at least for a fellow like me; so simple that it is easily overlooked.

The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. This morning, for example, I felt as if I had come to myself on a strange island. And what does such a cast-away do?

Why, he pokes around the neighborhood and he doesn't miss a trick.

To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.¹

In this lecture I offer some suggestions for the search, suggestions that will take us into an examination of the secularity in which we conduct the search, the secularity that stands as a barrier to finding God's grace. Then I want to consider some avenues to finding God's grace, not apart from, but from within, the stuffness of that

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secularity.

I have been teaching a course on religion and film at the Claremont School of Theology since 1965. Last week I was back in Claremont for my first film class of the new millennium. When I started teaching in 1965, we used 16mm film; today we use videos displayed on a thirty-two-inch screen. My first students were all male and, with occasional exceptions, all white. Last week, my class had only one white student, a woman who is pastor of a congregation in Seattle that is one-third Tonganese. Others in the class included an African American woman, a Korean American man, a Hispanic woman, and a Tonganese man.

One morning we viewed a film that I would never, on my own, show to a class or a church audience: *The Green Pastures*, written and directed by Marc Connelly. The film is wise and evocative, but it is terribly politically incorrect for today's audiences. I received permission to use the film, however, from the African American student, who had a copy and who wanted us to see it because she thought we should have a cinematic experience from within the African American experience. She made sure we were aware that the film, by today's politically correct standards, was very incorrect. Its language and style reflect a 1933 culture, with an all-African American cast speaking in the idiom of a Deep South dialect no longer used or permitted in mixed company.

She told us that since we had spent several days talking about the importance of looking beneath the surface of a film into the wisdom and vision of the work, she figured we were ready to receive the experience of *The Green Pastures*, which features an African American man as the Lord, who comes to earth to check up on his creation. What he discovered was that his creation had been completely taken over by a secular worldview that had no place for him. The Lord was so disturbed that he was ready to wipe out the entire planet, until he met a man named Noah and decided, instead, to start over with Noah's family, who then rode out the forty days and forty nights of rain and flood on an ark and emerged as a new people. God was starting over. This started me thinking about a question that involves our search.

What if the Lord made another return visit to this planet at the beginning of the new millennium? I fear he would find Western civilization so completely secular that we would need to worry about another flood. How secular are we? Recall the recent celebration of the arrival of the new millennium. For almost two days, from the first moment of midnight in the western Pacific until the final viewing of the sun in the last time zone, also in the Pacific, we saw joyous celebrations in each city and country, and, since the Y2K bug didn't get us, we saw an absence of fear. But what we were allowed to see by the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) programming was a secular celebration.

The Tonganese student in my Claremont class reminded us that his home island

of Tonga was the first to greet the midnight hour of the new millennium. At first there was a silent prayer, then the large group gathered together by the island's king burst into song, singing "The Hallelujah Chorus" from Handel's *Messiah* a cappella. Paula, my student, said that except for the Pope's prayer, the rest of the worldwide celebration was secular. I have no doubt that various religions around the world had their sacred moments, but PBS did not bother to show us.

This is the challenge we face as we seek to minister to the youth in our care. They live in an environment so secular that our efforts to address religious concerns are as difficult as the efforts of a salmon racing upstream to get home. My student from Tonga reports that the first immigrants from Tonga began to arrive in large numbers on our West Coast in the mid-1960s. They represent one of many immigrant groups who have left behind a religious culture to enter a secular culture. As a result, his congregation has the usual first- and second-generation conflict: parents are still firmly rooted in the traditional Wesleyan Methodist faith of their islands while the children are surrounded by an American culture so secular that in some places it is illegal to utter the word "God" in a public school classroom.

The challenge we face as we minister to the youth in our care is that all we do is now, and will continue to be, carried out in a secular society, with what David Tracy has called "the sacred reservation" shoved out of sight, off in the corner, attended to only on ceremonial occasions. All of the dominant institutions of our society—media, education, business, entertainment, politics, government, and, I must add, the institutional church—operate out of a secular mindset. We "think" secular. Our values, our goals, and our ideals are rooted in what Houston Smith has termed the "modern western mindset."

Anglican bishop Lesslie Newbigin blames the Enlightenment for our dependence on rational, measurable truth as the sole legitimate way of viewing the world. As he puts it:

As heirs of the Enlightenment and representatives of the "modern scientific worldview," our normal procedure is to list a series of "problems" based on a scientific analysis of the situation. We normally proceed on the assumption that there must in principle be a solution which proper research can identify and proper techniques can deliver.²

In such a culture we develop an approach that views reality through what Paul Tillich once labeled "the secular mind." I came across Tillich's phrase while reading Robert Coles's recent book by that title. Coles, a research psychiatrist and a professor of social ethics at Harvard University, is better known to the general public for his books on children and how they survive under difficult circumstances. *The Secular Mind* addresses a theme that Coles says first began to develop when he was a resi-

dent in child psychiatry at Children's Hospital in Boston. He enrolled in a course at Harvard taught by Paul Tillich: "I still remember the shift in my head as I left the hospital (where the emphasis, even in psychiatry, was on doing, on trying to accomplish a specific task) for quite another world, across the Charles River, where we were, as Tillich kept reminding us, 'free to let our minds wander,' take us where we wanted to go with no set limits."³

The shift in Coles's head involved his recognition that "the secular mind" represents the way we all relate to the world most of the time and the way most people relate to the world all of the time. When the young Coles asked his professor to define the term, he wrote down Tillich's response:

The distinction he [made was] between Man [and woman] the thinking materialist and Man [and woman] the anxiously aspiring creature who bows his [or her] head and prays, and who "looks outside himself [or herself] to Another, to God," for explanations, understanding, guidance.

For Tillich...a secular person was one who looked within himself or herself...for whatever comprehension of the world is to be found, whereas the sacred mind...looked toward the beyond, toward that "Another," that "God" so often mentioned in our daily lives, that "God" who ironically...has become such a part of our secular life—the pietistic reflex...as a purveyor of calm, or reassurance, of self-satisfaction. Here is Tillich word for word on that score: "Church attendance for us can become a weekly social rite, a boost to our morale." Is that the secular mind in operation? I ventured to inquire. A smile from the professor: "Yes, you have it, there."⁴

Coles adds: "I can still visualize that moment—can hear his terse but original way of responding, of using colloquial English, of acknowledging an irony: religious practice as a motion of sorts in the course of ordinary living, as one more exercise of the secular mind."⁵

Coles reminds us that secular means the "things of a particular time." And what do we think of when we contemplate "things of a particular time"? We are thinking specificity, facticity, "thingness," as opposed to unlimited "isness" and larger-than-human-life transcendence.

We are not a culture that looks with favor on the imagination, the experience in which we make ourselves vulnerable to transcendence. Not long ago I was browsing through my local library when I found a reprint of a 1949 book of essays by poet Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*. In her book Rukeyser describes why poetry is so important for contemporary culture. She writes that our culture is afraid of poetry because poetry demands that we see things more deeply than we are accustomed to

seeing them. She puts it this way: "A poem does invite, it does require. What does it invite? A poem invites you to feel. More than that; it invites you to respond. And better than that, a poem invites a total response."⁶

What happens to us, as individuals and as a community, when we fail to accept that invitation? We chase off after shallow sensation and mindless pursuits when we should be devoting our energies to creative and sustaining activities. Here is how Rukeyser, writing in the mid-1940s, describes what happens to us when we choose the mindless over the mindful:

We feel the penalties. We talk about these penalties in terms of mass and individual conflict; some call the process in which we find ourselves...the death of culture; some call it the breakdown of morality, the breakdown of communication. We are cut off from large areas in ourselves, and we make the specialized skills and expressions our goals. We suffer from this, since the human process is only partly accomplished. We think in terms of property, weapons, secrets; we exalt the means. Less and less do our values have obligating power; less and less do we imagine ourselves and believe ourselves. We make a criterion of adjustment, which glorifies the status quo and denies the dynamic character of our lives, denies time, possibility, and the human spirit.⁷

Can we find a methodology that can shift the thinking of those to whom we minister from the purely rational to the poetic? Is there a way we can travel in our search that will help us break out of the bondage of the secular mind? I think so, and I suggest we begin with the movies.

Over the years, I have used a methodology for viewing motion pictures that I wrote about in a book titled *Church and Cinema*. The methodology is indebted to the work of Susanna Langer, a philosopher of art, who suggests two levels of viewing symbolic forms. Langer says that in viewing a symbol we receive the symbol on two levels. One is the discursive level, from which we obtain factual information, data accessible to us because we are able to see and hear what is provided for us on screen, or on canvas, or through whatever medium is before us. The discursive level is important, for it is the material that tells us what we are seeing on the immediate surface or in the initial experience.

Beyond the discursive, Langer suggests, lies the presentational, that dimension of a symbol that has its own power to formulate meaning and to project that meaning into the cognition and sensibility of a viewer. On this second level, we adhere to that which is between the facts. We can describe the discursive level as that which tells us what a film is "about," while the presentational level gives us what a film "is." So our concern becomes "aboutness" and "isness," two terms that don't appear in my com-

puter spell-checker but that convey the points I want to consider.

The Cider House Rules has been described as a caring, loving, old-fashioned movie. And yet its story, set in 1943, deals with illegal abortions in a Maine hospital and orphanage, with death, with revenge, and with many disappointed orphans who too soon grow too old to be adopted. How can such material evoke such tender affection from the viewer? The answer is found in the film's source material, John Irving's 1985 novel, from which Irving wrote the screenplay for director Lasse Hallstrom's film. Irving's level of "isness" is profoundly caring and loving as he deals with the "aboutness" of difficult and bleak topics.

The book and the film begin at St. Cloud's, the orphanage and hospital to which women came in pre-Roe v. Wade days either to leave behind an orphan or to have an abortion, their choice. One of the orphans, Homer Wells, grows up fast as a would-be doctor, still unsure of how he feels about the morality of abortion.

The Cider House Rules is a film with images and moments that resonate with our religious sensibility. There is a prodigal son motif, and a powerful moment that calls for responsibility and obligation to be the driving forces in a person's life. If we look only at the discursive level of a film like this, we will see a factual story about abortion, disappointment in romance, and compromises. But if we are attentive to the presentational level of the film, we can celebrate a meeting of intimacies (ours and the author's), a sharing of visions, and a connection that allows us to say "yes" to the presence of a transcendent reality that greets us and delivers us, if ever so briefly, from the grip of secularity.

Another recent film is even more specific in its religious imagery, though few secular critics have acknowledged the specificity of this imagery. *Bringing Out the Dead*, director Martin Scorsese's frenetic examination of three days in the life of a paramedic, is my overwhelming choice for the best film of 1999. Most critics have compared this picture to *Taxi Driver*, Scorsese's earlier venture into the mean streets of New York City, but a better comparison is to *The Last Temptation of Christ*, in which another healer and savior begs to be relieved of an impossible assignment thrust upon him by a demanding supervisor. *Bringing Out the Dead* is written by Paul Schrader, Calvin College's contribution to Hollywood and Scorsese's most valued creative companion, and directed by Scorsese, a Catholic.

You don't have to be religious to appreciate the power of this picture, but it surely helps, especially if you are willing to look more deeply into the story of paramedic Frank Pierce's three nights on ambulance duty with three different partners, each of whom has found a unique way to avoid the pain of failure: an obsession with food, with religion, or with violence. Pierce feels he is a failure; too many people are dying on his watch. He is reminded each night of his failures by the same face of a young girl who died under his care. Pierce, like Jesus in *The Last Temptation*, begs to

be fired from his assignment, but his supervisor can only promise maybe to fire him tomorrow, but not tonight, because "I need you out there."

The film's final image is a classic artistic expression of religious piety: Nicholas Cage as the suffering servant paramedic, nestled in the bosom of a woman whose name is Mary. There are other signs of a religious sensibility in the film, as when Pierce says: "I came to realize that my work was less about saving lives than about bearing witness."

David Lynch's first-ever G-rated film, *The Straight Story*, a joyous celebration of life for all ages, is a film that, when described on the discursive level, doesn't sound like something you would rush out to see. How does this sound to you: "a movie about a man who drives a lawn mower tractor across the state of Iowa to visit his dying brother?" But *The Straight Story* is a lyrical portrait of a seventy-three-year-old man who becomes a force for good to everyone he encounters on his impossible trip, from a teenage runaway to a World War II veteran who talks about his long-suppressed war experiences. No film in recent memory equals this one in its ability to say "yes" to life.

A recurring question in *The Cider House Rules* is asked by Mr. Rose: "What business are you in?" The answer he is looking for is "the apple business," and the implication is that it is time you put your full energy into the apple business. Let me ask all of us: What business are we in? Kathleen Norris, in her book *Amazing Grace*, provides an answer when she reminds us that one translation for the word salvation from the original Hebrew evokes the image of "entering a larger space." She suggests that salvation, that turn in life, is the moment in our search when we find ourselves in a larger space.

What business are we in? We are in the salvation business, neither to scold nor to judge, but to invite all we serve into that larger space where God will find us with his redemptive word of grace. ▼▲

NOTES

1. Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York: Random House, 1961), p. 13.
2. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches*, The Risk Book Series, World Council of Churches (Geneva: 1983), p. 18.
3. Robert Coles, *The Secular Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 3.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
6. Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry* (Williamsburg, MA: Paris Press, 1996), p. 11.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 43.