



GOSPEL
SOCIETY
& CULTURE

Contending for Christ in an Ocean of Options

by Kamal Weerakoon

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A watershed moment for the West

We are living through interestingly contradictory times. On the one hand, secular law is becoming more and more prejudiced against Christian morality (and traditional, religiously-based morality more broadly). Over the last few years, NSW laws on euthanasia (voluntary assisted dying, VAD, which is better termed physician assisted suicide, PAS),^[1] 'conversion therapy',^[2] and abortion^[3] have made Christians feel increasingly censored, marginalised, and restricted. Even if we don't directly interact with these laws and the matters they deal with, they have had a culture-shaping effect. 'Western' culture feels increasingly hostile towards, intolerant of, and prejudiced against, Christianity. We have increasingly had to 'apologise' for existing – not in the sense of saying sorry, but in the sense of having to mount an apologia, a defence, of our right to believe traditional Christian doctrine and behave in traditionally Christian ways.^[4]

Through significant political activism, these NSW laws are not as draconian as they could have been. Euthanasia is much more closely regulated in NSW than other jurisdictions. The initial version of the NSW abortion bill had provisions to override healthcare workers' conscientious objection and thereby force all healthcare workers to participate in abortion on demand.

Those provisions were rejected in the final form of the bill. And the NSW 'conversion therapy' act respects religious activities much more than the equivalent legislation in Victoria. But that only goes to prove our point. Christians have had to make a public stand to protect our ability to believe and behave as Christian individuals, and to protect the ability of the institutions we create, e.g. Christian schools and hospitals, to operate according to Christian principles. And not all activism has been successful.

The ACT government compulsorily acquired the Catholic Calvary Hospital, now renamed North Canberra Hospital, because Calvary insisted on operating according to traditional Catholic morality which excludes abortions and euthanasia.

But at the same time as official pressure seems to be ramping up, popular culture seems to be heading in precisely the opposite direction. Western culture is going through a 'vibe shift' against aggressive atheism.^[5] Atheism has ceased to be aggressively anti-theistic and become more like a sceptical agnosticism. Significant public atheists like Tom Holland,^[6] Jordan Peterson,^[7] and even Richard Dawkins,^[8] still don't actually believe that the supernatural realm really exists, but have publicly expressed renewed appreciation for



religion's ability to form individual morality and thereby create social cohesion. Some significant public atheists, like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, her husband, award-winning historian Niall Ferguson,^[9] and Wikipedia co-founder Larry Sanger,^[10] have publicly professed the Christian faith. Online influencer Joe Rogan interviewed Christian apologist Wes Huff for three hours, broadcasting Christianity to his 19.3 million YouTube subscribers.^[11] The UK Bible Society's report into the 'quiet revival' demonstrates, through a "large, robust and nationally representative population study that has tracked the religious attitudes and behaviours of England and Wales since 2018," that "the Church is in a period of rapid growth, driven by young adults and in particular young men."^[12]

But then again, when we look in more detail at what people actually believe, many of these high-profile converts don't (yet?) wholeheartedly hold to the historic, orthodox, supernatural Christian faith.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali seems to be trying to protect the 'Western' values which first propelled her out of Islam and into atheism. A significant reason she "call[s] [herself] a Christian now" is because "Western civilisation is under threat." She sees Western civilisation to be "an elaborate set of ideas and institutions designed to safeguard human life, freedom and dignity" which "find their roots in Christianity."^[13] And Niall Ferguson does not "think that one can know that with certainty" whether Jesus rose from the dead or not. "But," he says, "I think the teaching about how one should live, and the relationships one should have with one's fellow human beings, is so powerful that I prefer to live as if it's true."^[14] So the basic structure of 'Christian' Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Niall Ferguson's beliefs are still very similar to that of the (newly open-minded) 'atheists' Tom Holland, Jordan Peterson, and Richard Dawkins.

The difference between the two groups seems to be one of degree. Hirsi Ali and Ferguson are probably more genuinely open to the supernatural than the three atheists, but the three atheists respect religion rather than holding it in contempt.

The situation is similar here in Australia. The data about the precipitous recent decline in official census Christian self-identification has become common knowledge. A recent McCrindle report at first glance seems to agree with that trend. Using a technique called cohort analysis, which permits them to identify long-term trends within the census data, McCrindle identified that young people were the most likely to give up being Christian: between 2011-2021, 8% of people between ages 0-24 went from Christian to no religion.^[15] Older people were moving the other direction: between 2011-2021, 11% of people between aged over 55 went from no religion to identifying as Christian. However, the data also showed that the young people are much more likely to actually go to church than older people – 68% of Gen Z had attended or visited a church at least monthly vs. only 26% of boomers.^[16] Young people are also more open to 'spiritual' conversations: 51% vs. 32%.^[17]



Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Niall Ferguson

So who's actually more open to God and the supernatural? Young people who may not call themselves 'Christian'? Or older people who may call themselves 'Christian' but don't actually go to church and may therefore be using the term in a moralistic way to protest what they see to be a decline in social, civic virtue? As the (probable) inventor of the term 'vibe shift' said, "[w]e are in a strange historical moment. The old world, known as Christendom, is dead. We do not yet know what will come next, but it will be radically different."^[18]

The rise and fall of Western Christendom

The kind of anti-Christian legal and cultural pressure we reviewed above is relatively new to Australia. Australia's European settlement occurred under conditions of 'Christendom,' where Christianity was socially accepted as the 'normal' religion. Therefore, even people who did not call themselves Christians could not avoid their personal values of truth, goodness, and beauty, and their ethics – their sense of right and wrong – being heavily influenced by Christianity.

European settlers to Australia brought hundreds of years of Christian culture with them. Early Christianity, from the evidence of the New Testament, was misunderstood, hated and persecuted. But when the Roman Emperor Constantine (reigned 306–337) became a Christian,



Emperor Constantine

he issued the Edict of Milan in 313, making Christianity a recognised religion. This didn't (yet) grant Christianity any particular privileges. But it did stop the persecution, and gave Christianity a degree of social respectability. Christianity's special status came when the Imperial Triumvirate of Theodosius I, Gratian, and Valentinian II issued the Edict of Thessalonica in 380. This imperial decree made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire – i.e., of Europe.

This didn't mean that everyone in Europe became a Christian. It did mean that Christianity, and Christian values, became socially 'normal.' This cultural Christianity has been termed 'Christendom.' When European settlers arrived in Australia, they brought 1400 years of Christian social normality with them. Unsurprisingly, they created a country where Christian values were taken for granted. Not everyone believed that Jesus is God, that he died for their sins, and rose again. But, generally, people believed that it was good to "do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matt 7:12); that marriage was between one man and one woman; that telling the truth is good, and lying bad; and, if a God existed, he (the masculine pronoun is deliberate) would be something like the Biblical God. Believers gathered in church buildings (not mosques or temples), wearing their 'Sunday best' (not hijabs, or the orange robes of Buddhism).

But notice: while Christendom is informed by Christianity, it's not the same as Christianity. It's merely secular culture. In itself, it's from the world, not from God. Living by Christian morality doesn't make you Christian; it just makes you morally conservative. Christians are people who have accepted that they are themselves sinners, under God's condemnation. And because of that they put

their trust in the Jesus who came to call, not the righteous, but sinners (Matt 9:13; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:32).

Christendom began to crumble in the second half of the 20th century. The 20th century saw the 'Christian' West tear itself apart in three wars – World War I, World War II, and the Cold War. Sixteen hundred years of 'Christian' morality seemed to have culminated in the mass slaughter of God's historical people, the Jews, and the threat of global nuclear holocaust. In the West, Christendom's home, 'Christian' cultural morality no longer had credibility. People started searching for new things to believe and new ways to shape their lives.

The latter half of the 20th century also saw global 'decolonisation.' In the 16th and 17th centuries, European nations explored the world and built vast international empires. England controlled India (which at the time included today's nations of Pakistan and Bangladesh) and Sri Lanka; the Dutch ruled what is now Indonesia (the 'Dutch East Indies'); the French controlled what is now Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam ('French Indo-China'); the Spanish took control of South and Central America; and various European powers claimed various portions of Africa.

After WWII, these colonies steadily threw off European rule and reasserted their national independence. This independent nationalism was often accompanied by a renewal of the traditional religions out of which the 'Western' Christian missionaries had sought to convert the 'natives.' Christianity was associated with imperial oppression and traditional religion was associated with ethnic identity and nationalism, so the collapse of Western imperialism brought about a surge of religious nationalism. For example, India's currently ruling Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) holds to a Hindu nationalist ideology known as 'Hindutva,' which considers both Christianity and Islam as alien, foreign, imperial ideologies which threaten Indian (i.e. Hindu) identity. Under the BJP, discrimination against Christians and Muslims has steadily increased.^[19]

The relative wealth and comfort which followed the end of the Cold War contributed to this Western cultural prejudice against religion in general and Christianity in particular. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and collapse of the Soviet Union during 1990-91 led to a sense of universal wealth, comfort, and safety for the West. Even the events of the first and second Gulf Wars were experienced from a distance, and Western forces secured easy victories in both. Under these conditions, the divine felt



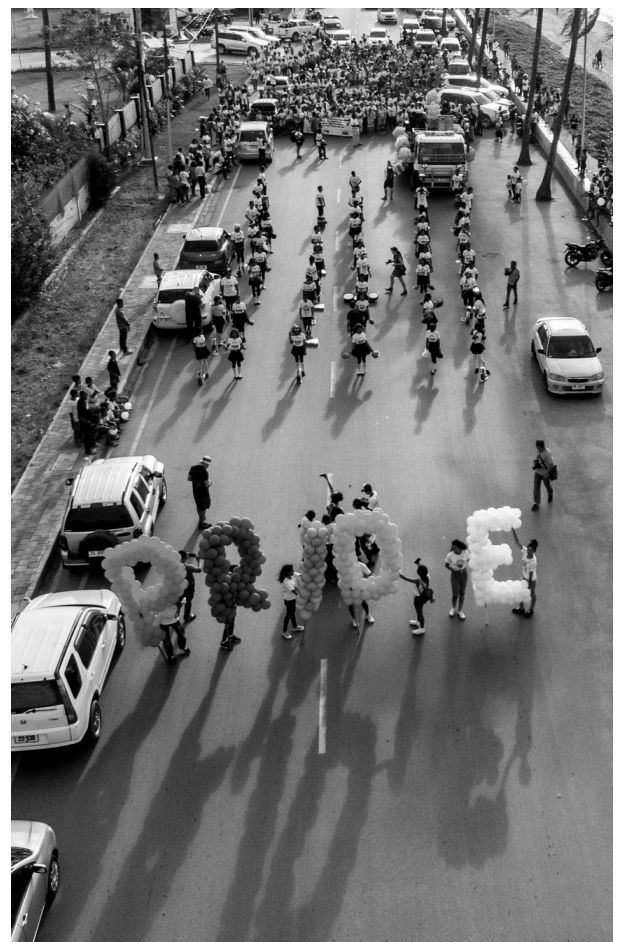
unnecessary. This world felt adequate for a full, happy, and meaningful life. This was the beginning of a thoroughgoing secularism in which people don't even think about God, religion, or the supernatural in general. Most contemporary Westerners are more atheist in practice than profession. If asked, they may say they believe in some higher spiritual power etc. But that supernatural power is in practice irrelevant to them. It exerts no discernible authority over their lives.^[20]

The 9/11 world trade centre attacks and ensuing 'global war on terror' started to make religion look not just irrelevant but 'dangerous.' While the perpetrators came from a very narrow, aggressively militant version of Islam, the whole episode gave credibility to the atheist mantra that 'religion causes wars.' This was the context for the popularity of the new atheists: Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens. Harris' bestselling book *The End of Faith* was explicitly motivated by 9/11.^[21] Dawkins' *God Delusion* was on the bestseller list for almost a whole year.^[22] This anti-theistic cultural milieu permitted *The Davinci Code*,^[23] a fictional novel by a previously little-known author which made fictional statements about Christianity, to sound more plausible than, for example, well-researched apologetical works by Oxford Christian scholar Alister McGrath,^[24] and Christopher Hitchens' brother Peter's autobiography.^[25]

The final element of this multipronged assault upon Christendom's moral hegemony (which, as noted before, is not the same as authentic, Biblical Christianity) was the increasingly aggressive assertion of sexual liberty, which culminated in the transgender movement.

Societies have throughout history regulated

sexuality in ways which agree with the binary, dimorphic, and sexually complementary nature of human sexuality. You don't need the modern scientific method to know that men and women possess different sexual organs; that those organs, on their own or with people of the same sex, may create pleasure but do not produce children; but when they operate together through heterosexual activity, they produce both pleasure and procreate children who are biologically related to their parents. Different societies in different places throughout the ages regulated heterosexuality in different ways. The formal institution of 'marriage' has been defined differently throughout history and in different cultures. And people were not always faithful to their marriage partners – the formal institution may have been broken more often than it was honoured. Nevertheless, until the sexual revolution of the 1960s, it was generally accepted that sexuality needed to be controlled so that sexual energy would be socially constructive instead of destructive.



The sexual revolution, as it developed, systematically reversed this assumption. Propelled by popularised versions of Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, and Foucault,^[26] and facilitated by contraception and treatments for sexual transmissible infections (STIs), the concept that sexuality possesses an inherent order has steadily been denigrated, and it has been increasingly assumed that sexuality's main purpose is self-gratification. During the last few decades it gained momentum by building on secularism's indifference towards the divine and concomitant expectation that the good, full life can be possessed entirely in this world. Everyone agrees that sex is pleasurable fulfilling. Secularism made the relatively small but culturally and morally significant extension from you can find sexual fulfilment in this world to you must find sexual fulfilment in this world. Sexual self-gratification became a matter of social justice.^[27] There has therefore been a rise in the social expectation of boundless liberty wherein to experiment, explore, and 'discover' one's sexuality – hence the social trajectory from at-fault divorce (which required proof of some kind of abuse or infidelity) to no-fault divorce to a decline in marriage and increase in informal cohabitation. That assumption of



boundless sexual freedom underlies the normalisation of same-sex marriage. And the same self-focused logic, applied beyond sexual activity to the binary sexed nature of our bodies, underpins transgender.^[28] Under these cultural conditions, anyone who reasserts the traditional model – that sex contains a natural order, which is expressed in our natural bodies – sounds like an arrogant, ignorant bully who is trying to choke someone – who is stifling their ability to live.

Through these combined social forces, Christendom, which had existed for some 1600 years, appeared to crumble almost overnight. In one generation, Christianity's social status became exactly reversed: not merely 'from hero to zero', but from 'hero' to 'villain'!^[29] In the past, everyone in the 'West' assumed that a decent, morally upright person was a Christian – or at least lived by Christian values. Suddenly it felt like everyone thought Christians were wicked. Christianity had gone from apparently being the dominant world religion to being the one religion which it seemed no-one, anywhere in the world, took seriously.

Migration, multiculturalism, religious plurality and tolerance

This collapse of Christendom happened at the same time as increased migration, social policies associated with multiculturalism, and consequent rise in religious plurality. In Australia, Christianity is no longer the 'normal,' socially privileged religion. Other religions are accepted as being at least as valid as Christianity. In fact, in response to its perceived prior social dominance, Christianity may sometimes be actively socially marginalised in order to 'make room' for these new religions. Most of us experience that religious diversity daily. We see Muslim women wearing their head coverings in

public. Hindu and Buddhist temples are being built in various parts of our cities. Some people from India walk around with a very prominent red dot on their forehead. It's a Hindu religious marker, called the bindi when it's worn by a woman or a tilak when it's worn by a man.

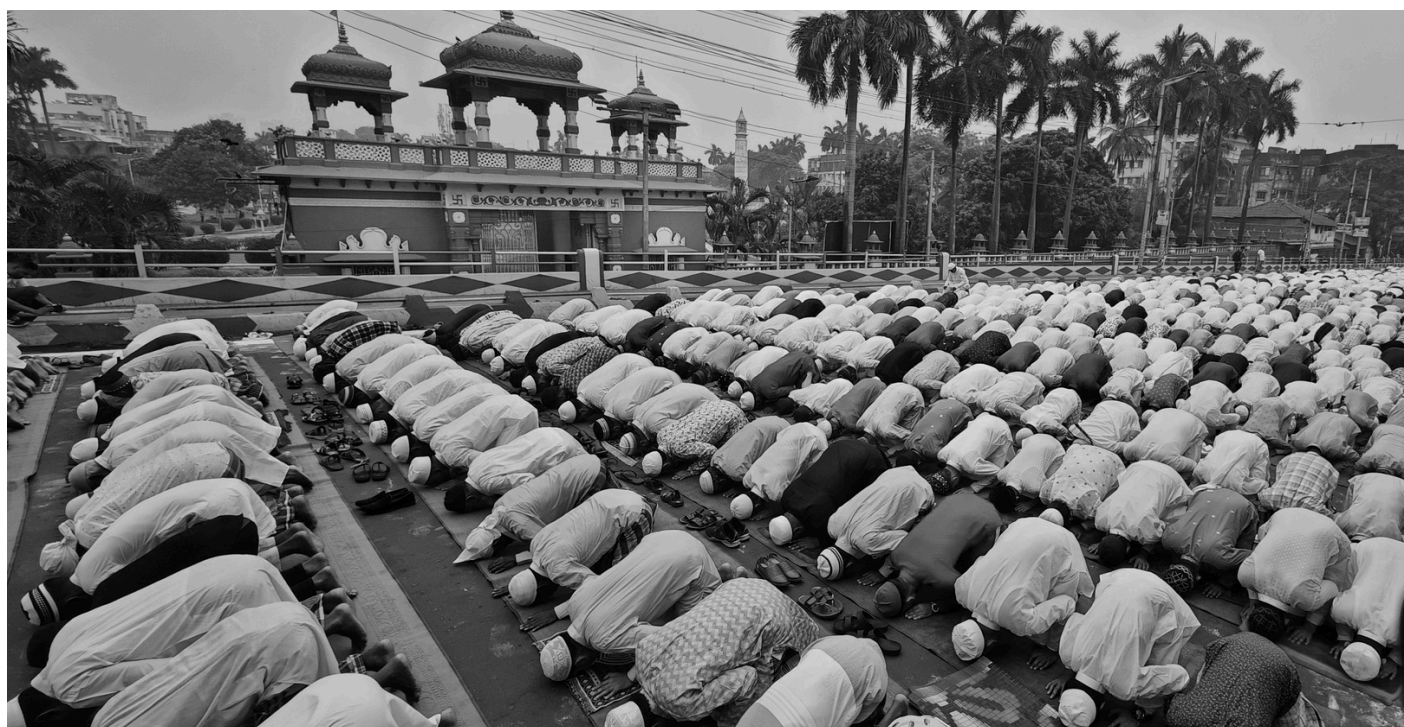
The ethnic and religious plurality associated with multiculturalism is in one sense a risky endeavour. When people of different religions live close together in one society, there's an increased likelihood of conflict between them – not necessarily physical violence, but some degree of friction, of genuine opposition. This is because religious identification can lie close to the core of a person's self-identity, and religions tend to contradict each other. The statement 'all roads lead to God' is ignorant and naïve because the God/s of the four major religions are fundamentally different to each other, therefore the major world religions are, at significant points, not just mutually incompatible but opposed to each other.

The Bible says, amongst other things, that God is Trinity; ; Jesus is the Son of God incarnate; and he died on the cross to forgive our sins. Islam teaches,

amongst other things, that God cannot have a son; that to say God has a son is a sin; that Jesus was a prophet; and that God didn't let him die on the cross, but secretly took him up to heaven. A faithful Muslim would therefore find Christian teaching blasphemous – an offence against the God they worship.

Christianity and Islam as both monotheistic religions – both believe that there is only one God who created the whole universe (although as noted above they significantly disagree about the nature of that one God). In contrast Hinduism teaches about many gods ('polytheism'), and also that physical creation is itself an aspect of the divine being. And where the Bible says God is passionately concerned about this world – he 'loved' the world in giving Jesus for us – Buddhism says that passion, 'love', is the basis of all our problems. The goal of Buddhism is detachment from the world and absorption into the oneness of everything.

Faithful Christians would find Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam distressing, because, from a Christian perspective, they all misrepresent God. The misrepresentation puts the adherents of those



religions under the rightful judgment of the one true God who reveals himself in Christ. The nature of Christian faith motivates faithful Christians to contradict the claims of all other religions.

Similarly, a faithful Hindu or Buddhist would, quite reasonably, be offended by Christian exclusivism. Both are ancient religions which predate Christianity. Both come from the South Asian Subcontinent, whose rich and ancient culture predates Western imperialism. To a Buddhist or a Hindu, Christianity is synonymous with Western greed and sexual promiscuity. Buddhists and Hindus believe they know how to live properly in accord with the divine; Christianity has no credibility to them.

Personal offence does not always lead to active hatred and violence. It is possible to be offended by someone and simply leave them be. We need to realise, though, that in a religiously plural society, some people are going to believe, say, and do things that offend others. Under conditions of religious plurality, when cultures collide, there is a high likelihood of *some* degree of *conflict*.

In this context of religious and ethnic plurality, 'tolerance' has rightly become an important social virtue. A basic level of tolerance disavows both coercion and censorship. Under this kind of tolerance, religious people, even if they're in the majority, don't try and use official state-sanctioned force (the police, the courts, or the military) to coerce someone to comply with particular religious beliefs by requiring them to comply with that religion if it's against the person's will. But neither are official state sanctions used to censor anyone – to muzzle their ability to publicly declare their beliefs and criticise those who disagree with them. This basic level of tolerance is therefore compatible

with vigorous debate about the truth or falsity of an idea being held. A Christian believes Jesus rose from the dead; an atheist believes he did not. Under this non-censorious version of tolerance, the two can argue about it passionately, but neither is going to try and get the other arrested for holding that belief.

This non-coercive, non-censorious version of tolerance requires certain social expectations. We expect people to:

1. Respect other people's conscience by permitting them to believe things about God we think are wrong;
2. Express that respect by refusing to officially coerce them in matters of religion – we don't expect official government agencies like the police and the courts to punish people who believe a different religion to us;
3. Expect other people to similarly respect our beliefs about God, our religion;
4. And express that religion through our (non-coercive) profession of our faith and critique of other people's faiths – we don't censor ourselves, and don't expect anyone else to censor themselves either.



We see these principles in the Apostle Peter's famous passage on apologetics. Having exhorted Christians to submit to governmental authority (1 Pet 2:13-17), he challenges us to "always be prepared to give an answer," an apologia, "to everyone who asks you to give the reason" – the logic, the rationale – "for the hope that [we] have," 1 Pet 3:15. He quoted Isaiah 8:12-13 in the previous verse to urge us against being frightened by unbeliever's threats. That means in his time and ours, cultural pressure could slowly and systematically intimidate Christians into silence. Peter wants us to courageously proclaim Christ "in and out of season," 2 Tim 4:2. But he immediately exhorts us to "do this with gentleness and respect," which indicates that both in his time and ours, Christians were tempted to be disrespectfully overbearing in their engagement with unbelievers.

The Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone underpins this kind of non-coercive, non-censorious tolerance. To be saved from God's wrath, be reconciled to him, become his spiritual children, and have the confidence of living with him in eternity, we need to honestly put our trust in Jesus – we need to "repent" and be "born again" – John 3:3; Acts 2:38. Christian faith therefore cannot be coerced. And there's no point censoring people

who honestly question the faith. In the book of Acts, the Apostles and other early Christians engage in vigorous debate with non-Christians – they don't censor themselves – but they don't censor their opponents either. In fact it's their opponents who try to manipulate secular laws to censor the Christians – e.g. Acts 18:12-16; 24:1-9.

Christians therefore don't need a theocracy. We don't need the government to protect Christianity, privilege Christianity over other religions, and/or legislate distinctly Christian morality. God, through his common grace to this sin-stained world, uses his general, non-salvific revelation and the imperfect but genuine sensitivities of the unregenerate human conscience to enable sinners to live reasonably well in this world. Sinful humans can still discern enough about basic morality to live as families and communities together. Government is one aspect of that life together. Christians should respect the government – Rom 13:1-7. Precisely because we honour the government, we call it to do what is right and just. Part of that justice is creating a truly tolerant legal environment which is neither coercive nor censorious.

We can also urge everyone, Christian or not, to engage with each other in ways which simultaneously express our convictions about what is true and right, yet respect other people's differing views. And we can model that kind of courageous courtesy by proclaiming Christ with a simultaneity of vigour and grace.

The rise and fall of quasi-religious relativism and intolerant secularism

Recently, however, the term 'tolerance' has been redefined to mean not just permission, but necessary affirmation of the other person's religious beliefs. This new, intolerant form of



'tolerance' uses all the above anti-religious, specially anti-Christian, social forces in censorious ways which seek to redefine religion (especially Christianity) and ostracise those who stubbornly remain faithful to the historical versions of those religions (especially Christianity).

Philosophically, this ironically intolerant 'tolerance' begins with the postmodern disbelief in objective, accessible, universal truth. Ultimate reality may or may not exist – that's not the point. The point is: postmodernists don't believe that we can find ultimate reality. They don't believe that anyone can confidently say 'this is true for everyone everywhere.' All we can have is approximations of the truth. And that approximation, say postmodernists, is necessarily coloured and limited by our particular location – our background, ethnicity, gender, and so on. Therefore, no-one can claim to have a unique, privileged perspective on reality which is superior to everyone else's. Such a claim is considered 'intolerant' and as such does not have to be argued against. It is simply dismissed.

This dismissal of anyone's ability to know final truth (except the final truth that no-one can know final truth) immediately redefines religion. Religion has

traditionally been taken to deal with supernatural matters which, precisely because they're sourced from outside this world, have the authority to define final truth and reality. People who are 'faithful', those who are 'committed' to a particular religion, hold their religious convictions close to the core of their identity. Being Christian, Hindu, or Muslim will be important to them. They will therefore prioritise the supernatural over the natural and permit their religious beliefs to govern their life in this world.

We have also seen that the major world religions contradict each other. Serious adherents of all the major religions will, therefore, sincerely believe that everyone else is objectively wrong. And, out of love and concern for the eternal well-being of those people, they will seek to dissuade them of those wrong beliefs, and inculcate true beliefs about God/the gods/the divine. That is, serious believers, of all religions, will seek to convert others to their own religion. And they will do so out of love: love for their God/gods/the divine, and love for other people.

Postmodern relativism cannot tolerate the reality of the divine. Postmodernism treats religion as a



as a 'cultural' phenomenon. People are brought up with and enculturated into the religious beliefs of their family, ethnicity, and cultural group. Those cultural understandings of 'God' or 'the divine' or 'the ultimate' are considered part of that approximation of reality which people, through cultural tradition, grow up taking for granted. Respecting different religious beliefs is, therefore, an aspect of respecting different cultures, nations, and ethnicities. Postmodern relativism therefore cannot merely permit someone to hold their religious beliefs; it must affirm them, and celebrate those beliefs in them. Someone who says "I don't hate Asians – but I'm not eating in a Chinese restaurant, and I won't send my children to a school with lots of Asians, and I won't employ any in my firm, and..." would be considered racist. These days, the statement "I respect your religious beliefs; you're allowed to hold them; but I think you're badly wrong" comes across sounding the same.

This has led to the development of a new, coercive and censorious version of secularity. The word 'secular' comes from the Latin word *saeculum*, which simply means 'this world.' For something to be secular doesn't necessarily make it bad. It just means that it's limited to this world. Science, for example, is good but 'secular.' It can discover medicines and take humans to the moon, Mars, and beyond. But it can't heal us of our sin or transport us to 'heaven,' to the new creation.

Previously, secularity was not anti-religious. It sought to apply the non-coercive, non-censorious version of tolerance we reviewed above, which permits religious people the freedoms to express their beliefs in public. But all the recent social developments we reviewed above – the decline of Christendom; the rise of a radical, aggressively anti-

theistic form of atheism; the increasingly aggressive assertion of sexual liberty; and the rise of postmodern scepticism which (inconsistently) relativises all truth (except itself) – have combined to create a new, radical, intolerant, supposedly anti-religious but actually and ironically quasi-religious version of secularity which we shall call secularism.

Contemporary secularism builds on postmodern relativism by inverting the normal religious priorities. It insists that this world – the 'secular' – is more important than eternal life in 'heaven', the 'next world.' Therefore, religious beliefs about the supernatural must conform to this-worldly, 'secular' definitions of what is best. In the process, even the concept of 'religion' gets redefined in a worldly, 'secularised' manner. 'Religion' gets demoted from being convictions about ultimate truth, reality, and goodness – convictions which command your ultimate loyalty and motivate you to sacrificial, heroic actions – to become little more than a hobby – an activity you perform either on your own or with others to make you feel good, create relationships, and give your life meaning.



The only way this kind of relativistic 'tolerance' can flourish is for religious people to stop taking their religion seriously. They don't have to completely stop believing it – but they can't hold it close to their identity; they can't be too passionate about it. And it's best if they stop believing the elements of the religion that make it unique – like the incarnation of Christ, or the uniqueness of Gabriel's communication of the Koran to Mohammed. Celebrating other people's beliefs must be more important than trying to persuade people about your version of God and religion – 'evangelism,' which systematically gets replaced with the more negative word 'proselytism.' Any claim that one religion is superior to others is considered 'intolerant' therefore socially destructive therefore deserves to be censored. People who genuinely believe the traditional, supernatural version of the religion get steadily marginalised and mocked as being 'radicals,' even though they're actually holding the normal, historical, 'orthodox' version of their faith.

But what secularists don't realise is that the first step of their logic - the assertion that this natural



world is more important than the supernatural – is actually and ironically a quasi-religious claim. Postmodernists claim to 'know' that all knowledge – including religious knowledge – is approximate and biased by the person's geographic, cultural and ethnic location – except their particular perspective, which they claim to be universally relevant. But the only way they can know that all truth is relative is if they themselves have unique access to a universal, trans-cultural, trans-temporal perspective on the world. As we said before, that kind of claim to ultimate, final knowledge has traditionally been considered a religious claim. It's a claim usually made by a prophet – someone who has knowledge from beyond this world, given by God or the gods. At the very least it's a claim to be 'enlightened', like the Buddha. So by insisting that this natural world is more important than the supernatural, secularists are ironically divinising this world, creating a new religion of secularism, and appointing themselves as its evangelists. They then 'evangelise' people with religious beliefs, trying to 'convert' them to secularism.

This new, intolerant secularism is really quite arrogant. All major religions believe in different kinds of supernatural existence. To disbelieve all of them is to disbelieve the entire history of human knowledge which has built the human civilisations we benefit from today. And the secular, i.e. worldly, nature of secularism is its greatest weakness. Divine authority is superior to human authority. Regardless of exactly how we understand God/the gods/the divine, he/she/it is more powerful than humanity. That's part of what makes a God a God – people need to believe that he/she/it is powerful enough to deserve being worshiped and obeyed. That's why secularism is only a quasi-religion. It's a fake, a parody, a reflection of religion, which tries to mimic religion's authority without possessing any real religious characteristics.

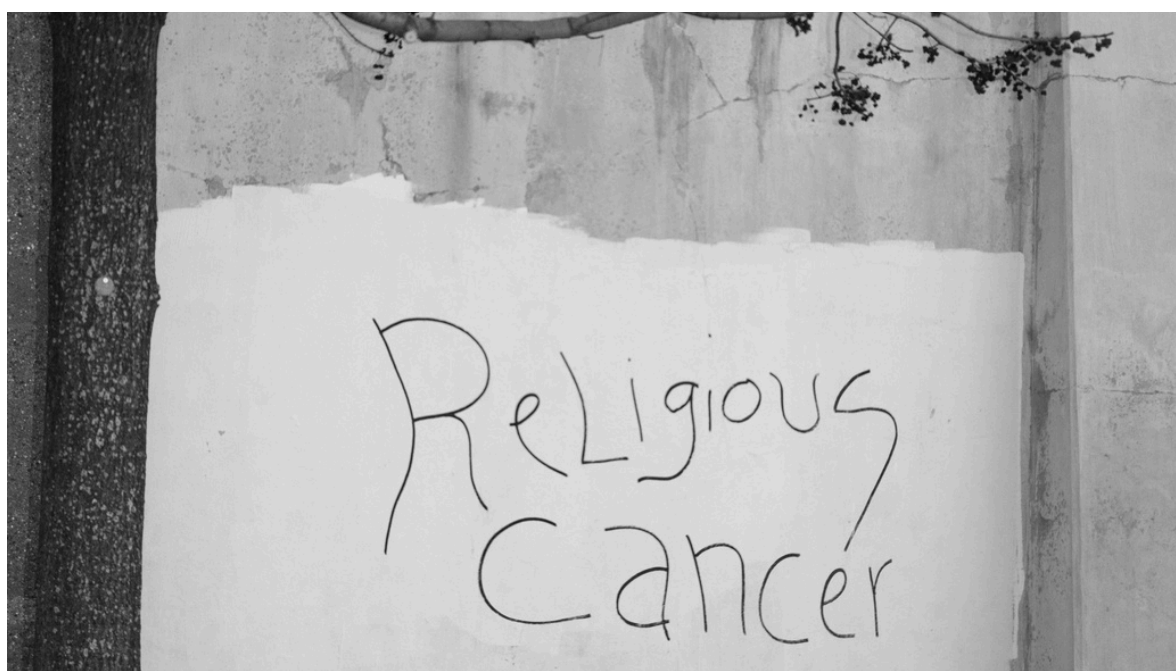
Because divine authority exceeds human, religion possesses superior epistemic resources than atheism – definitely in its postmodern form. Religious people (not just Christians), by being religious, have a basis to claim to know the divine, and in knowing the divine, have a basis to claim to know ultimate truth. Religious people thereby possess the kinds of positive visions of a good, flourishing life which disillusioned refugees from postmodernity are seeking. Serious religious adherents will simply ignore secularistic tolerance and continue their divine mission. Indeed, they will interpret secular tolerance as part of the problem which is addressed by their mission. Their converts need to be converted away from this form of intolerant secularising tolerance, and embrace their religious mission instead, as a sign that they truly know their God.

Since this kind of radical secularism is so incredibly fragile, it needs to be supported externally, especially by law. This is evident in the recent imposition of an increasingly anti-Christian, anti-religious legal framework, especially with regards to sexuality. The distinctly 'Western' cultural obsession with sex is expressed through censorship, e.g. through 'conversion' laws potentially punishing

traditional Christian sexual ethics, and through coercion, e.g. people being required to publicly affirm LGBT+ sexuality as a requirement of their employment.^[30]

In fact, postmodernity's internal instability may explain the 'vibe shift' in favour of morality, spirituality, and religion. 'Western' people, especially young people, are increasingly realising that if everyone is a product of their culture, then postmodern relativism cannot be ultimate truth but is itself a product of recent 'Western' culture. People only believe postmodernity because they've been brought up to believe it. Furthermore, postmodernity is at core not a positive but a negative philosophy. It has internal, rational bases to propose good, positive ways of life. All it can do is criticise the positive visions of the good life which other religions and philosophies propose. People, especially young people, are becoming sceptical about scepticism. There is a renewed hunger for some concrete, reliable basis upon which to build one's life. The 'buffer' between the Western people and the supernatural is cracking.^[31]

This, then, is how we have arrived at this time of contradictions, this watershed moment for



Western culture. We have an increasingly intolerant, secularising legal environment at the same time that the fragility of secularism is causing it to self-destruct before our very eyes. So what does Christian faithfulness look like under these conditions?

Responding with confidence, curiosity, and courtesy

First of all, we need to realise that this misunderstanding, marginalisation, and mockery of Christianity is closer to what the Bible considers normal. The people of Israel were unusual in claiming to worship the one true creator God in the midst of idolatrous nations. That's why the Old Testament is so full of tirades against the idols, and warnings not to follow the nations in their idolatrous worship and consequent decadent behaviour, e.g. Lev 18:3-5. Jesus constantly warned his followers that they would be socially outcast. The beatitudes are not just about being humble and nonviolent. He blesses those who are merciful, meek, and mourn because they are unjustly persecuted in his name. They are the true heirs of the Old Testament prophets (Matt 5:1-12). He did not gather people with social power, but those who were socially outcast and marginalised – sinners, tax collectors and women. Paul said of the Corinthian church that “not many” were, “by human standards”, “wise... influential...” or “of noble birth” (1 Cor 1:26). This is true to the nature of the gospel itself, “for the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18).

The New Testament church proclaimed the divinity of, and unique salvation wrought by, Jesus Christ, in the midst of Greco-Roman idolatry. Scholars estimate that 1 Thessalonians is the earliest letter

written by Paul that we have in the Bible. In it, Paul basically defines the Christian life to be a turning from idols, trusting in the living God, and waiting for Jesus (1 Thess 1:9-10). Paul and other church leaders were regularly attacked, beaten, jailed, and / or chased out of town (Acts 13:50; 14:5, 19; 16:22-24; 17:5-9; 19:29, 33-34; 21:27-36; 22:22-25; 23:12-15; 24:5-6). New Testament churches were relatively small communities in the midst of a culture that despised them. Paul tells Titus to instruct people how to behave so as to “make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive”, and “so that those who oppose” Christianity will not be able to “malign the word of God”, but will be “ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about” the church (Titus 2:5b, 8b, 10b). Peter warns his readers that their former friends will “think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation [any more], and they [will] heap abuse on you” (1 Peter 4:4).

We should not, then, grumble, complain, and protest that Christianity no longer has social privilege. That lack of privilege is normal. The last 1400 years of Western Christendom social privilege were abnormal!



Instead of complaining, we must have the confidence to join the early church (and most of the church worldwide – the non-western, ‘majority world,’ for whom persecution is normal) in calling all people to renounce their idols and worship the one true God, the Holy Trinity, who has revealed himself in Jesus of Nazareth, God the Son incarnate. The core gospel affirmation is that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour – that he is the king of God’s kingdom. This would not usually be good news for rebels against this king. It’s ‘good’ news because this king doesn’t come in vengeance to slaughter his enemies, but comes in mercy to die and rise, to forgive them for rebelling against him, and give them a place in his kingdom. The gospel is that in Christ, the one God who created the whole world, and against whom all people in the world have rebelled, offers mercy to the whole world. That’s why Christians seek to tell everyone in the whole world about it. Evangelism flows from the nature of the evangel, the gospel itself.

Jesus (Mark 1:15 & parallels), the Apostles (Acts 2:22-39; 10:36-43; 17:2-3) and other early Christians (Acts 18:27-28) vigorously declared, taught, and reasoned with all kinds of people in the

racially and religiously complex world of the first-century Roman Empire. They did not present the gospel as mere human opinion – “here’s some ideas about spirituality, we hope you find them useful” – but as the authoritative summons of the one God who created everything and, in Christ, offers redemption to everyone – “thus says the Lord”.

However, precisely because this gospel is a summons to submit not to humans but to God, it cannot be coercive or censorious. The mere fact of telling people the message of Jesus cannot be coercive. We have to explain why Jesus is worth following. And those reasons are open to public debate. Our explanations do not force anyone to believe us. Anyone can ask: how do we know that Jesus is Lord? What’s our authority to make that claim? Also, the claim does not itself force anyone to accept it. We give people the ‘space’ to respond to God, not just us. This includes giving people the freedom to reject the gospel if they genuinely don’t believe it. Christians ‘tolerate’ people who reject Christ, for they have not rejected us, but God as their king (to paraphrase 1 Sam 8:7).

The New Testament itself shows how one aspect of a true response to the gospel was that the convert acknowledged that they were submitting, not just to the evangelist, but to God himself. The Bereans were more noble than the Thessalonians, not because they naively accepted what Paul said, but because they “examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11). Paul was relieved that he didn’t baptise anyone beyond Crispus, Gaius and the household of Stephanas (1 Cor 1:14, 16), so no-one could realistically claim he was trying to make his own disciples. He didn’t use human wisdom, but proclaimed the counter-cultural divine wisdom of Christ crucified, “so that



[the Corinthians] faith would not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Cor 2:5). He commended the Thessalonian church for accepting the gospel "not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God" (1 Thess 2:13).

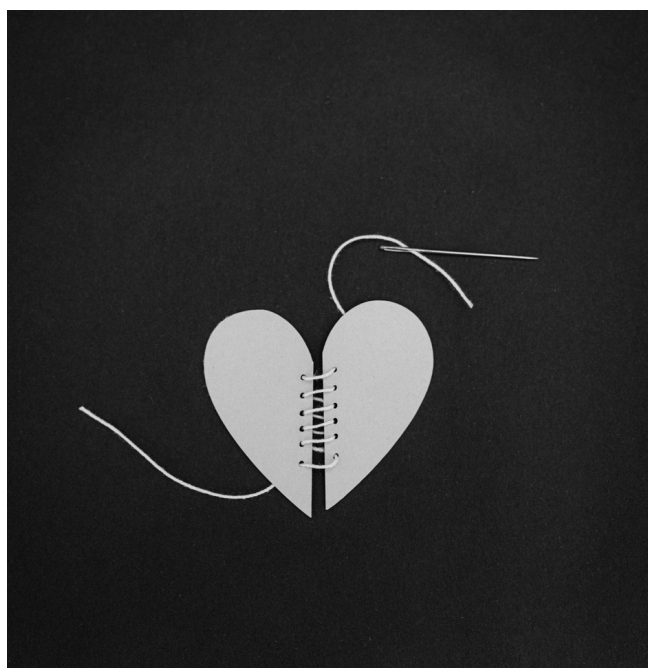
Also, as we have already said, Christian faith and repentance are deeper than mere outward behaviour. They involve a change of the 'heart', a realignment of one's attitude to God. A Christian goes from being a rebel against God, ignoring God's word and rejecting God's will, to being a child of God who accepts his word and seeks to obey his will. Being an internal change, it cannot be imposed externally. Any supposed change that happens through external enforcement isn't actually a change – it's just hypocrisy, pretending. It's like the little boy at school who, when his teacher ordered him to sit down, sat down, scowled, and muttered "I'm still standing up on the inside".

So, as we urge people to accept Jesus, we should also give them 'space' to think about what we're saying, and the significance for them personally. Jesus did that: he called people to "count the cost" of following him (see, e.g., Mark 8:34; Luke 14:25-35; John 6:41, 60, 66-69). Ultimately, someone

becomes Christian, and lives as a Christian, not through human persuasion, but because the Father convinces them, internally through the Holy Spirit, that Jesus really is Lord (John 5:21; 6:37, 39-40, 44, 63-66; Rom 8:28-29; 9:16). Confident in this, we don't pressure or manipulate people; we hope that God will grant them repentance (2 Tim 2:24-26).

This evangelical freedom and tolerance is not the gospel. We don't say to people: "good news! You can choose whether to follow Jesus or not!" We say to them: "good news! The crucified and risen Jesus is ruler over everything and everyone!" But it shapes the manner in which we engage non-Christians – it shapes the manner in which we communicate the gospel. It means we can be simultaneously faithful to the content of the gospel – "Jesus really is Lord, whether you like it or not" – yet communicate it in a manner that demonstrates a respect for the personal integrity of the listener – "what do you think, how do you feel, about that?" It also creates the kind of environment where conversions are most likely to be genuine: those who do repent are probably personally convinced, from the Bible, through the internal operation of the Holy Spirit, that Jesus really is Lord and Saviour.

One of the effects of contemporary secularity is an increasing ignorance of basic Christian beliefs and morality. Furthermore, in a multifaith society, a lot of our evangelism will happen in dialogue with people from other faiths. We can no longer assume that the people we're talking with share the same basic understandings about God, humanity, and the world that we do. If they're a Hindu, and we tell them they need to be "born again", they might agree – because they need to be reincarnated. If they're a Muslim and we call Jesus the Son of God, they might think we mean he's the



son of God the Father and Mary the Mother. To avoid misunderstanding, we need to know what they already believe.

So, before trying to explain Jesus to someone, be curious about their beliefs. Ask them what they already believe, genuinely listen to what they say, and then check whether you've understood them correctly. Once we have a basic understanding of what they believe, we can say "that's really interesting, because Jesus says..." and we can explain the gospel to them in a simple way that they clearly understand. Knowing the person we're talking to doesn't stop us from explaining the gospel – it helps us explain the gospel more clearly.

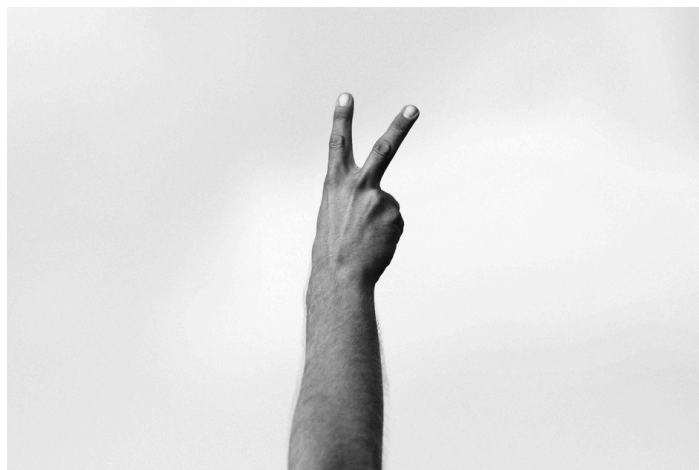
This attitude of curiosity is itself courteous. We honour the person we're talking to by genuinely hearing their beliefs. We can also deliberately honour the person we're talking to, and their religion – and then use that honouring to point to the gospel. Christ did not come to call the righteous but sinners (Mark 2:17 & parallels). So we can say to someone "you're such a faithful person – I admire you, really, you put my Christian devotion to shame. But according to Jesus, neither your devotion nor mine is good enough. Jesus is the only way". We're not doing this just to be clever. In our contemporary post-secular multifaitth context, this is a good way to be faithful to both the content of the gospel and the inter-personal dynamics implied by that gospel.

In today's conflicted, suspicious environment, this kind of curiosity and courtesy should also deescalate hostility and contribute to community cohesion in general. The gospel's fundamental goal is not peace in this world but peace with God. We have already reviewed how Christ warned us that we will have trouble in this world, John 16:33. However, our peace with God should motivate us

to have peace with our non-Christian neighbour and to "live at peace with everyone" "as far as it depends on" us, Rom 12:18. Furthermore, this kind of peacefulness, our willingness to forgive and turn the other cheek, should be a credible witness to the gospel's peaceability.

And this kind of relationally-engaged evangelism is compatible with public engagement for the common good. We previously affirmed that God, through his common, non-salvific grace, uses general revelation and the unregenerate conscience to permit sinners to live together well. It's therefore no surprise that people are seeking a basis for truth, meaning, purpose and stability for life as individuals and together as communities. Disciplining one's desires in order to cultivate noble virtues and discourage destructive vices is normal. That kind of responsible character-building is demonstrably good for individuals and communities.^[32] The last few decades of irresponsible, greedy, hyper-individualistic hedonism have been abnormal and we – especially our young people – are now suffering the consequences.^[33]

This kind of civic virtue is neither uniquely Christian nor salvific. It's good for this world but not good enough for eternal life with the holy God. Precisely for those reasons, we can simultaneously



encourage individuals and communities to demonstrate those kinds of wholesome virtues in ways compatible with their traditions, customs, and religions, while urging them not to trust in those virtues but in Christ. We can simultaneously reinforce 'secular' moral virtue while calling people to repent of that virtue before God and trust in Christ alone.

Contending for Christ amidst these conflicting currents

We are living in turbulent times of conflicting cultural currents. In some contexts we feel like we're living in the 'negative world' where cultural attitudes are prejudiced against Christianity. In different contexts we experience a renewed search for meaning and purpose, deep relationships within a committed community, moral order, and stability. The latter are not themselves the gospel. The gospel is about God in Christ, not human needs. But people are increasingly experiencing the vacuousness of hyper-secularised hedonism and are seeking virtues which are consistent with and flow from the gospel, and which may therefore be credible introductions, 'on-ramps,' to the Christian faith.

Under Christendom, the morals associated with that faith underpinned Western culture as we know it. But civic morality is not equivalent to Christian faith, and may in fact prejudice people against feeling the need to repent and trust Christ for their forgiveness. Christendom's decline, demonstrated in the disappearance of Christian social privilege, is no impediment to the gospel. We can continue to proclaim that gospel under conditions of religious plurality. Aggressive, intolerant secularism is an enemy not only to Christianity but to religion, moral virtue, and existential fulfilment in general. People, especially young people, are experiencing its negative effects and are searching for better options. We can encourage everyone to live well in this world and cooperate with people with whom we share common values even if we do not share a common faith. And we can simultaneously urge everyone to recognise that a good life within this world cannot be the final goal of existence, and that we can never through our efforts make ourselves adequate for eternal life with God – only God himself, who as Christ died and rose for us and for our salvation, can do that. The nature of the gospel itself equips us to navigate the conflicting currents of these turbulent times.



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