



Either/Or?

This Year, "Super Tuesday" just happens to coincide with Mardi Gras. Millions of Catholics in 21 states will vote first, then have their last big meal before Lent begins at midnight—Ash Wednesday.

Thus our major parties hit the backstretch in their respective horse races to the big summer conventions just as Catholics enter the 40-day stretch leading to Christianity's biggest feast, Easter.

It's this interesting convergence of the sacred and the profane, the political and the spiritual, that has got me thinking about the drift of our time. Where, I wonder, are our culture's currents taking us?

I first confronted "secularism" before I knew its name, and well before most Americans worried about declining religion.

When I decided to study overseas in 1968, my hometown parish still had six Masses filling the church every weekend. There were no great public controversies over contraception or abortion or Christmas displays in public places or the teaching of "intelligent design."

The "culture wars" were still in the future, for Americans were too busy fighting about the real shooting war in Vietnam (and the shootings of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy) to worry about "traditional family values" or "abstinence education" or the threat of "secular humanism." The country was divided on race, war, and poverty, but religion remained as central to the "American way of life" (even *without* an established church) as motherhood and apple pie.

So my whole upbringing conditioned me for shocked surprise the Sunday evening I first walked into Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris about a month after I arrived in France.

I had seen the poster advertising an organ concert followed by Mass. It seemed the perfect way to experience this massive stunning monument to medieval faith.

I got there an hour early, but the vast place was already packed, so I ended up squeezed into a rear seat virtually under the organ loft. The acoustics were fine—I could hear every note—but I was a long way from the main altar. Little did I know, that would not matter.

As the program began and those massive pipes poured music down over us, I surveyed the crowd. I saw a roughly even mix of men and women, a wide blend of people from their teens (I was still 19 myself!) to their 70s and 80s, a remarkable diversity of attire from "Sunday best" suits and coats to hippified student duds. It seemed, to my eyes, a microcosm of the populace I saw every day on Paris streets. I had heard some bleak comments about Catholic life in France before my arrival, but now I wondered what people had been referring to.

Pierre Cochereau, Notre-Dame's famed long-time organist, made brilliant beautiful music for an hour, and as he finished the crowd rose to applaud. After a few moments the applause faded, and I sat down to await the start of Mass.

But a moment later I realized no one else was sitting. They were still standing, now turning, forming lines toward the aisles. They were leaving!

It took several minutes for those leaving to file out of the main doors. Once the aisles were clear, I could see that those remaining were moving up toward the main altar, to be closer to the Mass about to begin.

I decided to follow suit, and moved nearer the front. Waiting for Mass, I surveyed again. Perhaps 85% of the crowd had gone, and the group left wasn't just much smaller. It was also much different.

The worshippers were mainly elderly ladies in black, with a smattering of older men. Some of these elderly had children with them—grandchildren, I guessed. There were few people between 25 and 60, and almost no one my age.

I stayed for Mass, feeling completely out of place, as if I did not belong in my own Church, or that I had isolated myself from my own generation.

Why do I write this long narrative?

Because that event, that "Notre-Dame shock," gave me my model-image of what "secularization" meant. For most of the people who had packed that enormous space, the Church continued to be a source of great beauty and cultural richness (the cathedral itself, the organ, the music, etc.)—but its spiritual activities were seen as having no interest or value.

So Secularization meant that one accepted faith's cultural legacy, but dismissed faith itself.

I would soon realize this was a fairly common attitude in France in those days. I had grown up as a typical American kid, frequently engaging in this chat with friends: "I'm Catholic...what're you?" It was a key feature in a culture where belief was taken for granted and always took three forms: Catholic, Protestant, and Jew.

In France, the chat was different: "Etes-vous croyant?"—that is, "Are you a believer?" More often than not, the answer was "NO"—but for me, even the question was striking, since it meant religion's place was not accepted in this "Catholic" country the way it was at home.

No one openly ridiculed me for admitting that I was "croyant," but I felt that people found my belief rather quaint, old fashioned. For them, the Church had the same importance as the monarchy: part of a glorious but by-gone past, swept away by their own revolution.

Clearly many people saw atheism as a more intellectually respectable world-view, while faith in God was treated as naïve, even out of step with the times. As people repeatedly told me, in France "Everyone is Catholic but no one goes to Mass!"

I soon realized that behind this shift to a secularized worldview was the increasingly widespread conviction among French people that religion was a relic of the past, which would have no place in humanity's future. To cling to faith was like clinging desperately to a dying loved one when others had long since let go. Faith was pathetic because

religion was dying. Out of politeness, people simply humored any "croyant" who could not handle the truth.

When I got home this idea haunted me. Sure, our churches were still pretty full—but how long would it be before secularization reached our shores? Before my "Notre Dame shock" would be repeated in our own churches?

A year later I began my theological studies with this question uppermost in my mind.

Looking back now, I realize that my experience had infected me with an untested assumption. For as I watched trends within U.S. Catholicism during the years I prepared for and began parish work, I assumed that secularization and Catholicism were on a collision course. I took it for granted that they could never coexist. Certainly, my Notre-Dame moment taught me that when people accepted secularism, they rejected faith.

I assumed that what I saw in France would happen the same way in America—or else would not happen at all. Either secularization would replace faith, or faith would fight back and prevail. Either Europe's godless future would arrive, or America's naive faith would survive.

It was that simple: Either/or!

It has taken me more than 30 years to find out that I was wrong.

Next Time: Both/And! How the Secular and Religious have come to coexist.

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Send Your Comments and Questions to bfswain@juno.com

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