



Practicing Faith with Adolescents: Overcoming Secular Barriers to God's Grace

Following my previous lecture, "Practicing Faith with Adolescents: Searching for Grace in the Stuffness of the Secular," Rosanna Piper made the excellent suggestion that we look to Harry Potter as a means to understand the presentational-discursive methodology that I had articulated. I was so taken with that notion that I talked further with Rosanna, and she did some further research for us. Since most of you have read the series on Harry Potter, written by J.S. Rowling, you already know that Harry spent his childhood in complete ignorance of the fact that he and his parents were wizards.

Harry's parents died when he was a baby. He was raised by his aunt and uncle, Petunia and Vernon Dursley, two mean adults—the sort of enemies that children love in their literature—who knew that Harry's destiny was to be a wizard but who worked hard to prevent him from discovering that identity. Here, then, is our metaphor for the secular mind, the phrase Paul Tillich gave us in the opening lecture. People who are not wizards in Harry's world are called "muggles," or nonbelievers in the power of magic and wizardry. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia are muggles.

Let us consider that muggles are those forces in our society that stand at the barriers of our lives that separate the secular from the sacred, or those people and institutions that want to keep the sacred from being an essential part of our private and public lives. Muggles so dominate our influential institutions that it is a constant uphill battle for a believer in God's grace to find a space in society where God's presence may comfortably be received and shared. Don't misunderstand me. I don't want you to return to your churches and say that I am advocating that we all become wizards. What I am saying is that the wizardry of Harry Potter and the muggles who try to keep him from his true destiny are metaphors for the secular mind blanking out the sacred perspective in our society.

Harry Potter's uncle and aunt keep his mail away from him, hiding those increasingly frantic notes to Harry that are inviting him to attend the special wizards' school. He is being prevented from learning about and developing his "calling and his destiny," a major task of adolescence. Now, please take note: I am not saying that this is the

intent of Ms. Rowling's novels. What she has done is to provide us with a metaphor to use as we seek to minister to youth. It is a metaphor that is not inconsistent with the intent of her novels, however.

I suggest that this metaphor will work by giving us a handle to grip as we contrast the *secular mind* with the *sacred perspective*, a worldview rooted in a sensibility that believes God seeks those willing to receive his grace and love. I have suggested we find our way to the mind-set that receives God, in opposition to the secular mind, by plunging into the stuffiness of secular life, with special attention to the viewing of certain films and the reading of certain novels. It is time, therefore, for us to continue examining the power of the muggles in our midst and to find ourselves an avenue for discovering our true destiny as believers who know God's grace.

The secular mind dominates the institutions and the elites in our culture—the leaders of media, government, politics, education, business, and, all too often, religion—who see no need for, nor have any interest in, reaching for the ultimate dimension of reality.

And bear in mind, I am not talking about us against them: we are a part of a church institution that operates with a value system that reflects considerable interest in, and preference for, the value system of secularity. (Been to any church-growth meetings recently?) And we, children of the secular culture, still get our news, our opinions, and our values from institutions that are secular to the core. Most of us rely on National Public Radio for our news. Good network, but secular to a painful fault, joining other institutions in measuring events by logical, rational values and asking, in media fashion, who's winning, who's losing, and where is the power that matters.

Author Douglas Sloan describes this power as an "awe and veneration" felt toward scientific truth, which takes on the trimmings and iconological symbols once devoted to religion. As Sloan puts it:

Technology [now] elicits feelings of awe and veneration once associated with a sense of the sacred. Technology has its own priesthood and initiates—the scientific-technological elite—and its own temples and cathedrals—research centers and universities. And it is to technology that millions in the world look for ultimate salvation—a kind of "second coming" in the next breakthrough of medical science, genetic engineering, or space colonization.¹

Let me illustrate how the secular mind operates in the field. During the early days of the Gulf War, I was called by a CBS news producer to see if I would be willing to appear on the network's news show that evening to discuss the religious aspects of the war. Thinking she had been reading my perceptive editorials on the topic, I asked her to spell out the approach of the discussion. Surely, I reasoned, here was a jour-

nalist who wanted to know how I understood the ambiguity of the moral issues involved in our president's political decision-making that had plunged us into a war in the Middle East.

Her answer was not only sobering, it was also indicative of how the media prefers to deal with religion—not as an essential part of culture, but as a sideline, with its own special brand of little problems. The media thinks not on the presentational level of how faith interacts with society, casting a light on political decision-making, but only on the discursive level of surface facticity. The producer told me that the show would focus on the fact that Jews and Christians would not be able to display their religious symbols while stationed in Saudi Arabia, a Muslim country. No crosses, no menorahs. I responded that I didn't think our troops would be bothered too much by this deprivation since they were free to pray in their tents, away from the prying eyes of the local symbol-police. She said she would get back to me. Needless to say, she didn't call back, and I lost my opportunity for network time.

When I wrote about this experience, a friend of mine who works in network television said I should have played along with her story and then, when given the chance, say what I wanted to say. But since my segment would not have been live, my theological wisdom would have ended up on the cutting room floor.

Another experience I refer to whenever I think of the problem of the secular mind shaping our public perceptions took place in the winter of 1976. I was serving as Illinois state campaign chairman for then-governor Jimmy Carter. In the final weeks leading up to the Illinois primary, I rode one day with Governor Carter between two campaign stops. Carter had begun that primary season as an underdog, but had surprised everyone but himself by taking the national lead with impressive showings in Iowa and New Hampshire. Then he lost the primary in Massachusetts. The Illinois primary was just ahead. We were alone in his car, except for the two secret service agents in the front seat. Rather inventively, I asked the future president, "How did you feel about losing in Massachusetts?" Instead of ignoring the presumptuous question, he thought a moment and said: "Rosalyn and I talked about it, and we decided it was for the best." Now I knew, and he knew I knew, that this was talk between two Georgia boys, one a Methodist, the other a Southern Baptist. He was thinking of the passage, "All things work together for them that love the Lord." Defeat or victory was not as important to him as knowing that he was in God's hands.

But all I could think about was that press bus behind us, filled with reporters who, had they heard that comment, would have produced stories with headlines like "Carter Glad He Lost." That's not what he said, and not what he meant, but the secular mind is merciless with its surface data. To the bored secular journalist riding through Illinois, it sounded like "Glad He Lost." Fortunately, Carter kept such comments between us, and we didn't experience any negative headlines on that trip. He

later won a substantial and important number of delegates in Illinois and moved closer to the nomination.

When film and literary artists like John Irving deal with complex and ambiguous moral issues, they risk having their intent reshaped by a marketing mentality that has final word over how their work is sold to the public. The central issue in *The Cider House Rules* is abortion. The conflict both in Irving's novel and in the film is between the older doctor and his young assistant about how to respond to back-alley abortions in Maine in the pre-Roe v. Wade days of 1943. Dr. Larch believes in offering women a choice; Homer Wells, his assistant, is opposed to abortion on moral grounds. John Irving, the author of both the novel and the screenplay, wrote in his memoir *My Movie Business* that he had final approval over the creative part of the film—its cast, script, and crew—but he didn't have control over its marketing.

Before the film was released, Irving talked to one of the producers and told him, "If Candy and Homer (or just Candy) end up on the movie poster of *The Cider House Rules*, we have failed. The film is not about that romance—that nonromance, as I refer to it.... Dr. Larch, with or without Homer, should be on the movie poster. Ideally Larch should be wearing his operating gown."²

If you have seen the ads for the film, you know Irving failed. The poster features Candy riding on Homer's back, hugging him tightly; Dr. Larch is nowhere to be seen. The moral struggle over abortion is still in the film, but you wouldn't know it from the marketing strategy.

Neil Postman's book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* makes the point that our consumer society buys entertainment as though it were a drug, a means of escape from reality, rather than as an opportunity for either growth or insight. And as we saw in Irving's experience with the movie poster, even when a film has the potential to be a deeper and more significant artistic experience, it is often marketed in ways that contradict the intent of the film artists.

The video box for *Blue*, the first part of Kieslowski's film trilogy *Three Colors*, carries the promotional blurb: "Recommend this mystery to a friend." I am struck by how this blurb reflects the secular mind rather than the religious sensibility out of which Kieslowski made the film. There is a mystery in the film, but it is not a conventional whodunit mystery; rather, it is the presence of an ultimate mystery that leads the main character, Julie, into a dramatic change in her life. Kieslowski died in Warsaw on March 13, 1996, at age fifty-four. In a documentary titled *I'm So So*, made a year before he died, Kieslowski testifies to his religious faith and speaks of his belief in God that began in a childhood spent in the Polish Catholic church.

One of Kieslowski's major contributions to modern film is *The Decalogue*, a series of ten one-hour films he made for Polish television in the mid-'80s. Each film is based on one of the Ten Commandments. The sense of mystery and the deep moral con-

cern reflected in these ten films are even more remarkable because the films were made under the eye of, and with the sponsorship of, the government of Poland, which at the time was still communist. A contractual dispute has kept *The Decalogue* from an American release, except for special appearances at film festivals, but in March 2000 that dispute was resolved and the videos are now available, an important breakthrough that makes a significant work available to American viewers.

Ingmar Bergman, son of a Lutheran pastor, was overt in his films about his theological probings. But his was a search for a faith he had lost, a descent into the depths of God's absence, something an unbelieving secular world could understand, even if it couldn't accept that what Bergman sought was a God who not only wanted to be found, but who was an active participant in the search itself.

Kieslowski's vision is not that of the fallen believer, but of a man who is still related to God, not through an institutional church, but as one who felt himself part of a wider community of the Spirit. In Kieslowski's worldview, we are all connected to one another for a purpose. What is that purpose? We never know for certain, but we know that the connection is there and that the vibrations that come to us through those connections link us to God. To some secular critics this appears as a presentation of fate, a series of coincidences. But to Kieslowski, this connectedness is more than fate or coincidence; it is an expression of a reality that transcends human existence.

When I first saw *Blue*, with English subtitles, at a festival screening in Europe, I was thrilled at its powerful choral ending, sung in Greek, with its text taken from I Corinthians 13, concluding with the familiar passage, "Faith, hope, and love, these three, but the greatest of these is love." Near the end of the film, the finale is hinted at when the composer takes the New Testament from the shelf, points to a page, and says, "In Greek, the rhythm is different."

To my dismay, when I saw *Blue* in an American theater, the subtitled lines of I Corinthians 13 had disappeared from the screen. Only the Greek words on the soundtrack remained. A colleague who books films for an American film festival asked the American distributor of the film what happened to the English subtitles of I Corinthians 13. His answer: "We took them off; we felt they would only confuse the audience."

Those of us who work within the religious community far too often come to the movie experience, along with everyone else, burdened with a secular sensibility. By this I mean we view the film the way the marketing gurus want us to view it, from a stance of the "aboutness," rather than the "isness" of a work, tracing plot details from A to B to C, demanding a satisfying and conclusive ending, preferably a happy one, and measuring our experience in terms of personal enjoyment: Was I entertained? Did the film hold my attention? Or we ask the moralistic questions: Did it have too much

violence or too much profanity or too much sexuality?

The religious sensibility, in contrast, seeks to know and experience the “isness” level of a film. Of course, since fully ninety-five percent of the films released each year have a decidedly shallow or negative “isness,” we can safely avoid all but the five percent of films worthy of our attention by doing our advance viewing homework. We do this by reading reviews, talking to people whose judgment we trust, and, if we worked at it with our friends, asking them not the “aboutness” questions but the “isness” questions.

Early in life our secular educational system too often—with some blessed exceptions—blocks the development of artistic antennae, leaving them to atrophy. Any sense of magic, wonder, and awe is too often replaced by logic, rationality, and demands for proof. Or, as in the case of moralistic religious critics of the Harry Potter series, they take note only of the books’ discursive material—stories about wizards—and conclude, wrongly, that the books must be “anti-Christian” because they find joy in the work of wizards. This is a terrible misreading of Harry Potter. These books do not advocate turning our children into wizards, but they do celebrate the joy and creativity and dreams of children, always with a moral focus on dealing with the good and the bad in our lives.

No wonder we have taken so quickly and easily to the computer, with its logical, orderly, and unforgiving insistence that the only truth that matters is that which can be measured and proven. Hal, the computer in Stanley Kubrick’s film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, is the cinematic embodiment of this secular mind. Recall the chilling effect of Hal’s calm, authoritative voice apologizing as it refuses to respond to the two remaining human astronauts, even as it insists that its understanding of the truth of the mission is the only truth that will be followed.

Cinema as art works with religious faith, for as Russian critic, scholar, and director Andrei Tarkovsky has written, “Art is born and takes hold wherever there is a timeless and insatiable longing for the spiritual.”³ How sad that organized religion has paid so little heed to this fundamental reality, this joint enterprise in which religion and creativity share in the insistence that we are vessels awaiting word from a transcendent reality, word that we are commanded to share with all who will listen, read, or see.

Tarkovsky continues:

...[A] person...goes to the cinema for...time lost or spent or not yet had. He [or she] goes there for living experience; for cinema, like no other art, widens, enhances, and concentrates a person’s experience—and not only enhances it but makes it longer, significantly longer. That is the power of cinema: “stars,” story lines, and entertainment have nothing to do with it. What is the essence of the director’s work? We could define

it as sculpting in time.⁴

Flannery O'Connor is one of the twentieth-century authors whose entire career was marked by rebellion against worship of the secular. Writing about what she calls "serious fiction," O'Connor observed that any story "that can be entirely explained by the adequate motivation of the characters, or by a believable imitation of life, or by a proper theology, will not be large enough."⁵ The writer does have to be concerned with these matters of facticity, but only, she insists, "because the meaning of [the] story does not begin except at a depth where these things have been exhausted."⁶ She adds, "The fiction writer presents mystery through manners, grace through nature, but when he [or she] finishes, there always has to be left over that sense of Mystery which cannot be accounted for by any human formula...."⁷

In his novel *The Sportswriter*, Richard Ford tells the story of Frank Bascombe, a divorced man whose two children live with his estranged wife. One Easter Sunday morning, Frank wakes up and begins to think of his children:

[She,] I know, is not taking Paul and Clarissa to church, a fact which worries me—not because they will turn out godless (I couldn't care less) but because she is bringing them up to be perfect little factualists and information accumulators with no particular reverence or speculative interest for what's not known.⁸

Among theologians, none has made this case more strongly than Joseph Sittler, who, in identifying the "place" of grace in our lives, insisted that we find grace within the actuality of our life, "within history and nature, and amidst the most common and formative episodes of experience...."⁹

Grace comes to us in "occasions," Sittler insists. And burdened by the mind-set of modernity, we have to be receptive to those "occasions" in new and unexpected ways. We can no longer assume that we will easily turn to traditional locations and terms to find grace. Now we must remember again how the Gospels so often spoke of the unexpectedness of the "bestowals of grace."¹⁰ As Sittler puts it, we should note again such phrases as: "And suddenly...and on the way he met...now it happened that...there stood before him a man.... In the midst of the many-threaded, wild unsystematic of the actual, the not-expected was crossed and blessed by the not-possible."¹¹

In a film by Australian director Peter Weir, *The Last Wave*, a young man encounters a group of Aborigines, who introduce him to some aspects of their religion. In so doing, they share with him the deep sense of mystery that permeates their faith. The young man goes to see his father, a minister, and asks him, "Dad, why didn't you ever show me this mystery?" To which his father replies, "I did; I preached about mystery every Sunday." His son slams his hand on the table, stands up, and responds: "No,

Dad, you explained it away.”

The barriers to the sacred in our secular society, those forces—indeed, those muggles—that would keep us away from an openness to the mystery of God, would have us believe that all of reality and all of truth will yield to explanations. This is nothing less than a closed universe, walled off from the mystery at the heart of creation. What business are we in? We are in the business of tearing down that wall. ▼▲

NOTES

1. Douglas Sloan, *Insight-Imagination: The Emancipation of Thought and the Modern World* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), p. 29.
2. John Irving, *My Movie Business* (New York: Random House, 1999), p. 115.
3. Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: The Great Russian Filmmaker Discusses His Art* (New York: The University of Texas Press Edition published by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1991), p. 38.
4. Tartovsky, p. 63.
5. Flannery O'Connor, *Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), p. 32.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
8. Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1996), p. 204.
9. Joseph Sittler, *Essays on Nature and Grace* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 83.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 87.