

The Secularization Project

Read Archbishop Gomez and Rev. Reese's articles below.

20 December 2021

Brothers,

One thing we are learning through The Secularization Project is that secularization touches every aspect of our lives, often sparking intense feelings. Sometimes, it is something we lament as it changes our lives. Other times, it is viewed as an opponent or enemy urging us to point fingers and blame others. The position of the Project's steering committee has been to simply accept secularization as a fact, exploring how it affects us and raising possibilities for how to give a Gospel and Franciscan witness in its midst.

Still, we cannot ignore the more contentious debates swirling around the topic of secularization. A case in point was the video presentation of Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles to the Congress of Catholics and Public Life in Madrid on November 4, 2021, entitled, "Reflections on the Church and America's New Religions." Gomez also blogged the text of his presentation, placing it in the public domain. Several commentators reacted to the presentation in the following weeks. Rev. Bryan Massingale, who is known in our province, was widely quoted in the Catholic Press. Rev. Thomas Reese, S.J., published a representative response in the *National Catholic Reporter*, for which we have received permission to reproduce for members of our province.

Several friars encouraged us to post Gomez' piece. Others opposed doing so, reflecting the emotion that can be part of a discussion on secularization. In the end, the steering committee decided to distribute both pieces in the spirit of transparency. Both documents have been published. Both received criticism and support. Both point fingers. Both strive to better understand the what, whence and futurity of secularization. We cannot pretend these and other documents like them have not been published.

However, these publishing events can also lead us to consider what we want to do in the face of secularization. The Secularization Project has taken the position from the start that we do not strive to fight or oppose secularization. The steering committee believes that would be futile. Rather, our focus has been on understanding how secularization is affecting us, leading to possible choices for witnessing in its midst. The approaching final phase of The Secularization Project will ask that very question of us all.

Scroll down to read the documents by Archbishop Gomez and Rev. Reese.

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Reflections on the Church and America's New Religions

 archbishopgomez.org/blog/reflections-on-the-church-and-americas-new-religions



*Most Reverend José H. Gomez
Archbishop of Los Angeles*

*Address delivered by video to
Congress of Catholics and Public Life
Madrid, Spain
November 4, 2021*

My friends,

I am sorry that I cannot be with you in person. But I am honored by your invitation to address this distinguished Congress.

You have asked me to address a serious, sensitive, and complicated topic — the rise of new secular ideologies and movements for social change in the United States and the implications for the Church.

And of course, I think we all understand that what the Church is facing in the United States is also happening in your country and in the countries throughout Europe, in different degrees and in different ways.

With that understanding, I want to offer my reflections today in three parts.

First, I want to talk about the wider context of the global movement of secularization and de-Christianization and the impact of the pandemic.

Second, I want to offer a “spiritual interpretation” of the new social justice and political identity movements in America.

Finally, I want to suggest some evangelical priorities for the Church as we confront the realities of the present moment.

So, let’s begin.

1. *Secularization and De-Christianization*

I think we all know that while there are unique conditions in the United States, similar broad patterns of aggressive secularization have long been at work in Spain and elsewhere in Europe.

An elite leadership class has risen in our countries that has little interest in religion and no real attachments to the nations they live in or to local traditions or cultures. This group, which is in charge in corporations, governments, universities, the media, and in the cultural and professional establishments, wants to establish what we might call a global civilization, built on a consumer economy and guided by science, technology, humanitarian values, and technocratic ideas about organizing society.

In this elite worldview, there is no need for old-fashioned belief systems and religions. In fact, as they see it, religion, especially Christianity, only gets in the way of the society they hope to build.

That is important to remember. In practice, as our Popes have pointed out, secularization means “de-Christianization.” For years now, there has been a deliberate effort in Europe and America to erase the Christian roots of society and to suppress any remaining Christian influences.

In your program for this Congress, you allude to “cancel culture” and “political correctness.” And we recognize that often what is being canceled and corrected are perspectives rooted in Christian beliefs — about human life and the human person, about marriage, the family, and more.

In your society and mine, the “space” that the Church and believing Christians are permitted to occupy is shrinking. Church institutions and Christian-owned businesses are increasingly challenged and harassed. The same is true for Christians working in education, health care, government, and other sectors. Holding certain Christian beliefs is said to be a threat to the freedoms, and even to the safety, of other groups in our societies.

One more point of context. We all noticed the dramatic social changes in our societies with the coming of the coronavirus and the way our government authorities responded to the pandemic.

I think history will look back and see that this pandemic did not change our societies as much as it accelerated trends and directions that were already at work. Social changes that might have taken decades to play out, are now moving more rapidly in the wake of this disease and our societies' responses.

That is certainly true in the United States.

The new social movements and ideologies that we are talking about today, were being seeded and prepared for many years in our universities and cultural institutions. But with the tension and fear caused by the pandemic and social isolation, and with the killing of an unarmed black man by a white policeman and the protests that followed in our cities, these movements were fully unleashed in our society.

This context is important in understanding our situation in the United States. The name George Floyd is now known worldwide. But that is because for many people in my country, myself included, his tragedy became a stark reminder that racial and economic inequality are still deeply embedded in our society.

We need to keep this reality of inequality in mind. Because these movements that we are talking about are part of a wider discussion — a discussion that is absolutely essential — about how to build an American society that expands opportunities for everyone, no matter what color their skin is or where they came from, or their economic status.

With that, let's turn to my next point.

2. *America's new political religions*

Here is my thesis. I believe the best way for the Church to understand the new social justice movements is to understand them as pseudo-religions, and even replacements and rivals to traditional Christian beliefs.

With the breakdown of the Judeo-Christian worldview and the rise of secularism, political belief systems based on social justice or personal identity have come to fill the space that Christian belief and practice once occupied.

Whatever we call these movements — “social justice,” “wokeness,” “identity politics,” “intersectionality,” “successor ideology” — they claim to offer what religion provides.

They provide people with an explanation for events and conditions in the world. They offer a sense of meaning, a purpose for living, and the feeling of belonging to a community.

Even more than that, like Christianity, these new movements tell their own “story of salvation.”

To explain what I mean, let me try to briefly compare the Christian story with what we might call the “woke” story or the “social justice” story.

The Christian story, in its simplest form, goes something like this:

We are created in the image of God and called to a blessed life in union with him and with our neighbors. Human life has a God-given “telos,” an intention and direction. Through our sin, we are alienated from God and from one another, and we live in the shadow of our own death.

By the mercy of God and his love for each of us, we are saved through the dying and rising of Jesus Christ. Jesus reconciles us to God and our neighbors, gives us the grace to be transformed in his image, and calls us to follow him in faith, loving God and our neighbor, working to build his Kingdom on earth, all in confident hope that we will have eternal life with him in the world to come.

That’s the Christian story. And now more than ever, the Church and every Catholic needs to know this story and proclaim it in all its beauty and truth.

We need to do that, because there is another story out there today — a rival “salvation” narrative that we hear being told in the media and in our institutions by the new social justice movements. What we might call the “woke” story goes something like this:

We cannot know where we came from, but we are aware that we have interests in common with those who share our skin color or our position in society. We are also painfully aware that our group is suffering and alienated, through no fault of our own. The cause of our unhappiness is that we are victims of oppression by other groups in society. We are liberated and find redemption through our constant struggle against our oppressors, by waging a battle for political and cultural power in the name of creating a society of equity.

Clearly, this is a powerful and attractive narrative for millions of people in American society and in societies across the West. In fact, many of America’s leading corporations, universities, and even public schools are actively promoting and teaching this vision.

This story draws its strength from the simplicity of its explanations — the world is divided into innocents and victims, allies and adversaries.

But this narrative is also attractive because, as I said earlier, it responds to real human needs and suffering. People are hurting, they do feel discriminated against and excluded from opportunities in society.

We should never forget this. Many of those who subscribe to these new movements and belief systems are motivated by noble intentions. They want to change conditions in society that deny men and women their rights and opportunities for a good life.

Of course, we all want to build a society that provides equality, freedom, and dignity for every person. But we can only build a just society on the foundation of the truth about God and human nature.

This has been the constant teaching of our Church and her Popes for nearly two centuries, now.

Our Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI warned that the eclipse of God leads to the eclipse of the human person. Again and again he told us: when we forget God, we no longer see the image of God in our neighbor.

Pope Francis makes the same point powerfully in *Fratelli Tutti*: unless we believe that God is our Father, there is no reason for us to treat others as our brothers and sisters.

That is precisely the problem here.

Today's critical theories and ideologies are profoundly atheistic. They deny the soul, the spiritual, transcendent dimension of human nature; or they think that it is irrelevant to human happiness. They reduce what it means to be human to essentially physical qualities — the color of our skin, our sex, our notions of gender, our ethnic background, or our position in society.

No doubt that we can recognize in these movements certain elements of liberation theology, they seem to be coming from the same Marxist cultural vision. Also, these movements resemble some of the heresies that we find in Church history.

Like the early Manicheans, these movements see the world as a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Like the Gnostics, they reject creation and the body. They seem to believe that human beings can become whatever we decide to make of ourselves.

These movements are also Pelagian, believing that redemption can be accomplished through our own human efforts, without God.

And as a final point, I would note that these movements are Utopian. They seem to really believe that we can create a kind of “heaven on earth,” a perfectly just society, through our own political efforts.

Again my friends, my point is this: I believe that it is important for the Church to understand and engage these new movements — not on social or political terms, but as dangerous substitutes for true religion.

In denying God, these new movements have lost the truth about the human person. This explains their extremism, and their harsh, uncompromising, and unforgiving approach to politics.

And from the standpoint of the Gospel, because these movements deny the human person, no matter how well-intentioned they are, they cannot promote authentic human flourishing. In fact, as we are witnessing in my country, these strictly secular movements are causing new forms of social division, discrimination, intolerance, and injustice.

3. *What Is to Be Done*

That leads me to my final set of reflections. The question is: What is to be done? How should the Church respond to these new secular movements for social change?

My answer is simple. We need to proclaim Jesus Christ. Boldly, creatively. We need to tell our story of salvation in a new way. With charity and confidence, without fear. This is the Church’s mission in every age and every cultural moment.

We should not be intimidated by these new religions of social justice and political identity. The Gospel remains the most powerful force for social change that the world has ever seen. And the Church has been “antiracist” from the beginning. All are included in her message of salvation.

Jesus Christ came to announce the new creation, the new man and the new woman, given power to become children of God, renewed in the image of their Creator.

Jesus taught us to know and love God as our Father, and he called his Church to carry that good news to the ends of the earth — to gather, from every race and tribe and people, the one worldwide family of God.

That was the meaning of Pentecost, when men and women from every nation under heaven heard the Gospel in their own native language. That is what St. Paul meant when he said that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free.

Of course, in the Church we have not always lived up to our beautiful principles, or carried out the mission entrusted to us by Christ.

But the world does not need a new secular religion to replace Christianity. It needs you and me to be better witnesses. Better Christians. Let us begin by forgiving, loving, sacrificing for others, putting away spiritual poisons like resentment and envy.

Personally, I find inspiration in the saints and holy figures in my country's history.

In this moment, I am looking especially to the Servant of God Dorothy Day. For me, she offers an important witness for how Catholics can work to change our social order through radical detachment and love for the poor grounded in the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, and the works of mercy.

She also had a keen sense that before we can change the hearts of others, we have to change ourselves.

She once said: "I see only too clearly how bad people are. I wish I did not see it so. It is my own sins that give me such clarity. But I cannot worry much about your sins and miseries when I have so many of my own. ... My prayer from day to day is that God will so enlarge my heart that I will see you all, and live with you all, in his love."

This is the attitude that we need right now, when our society is so polarized and divided.

I am also drawing inspiration from the witness of Venerable Augustus Tolton. His is an amazing and truly American story. He was born in slavery, escaped into freedom with his mother, and became the first black man to be ordained a priest in my country.

Father Tolton once said, "The Catholic Church deplores a double slavery — that of the mind and that of the body. She endeavors to free us of both."

Today, we need this confidence in the power of the Gospel.

We are at risk right now of sliding into a new "tribalism," a pre-Christian idea of humanity as divided into competing groups and factions.

We need to live and proclaim the Gospel as the true path to liberation from every slavery and injustice, spiritual and material. In our preaching and practice, and especially in our love for our neighbors, we need to bear witness to God's beautiful vision of our common humanity — our common origin and common destiny in God.

Finally, in this hour I think the Church must be a voice for individual conscience and tolerance, and we need to promote greater humility and realism about the human condition. Acknowledging our common humanity means recognizing our common frailty. The truth is that we are all sinners, people who want to do the right thing but often do not.

That does not mean we remain passive in the face of social injustice. Never! But we do need to insist that fraternity cannot be built through animosity or division. True religion does not seek to harm or humiliate, to ruin livelihoods or reputations. True religion offers a path for even the worst sinners to find redemption.

One last thought, my friends. And that is the reality of God's providence. We need to hold onto this supernatural understanding, because it is true: God's loving hand still guides our lives and the course of nations.

In the States, the Church is preparing to celebrate next month the 490th anniversary of the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which marks the true spiritual founding of America.

And already, we are seeing signs of an authentic religious awakening going on in America, underneath all the controversy of our politics, the continued clouds of the pandemic, all the uncertainty about where our country is heading.

I am confident that we will see this spiritual awakening grow and spread in the coming decade, as we look ahead to the 500th anniversary of the apparition.

And Our Lady's words at Tepeyac continue to strengthen and inspire me: "Am I not here, I who am your Mother? Are you not in my shadow, under my protection?"

Thank you for your invitation and for listening today. May God bless you all and may Our Lady of Guadalupe continue to intercede for us!

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Gomez, painting Catholics as victims, goes after his woke oppressors

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Thomas Reese

Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese's column for Religion News Service, "Signs of the Times," appears regularly at National Catholic Reporter.

by Thomas Reese by Religion News Service

In a video speech to an international conference in Spain on Nov. 4, Archbishop José Gomez, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, attacked social justice movements, identity politics and intersectionality, as well as "wokeness" and "successor ideology," as "pseudo-religions."

"They provide people with an explanation for events and conditions in the world," the archbishop told the Congress of Catholics and Public Life, meeting in Madrid. "They offer a sense of meaning, a purpose for living, and the feeling of belonging to a community."

Abandoning the term "social justice" to those he considers enemies of religion is surprising, considering

the long history of the church's social teaching. It should be equally surprising that Gomez didn't have anything negative to say about libertarian capitalism or rugged individualism, quintessential American heresies that have been critiqued by Catholic social teaching.

Gomez, on the other hand, believes "the best way for the Church to understand the new social justice movements is to understand them as pseudo-religions, and even replacements and rivals to traditional Christian beliefs."

These pseudo-religions tell a story of humanity, Gomez said, in which "We cannot know where we came from, but we are aware that we have interests in common with those who share our skin color or our position in society."

He criticizes the adherents to these movements for thinking "We are also painfully aware that our group is suffering and alienated, through no fault of our own. The cause of our unhappiness is that we are victims of oppression by other groups in society. We are liberated and find redemption through our constant struggle against our oppressors, by waging a battle for political and cultural power in the name of creating a society of equity."

Although he makes a brief mention of George Floyd and racial and economic inequality, he quickly moves on to his critique of these new movements without saying anything positive about Black Live Matter. Black Catholic leaders, such as the Fr. Bryan Massingale, a Fordham University theologian, expressed "dismay and disbelief" at the speech.

Likewise, Tobias Winright of St. Louis University thought Gomez's remarks seemed at odds with the U.S. bishops' 2018 pastoral letter, "Open Wide Our Hearts," which encouraged openness and dialogue with others working against racism. That document said:

To work at ending racism, we need to engage the world and encounter others — to see, maybe for the first time, those who are on the peripheries of our own limited view. We must invite into dialogue those we ordinarily would not seek out. We must work to form relationships with those we might regularly try to avoid. This demands that we go beyond ourselves, opening our minds and hearts to value and respect the experiences of those who have been harmed by the evil of racism. Love also requires us to invite a change of heart in those who may be dismissive of other's experiences.

What we get from Gomez, however, is condemnation, not dialogue.

"Rather than picking fights with potential dialogue partners and allies for social justice," said Winright, "the truly serious threat posed by violent white nationalism should be addressed with more emphasis."

"Bishop Gomez's remarks," Winright worries, "lift rather than lower the bridge over the moat dividing U.S. Catholics and recent movements in the U.S. seeking to build 'a more perfect union' with true liberty



In this image taken from video, Archbishop José Gomez of Los Angeles, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, addresses the body's virtual assembly on June 16. (AP/United States Conference of Catholic Bishops)

and social justice for all."

Creighton University professor Daniel DiLeo, whose research showed that American bishops have not supported the pope's teaching on climate change, sees this speech as a sign of the wide gap separating the American bishops from the social teaching of Francis and earlier popes.

"This statement is a direct repudiation of the World Meeting of Popular Movements, which Pope Francis founded to encourage collaborative work for social justice between Catholic and secular organizations," said DiLeo. "These sentiments are inconsistent with so many magisterial documents that celebrate 'people of goodwill' who work alongside Catholics for social justice."

Lisa Fullam, professor of moral theology at the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, sees a fundamental theological error at the core of the speech.

While the archbishop believes that these social movements "deny the soul, the spiritual, transcendent dimension of human nature," Fullam said, Gomez seems to forget that "In Catholic tradition, the human person is a body-soul composite, an inextricable union of body and soul."

"But bodies are inevitably particular," she noted. "We are gendered, raced, affected by our environments, etc., in ways that inflect our souls and our spirituality as well as our bodies. To describe social justice movements that serve us in our particular incarnate reality as somehow contrary to the Gospel is simply benighted."

Gomez began his speech by blaming the secularization and de-Christianization of Europe and America on the elites "in charge in corporations, governments, universities, the media, and in the cultural and professional establishments."

While there is no doubt that some of these leaders are antagonistic toward Christianity, this conspiracy view of history leaves no room for the mistakes or sins of the church, which frequently were the cause of antagonism toward the church.

Thus, Gomez is guilty of the very attitude he puts in the mouths of others: "We are also painfully aware that our group is suffering and alienated, through no fault of our own. The cause of our unhappiness is that we are victims of oppression by other groups in society."

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[2] <https://www.ncronline.org/join-conversation>