

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### ***The Triumph of Secularism: It Is Now “Impossible to Believe”***

According to a 2015 Pew survey, 36% of those born between 1990 and 1996 in the US are religiously unaffiliated. Further, church attendance is collapsing among young people—only 27% of millennials attend religious services regularly. With the triumph of a secular worldview, American Christianity is in crisis. The Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution and the digital revolution have all combined to produce a diluted, superficial, shallow Christianity. For many, the Modern and now the Postmodern nature of culture have made God not only irrelevant but no longer necessary. Theologian Albert Mohler relies on sociologist Peter Berger in arguing that 21st century American Christianity has been transformed into a non-cognitive commitment of faith. The binding authority of God's Word no longer applies and a profession of faith in Christ has little theological or even spiritual meaning. Mohler writes that “The meaning of words like morality, personhood, marriage, or virtually any other moral term has radically shifted for many postmodern Americans, making our job as preachers that much more difficult.”

In analyzing the confusion and non-cognitive nature of American Christianity, Mohler also observes that “belief is now a provisional choice, an exercise of personal autonomy. When people identify as believers in Jesus Christ, they are making a far more individualistic statement than was possible in years past.” He also cites philosopher Charles Taylor, who argues that western history is categorized by three intellectual epochs: “pre-Enlightenment impossibility of unbelief; post-Enlightenment possibility of unbelief; and late Modern impossibility of belief.” In the pre-Enlightenment era it was impossible not to believe. No other major worldviews were in competition with biblical Christianity or basic theism. But as the Enlightenment took hold in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, other worldviews were available, causing members of western civilization to reject the supernaturalism of Christianity. Naturalism replaced supernaturalism. The intellectual conditions of Europe and most American university campuses characterize the final epoch where it is impossible to believe. “As Taylor observes, to be a candidate for tenure at a major American university is to inhabit a world in which it is virtually impossible to believe in God . . . In three hundred years, Western intellectual conditions have moved from an impossibility of unbelief to an impossibility of belief.” Thus, we who represent Christ are not only considered marginal but actually “subversive of the new intellectual and moral regime.”

The “impossibility of belief” in this Postmodern culture was perfectly illustrated for me in an article in the *New York Times Magazine* by Mark Oppenheimer entitled “Beyond Unbelief.” This most insightful article focuses on the journey of Bart Campolo, the son of famous evangelical Tony Campolo. Because I want to accurately represent what Oppenheimer says, I

will extensively quote from this article. Bart Campolo ran successful inner-city missions in Philadelphia and Ohio and traveled widely as a guest preacher. But, in the summer of 2011 he suffered a near fatal bicycle accident. After “his near-death experience,” Campolo began questioning his faith as a Christian and his theology. According to Oppenheimer, Campolo’s wife was quite instrumental in the change in his life’s direction. She said, “You know, I think you ought to stop being a professional Christian, since you don’t believe in God, and you don’t believe in heaven, and you don’t believe Jesus rose from the dead three days after dying—and neither do I.” Campolo then began referring to himself as a “post-Christian.” Oppenheimer writes that “he loved everything about Christian ministry except the Christianity. Now that he had crossed over the bridge to apostasy, he needed a new vocation . . . he’d preach secular humanism, a kinder cousin of atheism. He’d help them accept that we’re all going to die, that this life is all there is and that therefore we have to make the most of our brief, glorious time on earth. And he would spread this message using the best evangelical techniques—the same ones he had mastered as a Christian.”

A growing number of non-believers in America now identify themselves as humanist rather than atheist. “That is, they’ve sided with a more welcoming version of nonbelief, focused on the joy and potential inherent in being human rather than on gainsaying others’ convictions. Their project is to talk about leading a good life without God.” Campolo increasingly felt himself being drawn to the humanist chaplaincies on several college campuses across the US. In 2014, he became a humanist chaplain at the University of Southern California. He calls his group the Secular Student Fellowship and between 75 and 100 USC students attend. In his role as humanist chaplain, Campolo relies heavily on the teachings found in several books: Greg M. Epstein’s *Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Believe* and Alan Loy McGinnis’s *The Friendship Factor*, a 1979 megaselling self-help book. Campolo preaches this message: “Happiness, connection and community, which many people attend church to find, can be achieved through human agency. It’s a modest claim but profoundly empowering, in a way that ancient stories may not be, especially when they come from traditions that few young people take literally. Besides, while Campolo believes that life can be meaningful with or without a god, his work these days is less about grandiose metaphysical claims than about simple acts of hand-holding. To 100 or so students, Campolo is a confidant, a stand-in parent, but one who doesn’t expect anything of them.”

Bart Campolo perfectly represents the “impossibility to believe” scenario of this Postmodern world. After his accident (and apparently even before), Campolo could no longer embrace as true the supernatural claims that define genuine, biblical Christianity. He abandoned them and re-oriented his worldview around gentle, non-threatening secular humanism. The pressures and relentless nature of secularization won the day in his life. But, Campolo wanted to continue to minister to the emotional and “spiritual” needs of young adults in college. Hence his Secular Student Fellowship at USC. He helps his students feel good about themselves, rejoice in their collective humanity and have some measure of hope, even though the physical world is all there is. Life is reduced to feelings! Campolo represents the tragedy of secularization. Once you surrender all belief in the supernatural, a huge vacuum opens. Campolo is trying to fill that vacuum in his life and in those of his students with the feel-

goodism of secular humanism. Although he would disagree, one cannot build a life of meaning, of purpose and of hope on a foundation of feeling good about yourself. Reading about Bart Campolo was highly disturbing for me personally, for it truly demonstrates the emptiness of a life without Jesus Christ. I have begun praying for Bart Campolo and for his students. They will never find what they are looking for until they find Jesus.

See Oppenheimer's article in the *New York Times Magazine* (1 January 2017), pp. 42-46 and [www.albertmohler.com](http://www.albertmohler.com) (12 and 23 January 2017).