religions

MDPI

Article

Accommodation, Fortification, or Conversion? Approaches to Catholic Engagement with Secular Culture

Hannah Vaughan-Spruce

Divine Renovation Ministry, London SW7 2HR, UK; hannah.vaughanspruce@divinerenovation.org

Abstract: As the Catholic Church declines in the west, critical questions are raised about its engagement with secular culture. Different engagement models have been experimented with since the 1960s, which I term accommodation, fortification, and conversion. Each model can be assessed according to sociological and theological criteria. While the accommodation model seems to have proven itself sociologically ineffective, compounding the challenge of evangelisation, the two remaining models, while offering more positive signals, still await sufficient sociological testing. This article argues that both the fortification and conversion models are more theologically authentic than the accommodation model and proposes that the conversion model, in its particular understanding of the 'secular', is likely to see greater evangelistic fruits.

Keywords: Catholic Church; evangelisation; secular; culture

Academic Editor: Jacob Phillips

Received: 12 December 2024
Revised: 19 January 2025
Accepted: 22 January 2025
Published: 30 January 2025

Citation: Vaughan-Spruce, Hannah. 2025. Accommodation, Fortification, or Conversion? Approaches to Catholic Engagement with Secular Culture. *Religions* 16: 160. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16020160

Copyright: © 2025 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. Introduction

It barely needs to be stated that we are seeing a decline in Christianity across the west. To take the Catholic Church in Britain as an example, in 1999, typical weekly Catholic Mass attendance was 1,264,000. By 2022, it was 594,000 (Kinnear 2023). This is a decrease of over half in the space of 23 years. To place this figure in stark comparison, the average weekly live attendance at a football match is 830,000.[1]

And yet, perhaps counterintuitively, in some pockets, there are hints towards a renewed interest in Christianity. Easter 2024 saw surprising surges in Baptisms and Mass attendance in certain corners of the western world, with one US parish receiving 82 people into the Church (Daude 2024). An astonishing 7000 adults were baptised in France at Easter 2024, a 31% increase on the previous year (Catholic News Agency 2024). In London, Westminster Cathedral reported having to turn worshippers away on Good Friday 2024 as the building reached its 3000-person capacity (Colsy 2024).

Signs of spiritual hunger in the culture are also seen in high profile interest in Christianity, and even conversions, among those who would not have considered themselves Christian believers: historian Tom Holland, academic Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and psychologist Jordan Peterson, among others.

There is no reason why these new signs of interest in Christianity—however slight—might not be reflected too in the unspoken hearts of countless individuals. We know that, in Britain, 61% of those who class themselves 'nones' are former Christians, 11% lapsed Catholics (Bullivant 2017). We learn some fascinating facts about 'nones' in Stephen Bullivant's 2017 study. On a scale of 0–10 where 0 is 'not at all religious' and 10 is 'very religious', 15.3% of 'nones' remarkably ranked themselves between 7 and 10. A little above 10% said they attended religious services at least once a month or more frequently, while 9% said they prayed at least once a month, with 4% saying they prayed every day! In other

words, practice of religion, while revealing something of a person's spiritual life, is not a completely reliable barometer of spiritual searching and interest.

The interior nature of such soul-searching makes robust conclusions extremely difficult, and yet, regardless, these small signs are a good impetus to Christian churches to do their own soul-searching. How do they interface with their local neighbourhoods, where—conceivably—thousands of inhabitants may find themselves curious about spiritual or existential questions, if not on a full-blown, restless, spiritual quest?

The theological stance we take concerning how the Catholic Church interfaces with secular culture is important for many reasons, but the reason I am concerned with in this article is a practical one. Theological posture flows into our attitudes and behaviours; it determines our pastoral strategies; it influences whether and how we will engage with the spiritual seekers in our neighbourhoods. This has profound implications for evangelisation, which is not only the Church's task but her identity (cf. Matthew 28:18-20; see also Pope Paul VI's (1975) encyclical, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 14).

2. What Is 'Secular'?

From the earliest days of Christianity, Christians have wrestled to understand how best to remain faithful both to Christ while living in the world, and to his command to, 'go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 28:18). Their answers rest on interpretations of how Christ himself lived in the world, the teachings he gave his followers, and the subsequent experiences of the Body of Christ, the Church.

Twenty-first century western Christians view these questions today from a different vantage point from those who lived 100 years ago, and from a vastly different vantage point from those who lived 500 years ago. This is because the world, the wider culture in which the Church exists, changes, and with it, its relationship with the Church. Belonging inescapably to the world as well as to the Church, our conclusions about how to interact with the world also change.

The way we understand and use words changes, too. It is important to define how we understand the term, 'secular', from the outset. How we understand and use 'secular' influences our stance on engagement with the world.

In his epic work, A Secular Age, philosopher Charles Taylor outlines three uses of the term. 'Secular 1' equates to self-contained public spaces such as political or economic realms with their own rationality, distinguished from the sacred spaces of religion.

A second use of 'secular'—'Secular 2'—came into use with the advent of modernity, where a post-Enlightenment account of the world shook off its childish Christian worldview. This understanding of 'secular' refers to an areligious space or standpoint. Underlying the use of the word in this way is an assumption that the modern world achieves more advancement when religious beliefs wither and the world is disenchanted of its superstitious beliefs. This is the version of 'secular' understood in 'secularism' and 'secularisation'.

A third version of 'secular' is what is meant in Taylor's title, A Secular Age. Here, 'Secular 3' refers to the society in which religion or belief in God is understood to be an option among others. The shift to secularity indicates a shift in 'the conditions of belief' (Taylor 2007, p. 3); the world has shifted from one where belief in God is unchallenged and unproblematic, to one where it is one option among others and far less plausible. Religious belief can still exist in such a society, and even be visible and fervent, but a plurality of options creates conditions in which it is much harder to believe. Societal structures which once existed to increase plausibility of religious belief no longer exist, and individuals' beliefs are fragile and contestable.

Taking this understanding of the term 'secular', I want to explore how the Church might engage with the world within such a context. To help us explore this question, theologian Richard Niebuhr's fivefold typology in his classic 1951 work, Christ and Culture, offers a framework. In this article, I employ three of Niebuhr's five typologies of how the Church may interact with culture, selecting the three most relevant to Catholic approaches to evangelisation since the 1960s. The 1960s was a watershed decade of change for Catholic engagement with the world. The Second Vatican Council coincided with Christianity's precipitous decline in the west already mentioned, which catalysed 'Secular 3' wider culture. This is the context in which Niebuhr's three typologies—which I term Accommodation, Fortification, and Transformation—have taken on concrete form in pastoral settings across the Catholic Church.

I argue that one of these three has been widely and extensively tested and, on the whole, been proven wanting. Having conditioned the outlooks of maybe millions of Catholics, it is now, in many pockets of the Church, largely abandoned. The remaining two are still in mainstream use, and, I surmise, greater time will eventually reveal the evangelistic potential of each.

3. Accommodation: 'Christ of Culture'

It is important to recall as we consider each approach that they are ahistorical typologies applied to particular historical contexts. Any outlook that absolutises the culture of a particular era as thoroughly in accord with Christ falls into the 'Christ of culture' 'type'. Here, no conflict is perceived between Christ and the wider culture. Culture has a seemingly equal dignity with Christ, and he is understood through its lens. A Christian may be equally at home in the Church and in the world. This type tends to highlight the elements of the culture that accord with Christ, and the teachings and actions of Christ that harmonise with the culture.

What does this look like, as what I am terming accommodation, when applied to our own era? In the 1960s–current day era that we are considering, this type manifests as a kind of cultural Christianity that emphasises a domesticated, ethical dimension of the Gospel. Christ stands for 'a peaceful, cooperative society achieved by modern training' (Niebuhr [1951] 2001, p. 91). In Niebuhr's words, 'man's greatest task is to maintain his best culture' (p. 105). Those who adopt this model have an abiding optimism about the progress of culture within history, and therefore, this type belongs to the optimistic, almost triumphalist thinking of modernity.

We find some hints towards this outlook in Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) (Vatican II 1965). The Council was opened with a tone of optimism, and, in his commentary on GS, Joseph Ratzinger comments,

> [Pope John XXIII's] optimism essentially consisted in rejecting the romantic nostalgia for the Middle Ages which makes people forget that every age belongs to God and can and must stand open, each in its own time, to God's eternal present (Ratzinger 1969, p. 123).

Steeped in what Ratzinger termed an 'affirmation of the present' (Ratzinger 1969), the ten paragraphs of GS in culture herald 'a new age of human history' (n. 54), awakening bright opportunities: 'New ways are open. . . for the perfection and further extension of culture' (n. 54). Lavishly confident in progress, this section dreams of 'a more universal form of human culture, which better promotes and expresses the unity of the human race to the degree that it preserves the particular aspects of the different civilisations' (n. 54); 'the unification of the world' (n. 55), 'the birth of a new humanism, one in which man is defined first of all by this responsibility to his brothers and to history' (n. 55). Importantly,

Article 56 does concede, however, to the problems to which a new global culture could give rise.

Such an optimism about wider culture, while highlighting its values and progress, risks overlooking the ways in which the wider culture opposes the actions and teachings of Christ. Increasing moral confusion and its impact on societal structures became glaringly more apparent as each decade following the 1960s unfolded, in a way that the Council fathers could not have foreseen. A 'Secular 3' reality is now firmly in place, where diverse religions, atheism, agnosticism, and manifold other spiritual outlooks do not tend towards 'unification' or a 'new humanism', but rather compete, jostle, and contest one another. Individual Catholics have not found themselves leading a pursuit towards 'a more universal form of human culture' as the fathers envisaged, but rather, struggling to maintain their own faith amid a plethora of options now open to them.

Taylor describes this context vividly as a 'spiritual supernova' (Taylor 2007, p. 300): far from being the rationalistic, monolithic experience presumed by a 'Secular 2' outlook, the feel of our current era is fraught with tensions, and the experience of believers is one of 'cross-pressure' as they are constantly faced with an array of options. Belief will never be smooth or unproblematic.

This turbulent spiritual reality is overlooked by the accommodationist. Beneath their standpoint has been a naïve assumption that the goals of the wider culture are the same goals as the Church. To be relevant, the Church needs to accommodate her teachings and practice to contemporary thinking on moral issues, particularly human sexuality. Such an outlook has seen wide pastoral application across the Church in the west since the 1960s, down to the local Catholic parish. While individual Catholics may not support a wholesale accommodation of the Church's teaching and practice to the wider culture, they are undoubtedly subconsciously formed by the ways their parish engages with the local neighbourhood: and, as we shall see, these ways have been, on a grand scale, informed by the accommodationist approach.

The Council coincided with a period when the Church in the west found her sociological purposes less relevant than they had been in the past. American sociologist, Jay Dolan, notes that, up until the 1950s, when mass immigration to America ended, Catholic parishes had had a critical role in the USA in integrating immigrants into society: socially and educationally, parishes contributed to immigrants' socialisation into a new identity as Americans (Dolan 1985). Catholic neighbourhoods had played powerful identity-affirming roles.[2] As these cultural and social purposes became less relevant, the parish found itself dissatisfied at functioning more and more as a service station supplying religious and spiritual needs. Likely influenced by the popular understanding of Vatican II's teaching on the Church's engagement with the world, the parish groped for new social relevance. Blurring its distinctiveness from the rest of society, 'Many became community institutions committed to serving the needs of all people regardless of race or religion' (Dolan 1985, p. 449). When British sociologist Michael Hornsby-Smith undertook a wide-ranging investigation into the state of Catholicism in England and Wales in the 1970s, he discovered that the outlook of Catholics on questions of faith and morals was increasingly indistinguishable from those of the wider population. The faith of many Catholics was diluted: a 'rational-pragmatic worldview and its concomitant emphasis on 'making up your own mind'' (Hornsby-Smith 1991, p. 229).

With decades of hindsight, we can safely reach two conclusions: that, not only does the accommodationist approach inherently distort authentic Catholic teaching, but it has also proven to be sociologically catastrophic. We failed to detect that the diverse spiritual options facing Catholics in a 'spiritual supernova' would be irresistible, and that the faith of millions would not be strong enough to overcome the 'cross-pressure' of the wider culture.

Accommodation has, in fact, disastrously accelerated this dismantling of faith, contributing to, rather than resisting, the general forces behind the breakdown of formal socialisation within the family, school, and parish.

When one gives wholehearted affirmation to the wider culture, viewing Christ through its lens, one ceases to see one's faith as distinctive. Reasons to practise according to traditional criteria become fewer. Certainly, the statistics cited in the introduction speak for themselves. For a pure 'Christ of culture' approach, of course, these figures are not particularly distressing since (we recall from Niebuhr) 'man's greatest task is to maintain his best culture' (Niebuhr [1951] 2001, p. 105). Yet, while such an optimistic view about the progress of culture within history might have persisted for decades past the Council, we would be hard pressed to find many who maintain such an arguably naïve stance today.

For the Catholic parish that attempted for decades to accommodate itself to the spiritual and cultural climate, its corrosion by the acids of modernity is now something of a wakeup call.

4. Fortification: 'Christ Against Culture'

Some of those (who remain) of the generations who were raised in Catholic parishes practising cultural accommodation today find themselves as the parish priests and lay leaders of those same parishes. Unsurprisingly, there can be extreme reactions to parishes' decades-long dabbling with accommodation. No longer naïve about the corrosive impact of modernity, their theological stance is one of deep suspicion towards it and the 'Secular 3' culture it catalyses.

Such a stance falls in the camp of Niebuhr's 'Christ against culture' type, which would come closest to arguing that culture without Christ is lost. This type finds expression, for example, when believers are called to leave the 'world' for monastic life, or when missionaries call converts to abandon entirely the customs of their society (Niebuhr [1951] 2001, p. 41). In this type, sin and evil are located in the 'world' from which believers are called to withdraw. Those who would hold this viewpoint today would argue that modern, 'Secular 3' culture is so far from the values of Christ, that the best option for Christians is to hunker down within their own communities in order to preserve their own culture and values.[3]

How might we unpack this stance theologically? If we were to probe modernity's 'constellation of understandings of person, nature, society, and the good' (Taylor 1995, p. 27), we would perceive a 'mutation' from the earlier, pre-modern 'constellation', 'an entire reconfiguration of meaning' (Smith 2014, p. 47). This is not to be taken lightly according to theologian David Schindler, who explains why it is important to consider the meaning of ideas and the form they give to external structures, institutions, and, we might add, culture. According to Schindler, sin, or the falling away from God's will and grace—which we have witnessed on a massive scale in the wider culture since the 1960s—

> . . .affects the order of intelligence, and thus the cultural institutions which are 'in*form*ed' by intelligence. In other words, there is such a thing as a 'bad' (badly ordered) idea, which in turn can give the wrong sort of 'form' or 'shape' to institutions, and indeed to the way of life of a culture. It is the internal structure provided by an 'idea' which gives external structures (institutions and the like) their *meaning* (Schindler 1995, p. 196).

Behind the external structures and institutions of modernity there are meanings, a 'constellation' of them, which we cannot blithely adopt, as the accommodationist does. Aidan Nichols OP agrees with the need to tease apart the 'internal structures' behind external ones:

> It is chimerical to suppose that such refined metaphysics [of probing internal meanings] is superfluous for cultural activity . . . Every practice will always turn out to have some kind of 'onto-logic', and so a spirituality or anti-spirituality that animates it. If it is not Trinitarian—which is as much as to say, if it does not bear the form of love—then it will, in the modern era, almost certainly be mechanistic and controlling, for the underlying logic of the Enlightenment traditions is that 'self-centric' variety which most naturally expresses itself in reliance on technique, privileges go-getting activity not contemplative receiving, and treats efficacy as assertion rather than creative generosity (see Rowland 2003, p. xiii).

Schindler, with a focus on his own country (the USA), traces closely how, since its founding in the eighteenth century, reason (truth) has been increasingly abstracted from love, and nature from grace to the point where, today, they are in 'outright opposition' (Schindler 1995, p. 210). While reason and nature assert their autonomy, love and grace are 'marginalised as arbitrary matters best kept private' (p. 210). These are 'logical' developments, according to Schindler, since although entwined with love at the time of America's founding, there was already a mechanical or rationalist worldview prevalent:

> . . .however much America's moral and religious will, for example at the time of the founding, resisted the mechanising and relativizing of personal relations and the secularising of culture, America's intelligence—that is, (largely implicit) ontology—was already sowing the seeds whose 'logical' fruit is this more complete mechanising of relations and secularising of culture (Schindler 1995, p. 211).

Schindler's reasoning derives from a von Balthasarian theology which would seek the Trinitarian form imaged in culture and institutions, to identify them as truly Christian. The unravelling of form and love, and the beauty which integrates them, in culture, is owing to an intrinsic rationalism or mechanism in modernity that leads logically away from the Trinitarian form and towards atheistic secularism. What results is a culture with the form of a machine that is resistant to grace according to Schindler, and is, in von Balthasar's words:

> . . . a world without women, without children, without reverence for love in poverty and humiliation—a world in which power and the profit-margin are the sole criteria, where the disinterested, the useless, the purposeless is despised, persecuted and in the end exterminated—a world in which art itself is forced to wear the mask and features of technique (Balthasar 1969, pp. 114–15).

Pope John Paul II, too, recognised that, where the world is organised without God, it is necessarily organised against humanity (Pope John Paul II 1989, p. 266). In Denver, he famously called this the 'culture of death' (Pope John Paul II 1993), expanding on earlier analysis:

> More than ever, in fact, man is seriously threatened by *anti-culture* which reveals itself, among other ways, in growing violence, murderous confrontations, exploitation of instincts and selfish interests (Pope John Paul II 1984, n. 8).

Theologians in this vein, including Schindler and Nichols, would critique the Council fathers' over-reaching praise of modern culture in GS because of the dangerous 'naturalism' in their outlook. Here, nature so absorbs grace that its activities are no longer seen as needing any radical transformation from God, missing his transcendence and eschatological call (cf. Schindler and Bouyer 1990, p. 11). This is the heart of the critique levelled at the 'Christ of culture' type by those more wedded to a 'Christ against culture' one. Tracey Rowland comments that GS's section on culture 'remains suggestive of the Liberal-humanist tradition with its idea of self-perfection through education and exercise of will-power' (Rowland 2003, p. 25).

How might such a theological stance play out practically? Pointing to the 'anti-spirituality' and Godless 'onto-logic' of much in the wider culture leaves one feeling it is all somewhat irredeemable. It is Rowland who gives perhaps the clearest statement of how the Church should, in this context, evangelise:

> Christians immerse themselves in the culture of the Church, and the Church, through her sacraments, liturgies, scholarship, religious and laity, Christens the world (Rowland 2003, p. 2).

In this type, which I am terming, fortification, the 'culture of the Church' must be strengthened against the ravages of modern corrosion. Only keeping authentic Christian culture pure, in its integrity, can it have any chance of 'Christening the world'. Here, we envisage oases of Christian life, unsullied by the culture, dotted across the otherwise Godless landscape. Their existence alone 'Christens the world': the emphasis is foremost on strengthening Christianity within these fortifications, rather than engaging those outside and lost.

Before suggesting some theological critique to this position, we might first of all make an observation. Recalling Taylor's three ways to understand 'secular', we perhaps see in the fortification approach an (unwittingly) adoption of an Enlightenment 'Secular 2' narrative. This outlook sees ultimate secularisation of all western society as inevitable, and to achieve this outcome insists on a narrative of a largely areligious culture, a rationalistic, monolithic experience. Does the fortificationist unconsciously adopt this narrative by painting wider culture as Godless, antagonistic to religious belief? By using 'secular' as a negative word, this stance seems to come into agreement with an Enlightenment narrative, conceding to it, yet determining to hold fast against the violent, ever-progressing march of secularisation.

There are three theological problems we might identify in the fortification stance. The first is that, in proposing to fortify 'the culture of the Church' against the onslaught of secularisation, its proponents seem to conceive of culture ahistorically. A particular culture seems to be reified (one would assume a pre-modern one), but in crowning any particular culture '*the* culture of the Church', one slips into the 'Christ of culture' type. Here, Christ is understood through the lens of this culture, rather than recognising his transcendence above all human cultures. We see an ironic mirroring of GS's optimism for twentieth century culture; the optimism here is for a supposedly timeless 'culture of the Church' that is able to Christen the world regardless of its particular cultural character.

A second problem we might identify is a failure to recognise that the Church herself is part of the *genus humanum*. Ratzinger, in his commentary on the Council, is critical of a 'deeply-rooted extrinsicism of ecclesiastical thought' that allows the Church somehow to stand outside the human race, 'retreat into a special little ecclesiastical world from which an attempt is then made to speak to the rest of the world' (Ratzinger 1969, p. 119). Ratzinger is here speaking about theological technique, but his warning may apply to any notion that one can extract oneself from the cross-pressure of modernity; after all, the believer's worldview is just as saturated with the 'nova effect' as the non-believer. Romano Guardini, while certainly not a proponent of anti-Christian mass culture that flowed from modernity, nevertheless has suggested that religious response to modernity has often made Christianity seem 'an enemy of the human spirit' (Guardini 1950, p. 61). Observing that we cannot extract ourselves from our modern conditioning, Guardini adds, 'our age is not just an external path that we tread; it is ourselves' (Guardini [1959] 1994, p. 81). Likewise, Louis Dupré's definition of modernity speaks to this ineludiable reality:

> Modernity is an event that has transformed the relationship between the cosmos, its transcendent source, *and its human interpreter* (Dupré 1993, p. 249; my italics).

Those who propose immersion in 'the culture of the Church' seem to overlook that 21st century Christians are inescapably products of and conditioned by the modern world. It is not possible, in other words, for such a culture to exist, untainted by the immanence and cross-pressure of post-modernity. Theologian and Vatican II *peritus*, Albert Dondeyne, taking a more historical outlook, remarks that

> It would be mistaken to regard this catalogue of difficulties and dangers [of the modern world] as a kind of jeremiad. Pessimism and optimism are out of place here since both are a flight from harsh reality. Only by having the courage to place oneself in the midst of these contradictions can we meet the cultural task of the present day (see Semmelroth 1969, p. 180).

'Placing ourselves in the midst of contradictions' is closer to a more hopeful, 'Secular 3' understanding of the culture. One can accept the difficulty of holding onto contested and fragilised belief, while at the same time perceiving that such a plurality of options means that atheism and agnosticism are contested just as strongly as Christianity. This outlook eschews the Enlightenment secularisation narrative and makes sense of the data cited in the introduction revealing 'nones' who pray daily. In other words, amid the undoubted 'anti-spirituality' there are, remarkably, air pockets open to transcendence.

The possibility of hope about modern culture indicates a third problem with the fortification approach. In its (understandable) condemnation of culture structured according to Godless 'onto-logic', it does not seem to admit of any redeemable qualities. As we proceed to explore the third and final type, I shall argue that this lack of hopefulness about modern culture misses the good in it that may be redeemed.

Before moving on, it is important to note a final critique, this time a practical one. Sheltering itself from aggressive secularism, the fortification approach has a particular interpretation of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18. Practically, evangelisation is by *attraction*: that is, relying on the secular, post-modern individual to witness 'the culture of the Church' being lived in Christian oases, and to be drawn towards it. There seems little emphasis on the '*Go*' imperative in the Great Commission, which suggests a movement outward, 'to all nations.' The emphasis, rather, seems to be on, 'Come and see.'

5. Conversion: 'Christ Transforms Culture'

Like the previous approach, this final type acknowledges a dualism or distinction between Christ and culture. And yet it neither rejects human institutions, nor sees them as wholly negative. It relies on a narrative of Christ as the Redeemer not only of the individual, but of the individual in community, and of all being. Nature is not totally corrupt. This type seeks the conversion of culture. Unlike the accommodation approach, this type takes seriously the reality of sin and its effect on nature: 'corrupt nature produces perverse culture and perverse culture corrupts nature' (Niebuhr [1951] 2001, p. 211). As such, nature and culture need redemption. We might note that this approach is central to the pontificate of Pope Francis, most clearly embodied in his Apostolic Exhortation, The Joy of the Gospel (Francis 2013), where he notes that

> Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the 'peripheries' in need of the light of the Gospel (n. 20).

To adopt this stance, one must see something in modern culture which is good and redeemable. We might here return to Taylor who proposes a characteristic unique to modern culture which he believes is not completely corrupt, and in fact, contains a noble, moral ideal. This is what he calls the 'ethic of authenticity', which is, in shorthand, 'being

true to oneself', 'finding the design of my life myself, against the demands of external conformity' (Taylor 1991, pp. 15, 68). He describes it as

> ...the understanding... that each one of us has his/her own way of realising our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside (Taylor 2007, p. 486).

When applied to religion,

> The religious life or practice that I become part of must not only be my choice, but it must speak to me, it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand this (Taylor 2007, p. 486).

In what he calls the Age of Authenticity, 'bare choice as a primal value, irrespective of what it is a choice between, or in what domain' (Taylor 2007, p. 478) is paramount, and the highest virtue is tolerance, 'the sin which is not tolerated is intolerance' (p. 484).

Immediately, we detect the difficulties that theologians who regard modern culture as anti-Christ would see in such an ethic. The triumphing of 'individualism as self-fulfilment' (Taylor 1991, p. 16) is surely not in keeping with the values of Christ: they would likely equate such individualism and subjectivism with 'hedonism' and 'narcissism' (p. 16).

But should we dismiss this 'ethic of authenticity' so readily as self-indulgent? Taylor thinks this would be hasty: he is convinced that 'there is a powerful moral ideal at work here, however debased and travestied its expression might be' (Taylor 1991, p. 15). By seeing in the value of authenticity a 'moral ideal', Taylor means 'a picture of what a better or higher mode of life would be, where 'better' and 'higher' are defined not in terms of what we happen to desire or need, but offer a standard of what we ought to desire' (Taylor 1991, p. 16). Certainly, this moral ideal betrays itself, giving itself a bad reputation among moral conservatives, and he traces these movements in The Ethics of Authenticity. But he maintains it is an ideal that is 'very worthwhile in itself', and needs 'retrieval' (Taylor 1991, p. 23).

'Retrieval' has similar overtones to the *redemption* of the conversion approach to culture engagement. For Taylor, for authenticity to be retrieved—or redeemed—it would have to incorporate the reality that human life is fundamentally dialogical (Taylor 1991, p. 33) and can never be purely subjective or self-defined. This is where the goodness in authenticity can be brought to fulfilment. One's identity, tastes, desires, opinions, and aspirations can be attended to, but they only make sense fully when considered against a horizon: one thing we cannot do, 'if we are to define ourselves significantly, is suppress or deny the horizons against which these things take on significance' (p. 37). Denying the horizon is where the subjectivist principle can destroy itself. Thus, Taylor summarises,

> ...authenticity (A) involves (i) creation and construction as well as discovery, (ii) originality, and frequently (iii) opposition to the rules of society and even potentially to what we recognise as morality. But it is also true, as we saw, that it (B) requires (i) openness to horizons of significance (for otherwise the creation loses the background that can save it from insignificance) and (ii) a self-definition in dialogue (Taylor 1991, p. 66).

The possibility of 'retrieving' or 'redeeming' a moral ideal such as authenticity from the modern age presents a new opportunity for engagement with culture upon which this third approach seizes. This moral ideal, purified from the modernity from which it originates, may provide a framework for a spirituality that precisely engages the quest-like shape of the post-modern individual's searches—without adopting what is often the distorted, individuating content of such spirituality (Taylor 2007, p. 516). Taylor points to spiritual quests that can end in religion, citing the Taizé community and World Youth Day as cases in point (Taylor 2007, pp. 509, 517). It avoids the extreme of accommodation which

in many cases adopts the content as well as the framework of this spirituality, falling into moral relativism. Rather, it is an outlook that authentically fulfils GS's hopeful approach to modern culture. It sees in it, not only an anti-Christian onto-logic that must be fortified against, but rather, opportunity to reach the nonreligious in a 'Secular 3' landscape, where the Christian past 'haunts' us 'like a city FM station in the countryside' that fades in and out (Taylor 2007, p. 521).

It is clear, then, that the conversion approach holds together both the anti-Christianity of modern culture, *and* the redeemability of some of its aspects, in something of a synthesis with the fortification approach. This is backed up by some who we would otherwise consider as adopting a solely fortification approach. While strongly condemning the 'culture of death', Pope John Paul II at the same time speaks of 'a convergence of conditions' with which the Church could authentically ally herself:

> If by modernity we mean a convergence of conditions that permit a human being to express better his or her own maturity, spiritual, moral, and cultural, in dialogue with the Creator and with creation, then the Church of the Council saw itself as the 'soul' of modernity (Pope John Paul II 1994, p. 5).

While the conversion approach may concede to much of the analysis of the fortification approach, its critical theological foundation distinguishes it from the latter, precisely because it allows the retrieval of elements of modern culture. To make retrieval possible, a *historical* treatment of culture is needed, which the fortification approach would not seem to countenance. Presenting such a treatment, Ratzinger, in his commentary on the Council, remarks that, 'The Church is not the petrification of what once was, but its living presence in every age' (Ratzinger 1969, p. 116), and proceeds to expound the point:

> Certainly the Church is tied to what was once and for all, the origin in Jesus of Nazareth, and in this sense it is obliged 'chronologically' to continuity with him and the testimony of the beginning. But because 'the Lord is the Spirit' (2 Cor 3:17) and remains present through the Spirit, the Church has not only the chronological line with its obligation of continuity and identity, it has also the moment, the *kairos*, in which it must interpret and accomplish the work of the Lord as present (Ratzinger 1969, p. 116).

Retrieving the moral ideal of authenticity is possible only in this pneumatological or kairological treatment of history. An 'affirmation of the present' (Ratzinger 1969, p. 123) involves recognising that God is a protagonist in every age, and that elements of modern culture—albeit mutilated—may contain glimmers of goodness. Recognising the Holy Spirit at work in the age is a sensitive task, since 'the moment of the Holy Spirit may not imperceptibly change into the momentary spirit of the age' (Ratzinger 1969, p. 117). A lack of discernment of spirits leads to the errors of accommodation. Fear of such disastrous errors may understandably give rise to a view of culture that finds safety in eschewing the possibility of the Holy Spirit's agency in a manifestly Godless 'anti-culture'. But the 'courage to place oneself in the midst of these contradictions [so that we can] meet the cultural task of the present day' (in Dondeyne's words) may open up evangelistic potential that is unavailable to the fortification approach. The 'cultural task' is the courageous and discerning healing of mutilated ideals of modern culture and finding within them the echoes of truth that allow us to engage with the people of our age shaped by such ideals.[4]

6. How Might the Church Best Engage Secular Culture?

There are certainly signs that a solely fortification approach to evangelisation, where committed small communities who treasure the riches of the Church, especially her liturgy and teaching, is bearing some fruit. To give just one example: in 2023 and bucking the

post-pandemic trends that many other parishes were experiencing, one suburban London church reported its highest average Mass attendance in ten years. It featured in the Evening Standard, thanks to its regular Latin Masses that are very popular with young adults (Phillips 2024). Proclaiming truth and beauty opens a skylight to the possibility of transcendence in the lives of young adults, who have only ever known the stifling immanence of modern culture. This trend, albeit slight, is undeniable, and time will tell how rapidly it develops.

Yet, we might not want to put all our evangelistic eggs in one basket. As has been proven with the experiments of accommodation, only decades of practice can demonstrate in any conclusive way the long-term fruitfulness of an evangelistic strategy. The conversion approach offers a further option: it turns to Christianity's advantage the moral ideal of authenticity by forging bridges from modern culture into the oases of Christian life. In this way, we do not 'miss a good part of the spiritual reality of our age' (Taylor 2007, p. 509). In practice, it means recognising that the postmodern individual is deeply motivated by 'being true to oneself', and 'finding the design of my life myself, against the demands of external conformity'. It means fostering practices and cultures that will not repel individuals allergic to anything akin to 'external conformity', but rather, creating environments where they experience belonging and acceptance as a precondition to exploring the truths of Christianity. It means offering opportunities or pathways on which their quest-like search for fulfilment may take place in a Christian context. The fortification approach, in its disdain for modern culture, would likely draw up any such 'bridges' that smack of modern ideals, and yet, a deep trust in the *kairos* of the moment—that the Holy Spirit is active in a person's search—can be fruitful: a search beginning in self-discovery may conceivably end in a discovery of God.

This is what another London suburban parish found when, through its Alpha courses—which offer individuals an opportunity to explore questions of life in an environment that fosters the feel of a quest-like spirituality—ten young adults became Catholic in the space of two years. One young woman commented,

> I'd explored spirituality previously, had felt that lightning bolt start of God's love at a dark hour, had meditated, prayed, read sacred texts. I was nervous of someone trying to bundle up and bind my infinite, boundary-defying God in the name of organised religion. And yet, I had a feeling Catholicism might offer me a way to know God in a deeper, more intimate way (Bullivant et al. 2025).

She confirms the possibility that a person with previous suspicions of 'organised religion' might conceivably end up a fully paid-up member of one. The individualistic journey may end in altruism, and a quest for self-discovery may end in self-gift. Authenticity is not necessarily hedonistic: philosopher Andrew Collier points out that it

> . . . is quite different from making us either selfish or isolated. On the contrary, is it not precisely the pressure of the 'they' that urges egoism on us. . . it takes a strong individual stand to 'swim against the stream' and seek the good of others (Collier 1999, p. 113).

And yet, without these 'bridges' into our Catholic communities where we acknowledge the authenticity of a subjective quest, fewer people may find their way to the truth that will fulfil them.

I propose, then, that the conversion approach ultimately offers possibility to reach *more* people than the fortification approach. But are numbers the only factor at stake here? I would suggest there is a further consideration when we contemplate a synthesis of these two approaches. A further advantage of the conversion approach is its recognition that committed Catholics are themselves products of modern culture and are deeply and inescapably motivated by their own search for fulfilment. A young 'none' discovering the

Traditional Latin Mass at the apex of his or her spiritual quest is initially motivated by a deeply conditioned moral ideal to be 'true to him- or herself'. And yet, there is an irony in his or her then rejecting the moral ideal that served as a bridge to the discovery that fulfilled this search.

I would argue, then, that what is also at stake is the danger of rejecting the moral ideal of authenticity completely. Recalling Guardini's words that, 'our age is not just an external path that we tread; it is ourselves', I propose that in rejecting the modern ideal of authenticity, we reject something of our very selves. We force an opposition between our belief and our modern conditioning—between Church and culture—in which it is exceedingly hard to exist. Certainly, considering the dehumanising effects of 'anti-culture', the safer route seems to be to force a choice between Christ and the world. And yet, we recall Christ's own words while living in the world—in the 'anti-culture' of his time—'God so loved the world' (John 3:16). The philosopher Jacques Maritain has a helpful reflection here. He observes the forced oppositions between Church and culture that originated at moments of history following the Reformation and the Renaissance and warns against such a dualism in our own age. Being inescapably products of modern culture, our conditioning tends to be stronger even than our choice to believe (and in a non-religious milieu—unlike 500 years ago—choosing to believe is a necessity). Condemning modern culture and drawing up the bridge is psychologically unsustainable, and the default outcome, he suggests, will be anthropocentrism:

> For pessimism detaches the creature from any link with a higher order. And then, as one must in any event live, the creature takes his ease and makes himself the centre, in his own lower order himself (Maritain 1969, p. 25).

'*As one must in any event live*': In our disenchanted world, it is more possible to live without Christ than it is to live without modern culture, since experientially we are steeped in the latter but not the former.

7. Conclusions

Decades were needed to confirm the pastoral and sociological outcomes of the accommodation experiment, and it is clear that, while we see signs of hope in both the fortification and conversion approaches, their outcomes will only be seen clearly in decades to come. I have proposed in this article that while fortification is necessary to maintain the integrity of Catholic liturgy and teaching, combined with the conversion approach, it affords more opportunities.

First, in not rejecting secular culture wholesale, it retrieves its moral ideal of authenticity as a point of common ground with a non-religious person for whom Christianity is alien. This moral ideal, when redeemed to its Christian fullness, offers a powerful path to Christian faith, where what begins in self-discovery can end in faith in God.

Second, adopting and redeeming this moral ideal is critical not only for evangelisation, but for the faith of all those within the Church who, conditioned by the modern culture, find themselves in the 'Secular 3' 'cross-pressure' of competing beliefs. Accepting the moral ideal of authenticity allows us to avoid the 'extrinsicism' of which Joseph Ratzinger warned: our faith is not only in the externals of liturgy and doctrinal beliefs, but in an interior quest towards deepening union with God. Such a quest will be possible only in attending to our subjectivity—identity, tastes, desires, opinions, and aspirations—not to reject them, but to allow them to be transformed and redeemed by Christ. In this way, we heed the personalism of Pope John Paul II who encouraged young people on retreat in Krakow while he was bishop,

> Following Christ also means following yourself. Christ does not tear you away from yourselves. He does not diminish or nullify the personhood of any of us (Wojtyła 1984, p. 58).

And third, the conversion approach allows an authentic trust in God as protagonist in history. It recognises the possibility of *kairos* even in the anti-Christ onto-logic of modern culture, that, even in this age, the Holy Spirit may generate new human avenues for discovery of Christ. In our openness to this possibility, we allow God himself to be the Subject of history, in transforming culture, rather than putting ourselves in the role of subject, protecting God and safeguarding his revelation in our Christian oases. Only in courageously recognising the opportunity of the modern age, resisting the temptation to draw up the bridges to these oases, might we open ourselves to the fullness of what God himself might do.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1. In 2021–2022, the average attendance at a live football match from one of England's top six tiers was 834,724 (average Premier League Home Attendances).
2. In Britain, too, a kind of 'parish civilisation', where a Catholic parish had fulfilled social and cultural as well as religious purposes, began to collapse in the 1960s. According to sociologist Michael Hornsby-Smith '. . .if parishioners still retained a few religious 'reflexes', the ability of priests to guide their everyday conduct in the sexual, ethical, political, or educational domains continued to be eroded. . .' (Hornsby-Smith 1989, p. 60).
3. Rod Dreher's (2017) book The Benedict Option is a contemporary version of this outlook.
4. Taylor warns of the nostalgia of a fortification approach. Harking back to a Christendom era is misguided since, 'If our [age] tends to multiply somewhat shallow and undemanding spiritual options, we shouldn't forget the spiritual costs of various kinds of forced conformity: hypocrisy, spiritual stultification, inner revolt against the Gospel, the confusion of faith and power, and even worse. Even if we had a choice, I'm not sure we wouldn't be wiser to stick with the present dispensation' (Taylor 2007, p. 513).

References

Balthasar, Hans. 1969. *Love Alone*. New York: Herder and Herder.

Bullivant, S., H. Vaughan-Spruce, and B. Durcan. 2025. *After Secularisation: The Present and Future of British Catholicism*. London: Catholic Truth Society, Forthcoming.

Bullivant, Stephen. 2017. The "no religion" population of Britain. *Catholic Research Forum Reports* 3: 12. Available online: https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2017-may-no-religion-report.pdf (accessed on 12 December 2024).

Catholic News Agency. 2024. Catholic Baptisms, Mass Attendance Surge Worldwide for Easter 2024. *Adoremus*. May 13. Available online: https://adoremus.org/2024/05/catholic-baptisms-mass-attendance-surge-worldwide-for-easter-2024/ (accessed on 12 December 2024).

Collier, Andrew. 1999. *Being and Worth*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Colsy, Thomas. 2024. Westminster Cathedral forced to turn people away due to unprecedented numbers attending Easter Triduum. *Catholic Herald*. April 2. Available online: https://catholicherald.co.uk/westminster-cathedral-forced-to-turn-people-away-due-to-surge-of-attendees-for-easter-triduum/ (accessed on 12 December 2024).

Daude, Guillaume. 2024. France reports boom in new Catholics: Over 7000 adults to be baptized at Easter. *La Croix International*. March 28. Available online: https://international.la-croix.com/religion/france-reports-boom-in-new-catholics-over-7000-adults-to-be-baptized-at-easter (accessed on 12 December 2024).

Dolan, Jay. 1985. *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present*. Garden City: Doubleday.

Dreher, Rod. 2017. *The Benedict Option*. New York: Sentinel.

Dupré, Lynn. 1993. *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Francis, Pope. 2013. *The Joy of the Gospel*. Vatican City: Holy See.

Guardini, Romano. 1950. *The End of the Modern World*. London: Sheed and Ward.
Guardini, Romano. 1994. *Letters from Lake Como*. Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans. First published 1959.
Hornsby-Smith, Michael. 1989. *The Changing Parish: A Study of Parishes, Priests, and Parishioners after Vatican II*. London: Routledge.
Hornsby-Smith, Michael. 1991. *Roman Catholic beliefs in England: Customary Catholicism and Transformations of Religious Authority*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Kinnear, Timothy. 2023. Statistical Appendices. In *The Oxford History of British and Irish Catholicism, Vol. 5: Recapturing the Apostolate of the Laity, 1914–2021*. Edited by Alana Harris. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 357–76.
Maritain, Jacques. 1969. *Integral Humanism*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
Niebuhr, H. Richard. 2001. *Christ and Culture*. New York: Harper and Roe Publishers. First published 1951.
Pope John Paul II. 1984. Address to Pontifical Council for Culture. In *The Church and Culture since Vatican II*. Edited by Joseph Gremillion. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, pp. 207–9.
Pope John Paul II. 1989. On the Catholic Universities. *The Pope Speaks* 34: 261–72.
Pope John Paul II. 1993. Homily at Denver, August 15. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1993/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19930815_gmg-denver.html (accessed on 11 December 2024).
Pope John Paul II. 1994. General Audience Homily. *L'Osservatore Romano*, September 25.
Pope Paul VI. 1975. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. Vatican City: Holy See.
Phillips, Emily. 2024. Holier Than Thou: The Rise of Gen Z Catholicism. *Evening Standard*. February 4. Available online: https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/holier-than-thou-the-rise-of-gen-z-catholicism-b1136795.html (accessed on 12 December 2024).
Ratzinger, Joseph. 1969. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Part I, Chapter I. In *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II, Vol. V*. Edited by Herbert Vorgrimler. London: Burns & Oates, pp. 115–63.
Rowland, Tracey. 2003. *Culture and the Thomist Tradition*. London: Routledge.
Schindler, David L. 1995. Christological Aesthetics and Evangelium Vitae: Toward a definition of liberalism. *Communio* 22: 193–224.
Schindler, David L., and Louis Bouyer. 1990. *Catholicism and Secularization in America*. Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor.
Semmelroth, Otto. 1969. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Part I Chapter II. In *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II, Vol. V*. Edited by Herbert Vorgrimler. London: Burns & Oates, pp. 164–81.
Smith, James. 2014. *How (Not) to Be Secular*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
Taylor, Charles. 1991. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Taylor, Charles. 1995. Two Theories of Modernity. *The Hastings Center Report* 25: 24–33. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
Vatican II. 1965. *Gaudium et Spes*. Vatican City: Holy See.
Wojtyła, Karol. 1984. *The Way to Christ: Spiritual Exercises*. Translated by Leslie Wearne. New York: Harper Collins.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.