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## CMDFA Presentation “Working authentically as Christians in a secular pluralistic society”

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Sydney, 6/2015

Hello friends. Alan and I are both presenting at this workshop because we have been challenged, stirred up and excited by the reflective wisdom of catholic academic, Charles Taylor. I have only ‘read’ Taylor through the eyes of protestant scholar Jamie Smith and others. In this presentation I want to point us toward pastoral and spiritual outcomes from this analysis.

Taylor defines our “secular age” as “this pluralised, pressurised moment in which we find ourselves, where believers are beset by doubt and doubters, every once in a while, find themselves tempted by belief.” I want to take us into this “pressurised moment” and discern ways forward. I have 4 subjects for conversation.

A) Stressors for Christian Professionals at work in a Secular 3 culture

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B) Secular 3 - some challenges for Christian Spirituality

C) Secular 3 - Where is Jesus today?

D) Embracing pluralism for faith that survives and thrives

### A) Stressors for Christian Professionals at work in a secular 3 culture

1. The music group Arcade Fire has written a song about that famous chess game between Deep Blue (a computer) and Russian Chess Champion, Kasparov. In our scientific secular world they call out, “standing under night sky; Tomorrow means nothing” but the song hesitates - “Hey, put the cell phone down for a while, In the night there is something wild. Can you hear it breathing? And, Hey, put the laptop down for a while. In the night sky there is something wild. I feel it, its leaving me.”

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(Arcade Fire)

“It’s leaving me.” Writer, Ephraim Radner comments “To lose God is to deny the loss.” So my first observation is that today we practice medicine/dentistry in a God free zone. What motivates universities and health care no longer has any room for God. The old dictum “we treat and God heals” has been erased and consigned to the quirkiness of history. Modern health care is enveloped by the sadness of this loss.

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2. Taylor has a capacity for assisting our understanding with new concepts. He offers “unthought” as presuppositions (usually unspoken) that undergird secularity or

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indeed any world view. In the world of today the “unthought” of secularity is that religion must decline. Taylor identifies four components of secular “unthought.”

- i) Religion must decline because it is false and science demonstrates this.
- ii) Because religion is increasingly irrelevant in an immanent world
- iii) Religion is based on authority but we now we relocate power in “autonomy”
- iv) Some combination of 1-3

While this is a reductionistic account of religion and faith, the telling consequence is the loss of any transformational perspective in life for secularists and indeed our world.

My take on this, is that we now experience a certain oppressiveness in clinical practice. Hope is restricted to the “evidence” of science. Health improvements are predictable on the basis of positive data. The certainty of evidenced based health care is reassuring, however we as practitioners devolve to become technocrats who have mastered the maths. Heart sink patients should be humoured or dismissed. We practice with no room outside the square. We practice with a mechanistic health system approach. We practice at the time of the triumph of technique. We have lost the open imagination of healing.

3. With the loss of a transformational perspective in our secular 3 pluralised world, we encounter the privileging of autonomy in its place. In one sense this is a corrective for health professionals who 'play God.' But now, Dr Google with a Facebook makeover sustains the myth of personal choice. Such autonomy has multiple spin offs to challenge the wisdom of Hippocratic service and patient centred care.

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- i) Autonomy has allowed us to shift from the spiritual distress of sin to the therapeutic. Sin and its discontents are a disease to be counselled or reskilled from.
- ii) Autonomy brings a suite of rights to the health encounter. These rights intensify the obligations of the professional. Such stressors are only calmed by increased financial rewards.
- iii) Autonomy is inherently linked to what "I love", to "my idolatry." It is also a disintegrating force. Consequently it predisposes people to dissatisfaction and boredom. Drug misuse and mental health concerns replace the humanistic vision of autonomous flourishing.
- iv) Autonomy also disqualifies grace, and so risk management replaces relationships. Doctor/Patient relationships are altered to the cost of the

value of a doctor as a therapeutic agent. On the other side, patients are expected to care for themselves even if sick and overwhelmed by suffering.

I have a patient who dialled 000 from a premier Brisbane hospital.

### **B: Secular 3 - some challenges for Christian spirituality**

Charles Taylor is showing us that we have moved from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed unproblematic, to one in which faith is understood to be one option among others and frequently not the easiest to embrace. In this context, secular humanism is the achievement of our time. It has succeeded in displacing religion from broad public acceptance and truth to individual choice.

What does this mean for our faith journey?

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- 1) Faith now shares the stage with doubt. The optional nature of faith in a secular age is weakened by choice. Suddenly the passion of my football club members is more attractive than the frozen congregation I worship in. The comprehensive arguments toward evolution seem to easily carry the day against my Sunday School theology of creation. The global power of money in the hands of corporate capitalists seems to make the contentment of enough with God, a whimper.

The power of the scientific method to answer the question, “Why is it so?” with a flourish, deflates my hesitant “God says so” answers. Philosophers gloat over the

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question of theodicy when war, disaster and brutality deliver unrestrained human misery. Faith shares the stage with doubt.

- 2) Choice forces Christian professionals into a dualistic posture. This only adds to doubt. During the week we live in the public square of immanent evidence based care and ask no questions while on the weekend we sometimes sleek back to the old comfort of Church and Faith. There seems to be an unbridgeable gap between the real demands of work and the pressurised claims of faith.

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- 3) Choice the only modern virtue, further disables us through the pull of multiple secular liturgies. James Smith develops this idea in his book “Desiring the Kingdom.” Smith is starting point is simple, ‘What we love is what motivates us,’ Human beings made in the image of God are designed to love and worship God. This core pre cognitive state of humanity has been distorted and corrupted by sin. Nevertheless Smith argues, “our loves and desires are aimed and directed by habits that dispose us to be the kind of people aimed at certain visions of the good life, particularly visions of the Kingdom.”

In the secular world, opinion leaders, trend setters, advertisers and so on know this is true. Almost seamlessly they tap into our loves to that we go back again and again to the consuming transcendence of a shopping mall. Indeed we might spend an hour at church then a few hours shopping because our love is also fed by a

competing liturgy. I shop, therefore I am. But the shopping centre experience is an “intensification of a wider web of practices and rituals associated with consumer capitalism.”

If we are the only Bible people ever see, they will see through us as we participate so willingly in such secular worship experiences. The rise of nationalism which allows the free flow of money in one hand but stops the boats of people in the other is another strong worship icon today.

Learning is no longer a pure pursuit of love. It also has been influenced by the utilitarian desires of the economy and the State, toward a materialist outcome focus. No longer do we enter Medicine or Dentistry to become healers. We learn to celebrate the prestige of outcomes and the materialist benefits of bloated super funds. In many ways secular liturgies strip us of the love (of God) generated choices.

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- 4) Even when we hold our ground. When practicing the presence of God as the true source of our life, choice continues to seduce us. The supernova of Christian worship options in this secular age weakens our resolve for community; to the loyalty of the fellowship of the Spirit. As we move from Church to Church the wind blows away the chorus, “They know we are Christians by our love, by our love.” It

seems easier to be a movie goer than a church goer today. It seems easier to air condition my church than love my neighbour.

### C - Secular 3 - Where is Jesus today?

So I want to ask a serious question. “Where is Jesus today?” It is a question that has echoed down from Dietrich Bonhoeffer as he considered the threat of Hitler to the Church. Where is Jesus in our secular age?

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- 1) In our pluralised world, Jesus is a ‘choice’. Jesus is on the “dashboard”, because Christianity lingers after Christendom. Taylor suggests Jesus and the Church provide a stable source of rituals for the life cycle. Christening after birth, weddings in a church, funerals and so on. Undoubtedly in our secular 3 age, there will be pressures to remove Jesus from the rituals or privilege other rituals to fill the void. Think of how “Jesus” was used in the recent ANZAC day 100 year celebration. The revelations of child abuse in religious institutions in past decades has precipitated a dramatic fall in church weddings around Australia. Jesus is a choice to be discarded when the going gets tough.

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- 2) Theologians have noted that Jesus is the one who is most authentically human. He is the new Adam who has faced life’s temptations and endured the penalty that sin attaches to human experience. So today, we may be surprised to encounter Jesus



in the lives of those seeking human perfection. Body beautiful, body powerful, body enhanced. Perhaps parents seeking to birth and raise perfect children will be surprised to encounter Jesus. We may expect to flourish with Botox, but God will not be silenced to a one dimensional life perspective. The resurrection life, the gracious transformation of Christ formed in us is the only enduring perfection in this world. Jesus is the firstborn who will lead many sons and daughters to glory.

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- 3) The zealous commitment to the scientific method; to the “Evidence”, is a weakness that the secular world currently ignores. The success of science driven technique and technology ensures this. However, Science itself is already demonstrating the benefits of spirituality for a flourishing life. Since 2000, around 400 peer reviewed scientific articles have been published annually. They are overwhelmingly positive about the benefits of the spiritual life. Science is demonstrating the reality of brain changes that represent the transformed life of faith formation. This information and research is opening a new frontier of neurotheology. In God’s economy, amazing scientists such as Francis Collins - the lead investigator in the human genome project - are a witness to the transforming power of Christ in life. Jesus at work in the world of Science will lead many an atheist home to our father, God.

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4) Jesus entered our world as a despised Galilean who lived in a town of Nazareth not recorded on any known maps at that time. It is not surprising the Gospel has always flourished among the poor, the weak, the marginalised in any society. Hitler despised what he saw as the inherent weakness of Christianity in this regard. Hitler wanted to change the world through political power and military force. The transforming power of Christ, is the power of the Cross. It is a cruciform presence in our autonomous self-made world. In opposition to our permanent Facebook profile, Jesus takes the penalty of sin, our sin on himself and we are set free. In practical terms, we may encounter Jesus in the lives of Medicare only patients; among those we recognise as “others” - a street person, a refugee, a drug addict and so on. Displaced, indigenous people all over the world will discover a respectful transformation in meeting Jesus in their despair. I could go on and reflect about the ‘almost’ experience of transcendence in our immanent world and so on. You will recognise other ‘Jesus’ sightings in our immanent framed humanity. So in our secular 3 world, Jesus wants to pioneer faith that survives and thrives.

#### **D - Faith that survives and thrives**

Our task today is not to provide all the answers but to stimulate reflection and open up God’s good future in our secular 3 world. It is a world that pays lip service to pluralism but is a juggernaut which rolls on.

A secular vision for life is essentially materialistic. Under the supervision of corporate capitalism, we can secure the 'good life' through the scientific method. What we encounter is the shopping centre world, the media world, the virtual world of IT and so on. These are secular visions of the Kingdom. As Health professionals we can recognise an unhappy restlessness in our patients who are 'in the moment' of such a life. Taylor speaks of 'a desire to gather the scattered moments of meaning into some kind of whole.' He also observes that "the swelling of immanence (through material abundance) seems unable to make up for the pressure we still feel - from transcendence from enchantment."

To bring a sense of the whole to this presentation today I want to initiate 4 final conversations toward faith that survives and thrives in our secular world.

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- 1) If we are to regain a transcendent/transformist way of life in our immanent world we need to recognise our own "unthought." Do we hold a 'closed' or 'open' take toward the Kingdom of God? Are we so immersed in the incarnated versions of life in our secular age we too have submitted to the incarnated perspective? We settle for talking head biblicalism. We sleep secure with orthodox belief. We exercise the choice of following the presence of the Spirit only to neglect the transforming call to live out the fruit of the Spirit; to know the transforming power of Christ formed in us; and to embrace the resurrection

power we say we believe in. Taylor says we can live in an immanent frame by a kind of vibe that trusts science ahead of revelation. This closed 'take' on life is regularly replicated in practice by Christian professionals. We live dualistic lives, guaranteeing a spiritual space on Sunday and then living the immanent secular life the remainder of the week. Taylor describes this as pre-shrunk religion.

As we recognise that our love for God is blunted and limp, the challenge is to repent, to surrender to the genuine possibilities of grace. Grace which continues to demonstrate God's love for the world in any age.

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- 2) Our repentance is not a nostalgic call back to the age of unchallenged faith. In our immanent world of "unchallenged common-sense", our renewal is to return to the daily call of Jesus to "follow me". To be a Christian is by grace, to live 'a way of life' in Christ. The habits and commitment of such a life, prayer, encountering scripture, fellowship in the spirit and so on become part of the histories of transformation in our lives. Now patient-centeredness is an expression of God-centeredness in our lives. Our repentance is not a return to intensify the knowledge of Christian ideas. Our repentance is a reorientation to the grace through faith which not only saves but transforms us in to the likeness of Christ. The flourishing of human life through the kingdom of God is

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the consummation of faith, hope and love in our lives. Unlike the one dimensional world of immanence, this is the thick, three dimensional world of amazing grace.

- 3) Taylor's interest in desire, what he calls 'social imaginaries' is another platform to encounter hope. We have already discussed the challenges of secular social imaginaries; Jamie Smith calls these social liturgies, such as the shopping centre experience, the culture of nationalism, the virtual worlds of film, popular media and IT platforms. Smith observes that "liturgies- whether "sacred" or "secular" - shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world."

In a nutshell, there is a calling today to see past all the spin of secular liturgies and recognize that the love of God is open and gentle, stimulating the formation of recreation. By grace, God reorientates our desire. So now in love we seek to imitate Christ. In love we genuinely seek the fruit of the Spirit to share the peace. In love we are one in Christ; slave/free, male/female, with whoever in the pressurized potpourri of pluralized secular life. In love we move in our world as agents of reconciliation, blessed peacemakers. Taylor would recommend a positive Christian presence in the public space. He would advise

1) conversations/debate to level the playing field; where both exclusive humanists and Christian dilemmas are acknowledged ie the probe of evil/disaster or sources of morality. Should morality be so codified and rules based etc?

2) Christians can demonstrate the inadequacy (in a generous way) of purely immanent accounts of reality and vice versa.

3) Christians need to acknowledge that all positions hold an element of “take”, and that we can show the more valid/nuanced place of a “Christian take.”

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4) Repentance - a transformed way of life - love fuelled desire in Christ, will re-establish our awareness for what Eugene Petersen calls the “unforced rhythms of Grace” and what Taylor describes as “transcendence”. I appeal to Smith in my last encouragement here. He says “our love is aimed from the fulcrum of our desire - the habits that constitute our character, or core identity. And “the way our love or desire gets aimed in specific directions is through practices that shape, mould and direct our love.” Our love as doctors and dentists whose lives are claimed by Christ are shaped by prayer, worship, scripture and so on. Can I emphasize here the habit of the Catholic fellowship of the cruciform life.

Today, more than ever, our life needs to be formed together. In an age of ex-carnate autonomy we can be the counter cultural people of God by choosing community. The embrace of God, the Father, Son and Spirit, is a gathering embrace. We gather in the power of the spirit to worship the lamb who was slain. In such a gathering our love is directed to our plural pressurized world. With all creation, it is a world breathless in expectation. When God's kingdom comes, don't you want to be there?! Jesus tells us the Spirit blows where it wills. Can you still feel this wind in a world of immanence?

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Paul Mercer

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