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**“THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE: RELIGIOUS THOUGHT-STRUCTURES IN
POPULAR CULTURE”**

BY CRAIG WRIGHT

Good morning.

Before I begin apologizing for a host of intellectual insufficiencies, and prefacing my remarks with a plethora of convenient information, let me take a moment to sincerely thank United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, and Cindi Beth Johnson and Mary McNamara, in particular, for the gracious invitation to speak with you all today.

Whatever I’ve done of value, creatively and otherwise, since I first enrolled at UTS, has been deeply informed and intellectually funded, so to speak, by the education I received here, and by the grace and depth of the friendships I made. A year hasn’t gone by since I left UTS that I haven’t called Mary Bednarowski or Paul Capetz or Clyde Steckel either for some help thinking through a theological problem, or quite often just to say hello.

UTS was an important part of my intellectual development – and, I would add, “spiritual development,” but I’m still not sure what it means. Mission accomplished, UTS!

Anyway – thank you all for inviting me to be here. It’s an honor: a blessing: and fun.

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Before I launch into my topic, which is a free-ranging rhapsody on the theme of the relationship between the mainline Protestant church and popular culture in the privileged West, I think it will be helpful, if perhaps even necessary, to give some background about my theological “location,” as it were: in order to let you know where I’m calling from.

My beliefs, such as they are, are fairly simple and, as faiths go, fairly minimal. And let me apologize, starting right now, for any theological muddiness. I’m not a theologian. I’m a big shot from Hollywood and I can’t be expected to think clearly. I’m on drugs.

Here are my basic religious beliefs, in a nutshell, out of which I’m offering my questions and opinions and rhapsodic reveries today. I have, I would say, four basic beliefs.

One: after being alive for almost forty-five years, I have still not been able to identify any single component of the universe which seems able to have generated the universe in its entirety; nor does the universe in its entirety seem to me to be self-generated; therefore, I experience the universe as if it is a created process, as if it is something that was initiated with some intent by a force that pre-dated it; and that it is now maintained in a variety of ways by that same force, in process itself, within an open but finite set of contingencies.

In other words, anything could happen, but not everything is; and what is, seems, to me, to have the look and feel of having been made. It just seems that way to me.

The material fabric of the universe: the elements, the rocks, the trees, the animals, the people, the stars, all seem to me to have been made, and to be, in the present, maintained, much like the figures one finds in a topiary garden. I see a continuous profusion being modeled and maintained in a variety of forms. The universe looks like that to me.

Also the unfolding ephemeral events of the world: the expanding motion of the cosmos, the evolution and destruction of species, the history of life on earth, the branching chains of choices all of us make, also seem to me to be managed by a shaky unseen hand.

That's one.

Two: I believe that in the early Israelite community a very powerful meme arose, a refinement and recombination of existing memes but also, in its clarity and potency, a genuine novelty, namely, what H. Richard Neibuhr called "radical monotheism."

I believe this meme of radical monotheism was refined in the fire of the early Israelite experience until it shone with an unshadowable brilliance. It was as if, in a lab, someone had concocted a universal solvent able to dissolve every other substance it encountered. Such was the conceptual and inspirational power of this certifiably new idea.

And I believe this meme of radical monotheism expanded exponentially when it attached and symbiotically grew in concert with the stories associated with the miraculous birth, exemplary life, prophetic words, violent death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In other words, I believe the radical monotheism of Judaism was a milestone in human religious consciousness and I believe Christianity can be understood without paradox as universalized Judaism. Undoubtedly, that process of universalization changed the meme – the hamburgers we get today at McDonald's don't resemble too closely the hamburgers first served by Richard and Maurice McDonald in San Bernardino, California in 1940 – but that *is* how McDonald's got started – and, to make this metaphor payoff with a credible thought, let me finally say that I believe western privileged secular civilization has, as its primary cause among many, that initial imaginative Israelite leap of faith.

I believe that what some call secularism is at least one endpoint in the life of the meme "radical monotheism." I see radical monotheism vividly at work in secularism.

Three: I believe that the capacity for language, whether it's used by humans, dolphins, whales, whomever, is a God-given, God-evolved capacity, generated for creating new truth in community with others. I believe that's what language is for. If it functions within individuals as an engine, so to speak, of self-consciousness, it only does so in order to prepare the groundwork for building new truths with discrete others, together.

And so I believe that whenever language is used for other purposes: when it is used to make statements that aren't invitations to mutual modification, it becomes nonsensical and quietly poisonous. This can happen very subtly, and we settle every day for so-called conversations which are actually nothing more than declarations made in suspiciously beautiful counterpoint; but they are not conversations and the only positive function they serve is to create enough frustration that perhaps one day, people will actually converse.

In other words, if we find ourselves talking but unwilling to be changed, we should be quiet. We should wait to talk until we're ready to be changed by and with others.

There's no other reason to talk. I'm not here to tell you what I think. I'm here to find out what I'm going to get to think next, with all of you. That's what I think language is for.

Finally: four: the symbols and stories of Judeo-Christianity are my primary lexicon for my conversations with myself and others about the mystery of being alive. I don't believe they're the only valid lexicon for an interested human conversation, but they're mine: for the most part. There are some passages of The Mahabharata and some Buddhist writings which have illuminated some corners of my experience for me and grown me in ways the Judeo-Christian lexicon hasn't. But, for the most part, the language of Judeo-Christianity is the one I use to talk to myself and others about matters of ultimate concern.

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I'm also white, European, male, heterosexual and privileged, with a lot of blind spots.

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Okay.

The story I tell most often about my time at UTS is about Clyde Steckel, and how I asked a question in Clyde's class once, and he said, "Craig, there are so many assumptions behind that question, I'm not even going to attempt to answer it."

Well, when Cindi Beth first contacted me about speaking with you today, if I remember correctly – and I may be mistaken, and if I am, Cindi Beth, please stop me and clarify –she said something much like what all the marketing materials about my talk today say: that is: "Could you talk about what the methods and messages of popular culture have to teach the church about doing a better job of getting *its* message out?" Right? And, just to be clear, when she said "church," I assumed she meant the mainline Protestant church, and that's what I mean today when I say it, too, and I include in this grouping Quakers and those Unitarian churches who still put Jesus at Ralph Waldo Emerson's right hand.

Where he is quietly plotting a comeback.

Anyway, my answer to this question: "Could you talk about what the methods and messages of popular culture have to teach the church about doing a better job of getting *its* message out?" is relatively simple: "Cindi Beth, there are so many assumptions behind this question, I'm not even going to attempt to answer it!"

No, I'll answer it. I'll *address* it, at least. I'll sit down beside it and chat.

So: what are the assumptions behind this question?

They are, it seems to me: 1) the church has a message: 2) a variety of factors seem to indicate it's having a hard time getting its message out: something's gone wrong in the delivery system, or, at the very least, it needs to be repaired or upgraded: 3) popular culture has a message or a number of messages: 4) it's doing really well at delivering its message: and, finally 5) these two systems, the church and popular culture, share enough essential similarities that we can extrapolate possible workplans for upgrading the church's faulty message-delivery system by examining the grid of the popular culture's.

But are these assumptions accurate? Well, we'll all have our own answer to that question.

Mine is: not entirely.

(By the way, those might not have been Cindi Beth's assumptions. I'm merely saying they are some of the assumptions, it seems to me, inherent in the question.)

And to cut to the chase: the two most suspicious assumptions – not completely incorrect: suspicious – inherent in the question, it seems to me, are: “the church is having a hard time getting its message out” and “the church can operate as a message-sender, without falling into paradox with itself, successfully using the methods of popular culture.”

Let's start by interrogating the first assumption.

Is the mainline Protestant church having such a hard time getting its message out?

Well, to answer that, we have to first define what its message is. Only then can we properly test for it, so to speak, in terms of concentrations, in the culture.

So: what is the mainline Protestant church's message today *as it's usually delivered*? Not in theory, but in actual practice.

Well, I'd say, speaking out of my limited experience, the “message” of the church is manifold, but I think its primary message can be, for the sake of conversation, separated into three mini-messages, the first of which cannot be expressed in words because it is *the existence of the church itself*. It is that the church *is* and *does*. It's like a series of cairns in a mysterious landscape: the fact that the church exists at all is a message: it's a form of evidence. It *says* something. Not the church itself, but the fact that the church exists.

The second message of the church is the Gospel: the *narrative* of Christ's miraculous birth, exemplary life, prophetic utterances, violent death and resurrection, framed within the larger narrative told within the Hebrew scriptures and the Epistles, both containing narratives, prophetic utterances, and miracle stories of their own, framed within the even larger narrative of the development of those stories and ethics within the early Israelite, Jewish and Christian communities – that's what I mean by: the Gospel: the ongoing saga of this three-pronged divine invasion: creation, incarnation, and whatever comes next.

The third message, as it tends to be stated, is simpler, but I would say, rather suspiciously so, and it tends to be: “Why not stop by our church this Sunday and check it out?”

This is my experience: that the message of the mainline Protestant church is usually tripartite: it has an existential component: *that it is*: a narrative/prophetic component: *what it tells*: and a relational component: what it wants from or for others and itself.

(The fact that the church's *message* can be teased out so easily into three categories without raising (I hope) too many intellectual suspicions is of course no surprise. From the moment the Jewish preacher Yeshua-ben-Joseph (or whatever his name was) was christened “the Logos” by his Greek-leaning devotees, this prismatic vision of God's activity has been available to anyone wishing to see it that way. In the formulation of Christ as “Logos,” of a walking, talking discrete human being as, somehow, the complete comprehensive divine utterance, we become able to identify God's activity in three ways: in God's free decision to “speak” as it were: in “The Word” itself, which is spoken: and

in the “invitation and reception” implied by this cosmic incarnated “Word.” And it all makes a neat little triangle and, if it’s your kind of thing, it works for you. Works for me.)

So now, to circle back: I have to ask: if that’s the church’s message, is the mainline Protestant church actually having a hard time getting its message out?

Well, in the case of the existential component, I’d say: no. The church exists. Churches may be closing as membership declines, but the church as a whole still visibly exists.

In the case of the narrative portion of the narrative/prophetic component, I’d say: no.

In my opinion, the narrative portion of the church’s message is doing pretty well. It’s doing so well, indeed, that one can hardly open one’s eyes in the morning without bumping against or being flat-out sold for money some component of this narrative.

Whether it’s in the form of explicitly Judeo-Christian content (“The Passion of the Christ”), allegorically Judeo-Christian content (the “Narnia” movies), socio-culturally Judeo-Christian content (“The Blind Side”), or structurally Judeo-Christian content (“Avatar”), the narrative portion of the mainline church’s message is everywhere. It has become one of the two or three standard shapes of thought in the privileged West: maybe really the only one that can plausibly be called “regnant.”

This year, “Avatar” became the biggest-selling movie of all time. It tells the story of a being with needs who freely chooses to attach himself to the body and also the long-term goals of another species. Difficulties and revelations of hidden capacities ensue, and in the end, after a near-death experience, an unprecedented migration takes place, in which the being with needs freely chooses to bind himself to this other species forever.

Human beings, through a combination of empathy and massive sensory overload, can experience this story of love, incarnation, and, structurally speaking, resurrection, in highly versimilitudinous 3-D, in a safe comfortable environment, for fourteen dollars.

And they do: again and again: they go back again and again.

Now, whoa, whoa, wait a minute. I can hear people getting upset already. “Are you saying, Craig, that the divine power of the Gospel narrative can be transmitted through stories that never mention Jesus Christ but which are structured with same rhythms? Are you saying that our God, the one we worship on Sunday at our church is as salvifically present in “Avatar” as she is in readings from the lectionary, delivered from the pulpit?

I don’t know.

I do know this.

There is not a single movie in the top five selling movies of all time that does not incorporate some form of narrative-structural if not actual resurrection. Most Hollywood movies roll out their narrative in a three-act-structure with which most people are now so deeply familiar, consciously or not, that they can show up at the office on Monday and tell you how something went wrong in the second act of the movie Hollywood released on Friday, rendering the third act somehow limp. People know the structure of movies: and that structure is a ghost of a life-form which most recently appeared as the Gospel.

Something miraculous happens. A woman who just decided to never fall in love with a co-worker again, because of bad history: meets the perfect guy: her new ambitious boss!

It's impossible! But true! It's so ironic, it almost seems to be the product of some unseen hand, as if her whole life has somehow been created to generate this impossible moment.

Urrghh! Aggravating. And yet, like a baby, the beauty of this miracle is undeniable.

This love might not last, though. It's in danger. The evil man from Human Resources is watching. Human resources: what are human resources compared to this love?

Luckily, things are made momentarily safe for this love, by the advent of the company retreat to Hawaii, which is the homebase of the company! Everyone's relaxed in Hawaii; no one's watching too closely – except for Mr. Human Resources – and they consummate their love in the boardroom! On the table!

Where are all the serious business gets done!

Little do they know, as they consummate their love, Mr. Human Resources is watching.

Thing is, they consummate their love at just about the same that they realize the board of directors of the company is up to something. Our heroes now, in order to maintain their integrity as lovers and, by so doing, make the world safe for others – because what this board of directors is up to is very bad news – babies will get formula full of pesticides if they don't do something – in order to do the right thing, these two: who really function as one person, they're so perfect for each other: will have to risk revealing their true nature, which is that of Love Itself! It's almost as if that's what wants to happen! Weird!

Anyway: wouldn't you know it, just as their powerfully potent call for justice is being sounded, they ARE revealed as lovers by Mr. Human Resources and due to the harsh rules of company policy, they're both fired: and since it's their essential nature, both of them, to abide by company policy – they both know what happened before: bad history – it leaves a bad taste: so they separate. Their love, which had seemed so promising: so life-changing: so dare-we-say salvific, especially for babies – is dead.

The board of directors blames the pesticide baby formula on her. She's disgraced.

She goes back to rural Indiana to be with her Dad. He's not such a bad old guy, and her childhood room *is* decorated just like it was when she was little.

Although it does seem somewhat, in this winter light, like a tomb.

And Mr. Right's in Hong Kong, or somewhere: there are neon lights out the window: but it's no fun anymore. The neon now seems lonely. It's just not the same without her.

The. End.

No – WAIT! What the hell is that clankity-clank-clank sound in the darkness?

A vintage Mini Cooper is pulling up in the midnight snow-covered Indiana driveway!

Her goofy secretary, who could never do anything right – she was so funny! – found the missing memo in her desk drawer because of the one-night stand she had with the Xerox repairman at the office – just trust me – it works – anyway, this memo proves the board knew about the pesticide baby formula all along and she has driven to Indiana from wherever this movie takes place – Canada! – and she tromps up to the house through the three-foot-high snow but when she knocks on the door, the snow from the roof falls on her! So when our heroine opens the door, she sees nothing but snow and moonlight.

Until a hand pops up through the snow with a memo in it! It's a miracle!

But it's not going to be simple. And as they whisper in the kitchen, making their plans, having a little late night snack, her father walks in, in his boxers, sleepwalking, and makes a sandwich for himself while they watch. It makes this big moment "real."

She bursts into the annual meeting of the board of directors with a shout and in her right hand is the incriminating memo and who's standing there at the head of the table: HIM.

Mr. Right. With a press corps clicking their cameras and scribbling notes.

What's he doing there? Taking over the company? Taking advantage of her disgrace to –no: he's there taking all the blame for the pesticide baby formula just to exonerate *her*.

Oh my God – his seemingly unquenchable ambition finally found its end in love.

She tells her story and shares the memo with the press. The board of directors is hustled away in chains. Mr. Human Resources gnashes his teeth. The world is safe for babies.

Love has won because it risked revealing itself for the sake of others. Especially babies.

And our heroes get their jobs back. In fact, they get two jobs! Why not? We're not gonna have to watch this stuff play out! It'll happen in another movie. *We hope.*

Her dog is there, too. I'm not sure why.

The. End.

Sound familiar?

The structure of the Gospel is the ghost in the pop-culture machine: not the Gospel itself, but the narrative structure of the Gospel, which pre-dated, in many forms, the Gospel, but which found an obviously very potent form in the Gospel. If it hadn't, there would be no record of a crucifixion on Calvary after all this time: there would be no Holy Bible; if the narrative structure of the Gospel hadn't reached a radical fulfillment in the Gospel, there would be no Vatican in Rome: there would be no Renaissance, no Reformation, no Scientific Revolution, no Enlightenment, no Industrial Revolution, no movies!

But there are movies. And there was a Reformation. And there is a Vatican in Rome. And there was a story told --- shh! – *that that guy they killed came back.*

As memes go, the narrative structure of the Gospel is doing just fine. The church doesn't have anything left to learn from popular culture with regard to getting that portion of its message out. It's out. It's out so far that it has become the shape of almost all messages.

And, before we move on to the prophetic portion of the message, let's talk about the explicit Gospel narrative: I mean: if the answer to Cindi Beth's question, "What does the church have to learn from popular culture about getting the Gospel told?" is something like "Make it more entertaining and cool and available to everyone," well: let's talk.

If "The Passion of the Christ," which played to billions of people, didn't result in a measurable increase in church attendance, what possible version of the narrative would?

Telling that story that way doesn't really matter anymore.

Why? Partially because it's a story which is itself the shape of nearly every story, so it seems paradoxically passé. More importantly, because everyone senses that the people telling the story aren't willing to be changed themselves by the ensuing conversation.

"The Passion of the Christ" and every other fancy, filmed, high-tech, online, texted, sexted, "entertaining" iteration of the Gospel, if offered by communities who don't have a real willingness to be changed themselves, is bad magic. It's a misuse of language.

In my opinion, when the Gospel is told in bad faith, it's inhumane and sacrilegious.

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So: what about the prophetic portion of the mainline Protestant church's message? Is it getting out? Is the mainline Protestant church understood as a repository of conceptual power, personal commitment, and coiled potential energy when it comes to standing up for the poor, the downtrodden, the victims of racism, sexism, homophobia, and war?

I'd say yes and no.

Certainly most mainline churches market themselves as being on the side of getting the good work that needs to be done, done. But, much in the same way that the Gospel narrative has lost some of its punch due to the ways in which it has quietly become the infrastructure of all narratives, so too the power of the church's prophetic voice has diminished as the essential values of the church itself have seeped, over the course of centuries, into the values of secular culture. A person wishing to feed the poor, for example, can do so now in a wide variety of ways: by paying taxes to the government: by supporting a variety of secular charities: by purchasing the products of socially-conscious companies who themselves give their money and time to just causes. So only a person with a pre-existing relationship to the church or a person with a fresh special interest in understanding their natural compassion within a supernatural framework is going to hear the church's prophetic voice and respond to it with action. And if they don't, it's quite often, I believe, because the tone of that prophetic voice is inflected with a suspicious vehemence by the church's third and, unfortunately, most problematic message:

"Why not stop by our church this Sunday and check it out?"

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Now everything that lives on earth, and, let's assume, everything that lives anywhere in the universe, wants to survive. This desire of living beings for their own continuance has to be understood, in a radically monotheistic view, as a part of God's good world. The same is true, I assume, for the larger systems and institutions created by those living beings, whether they are coral reefs, forests, packs of hyenas, towns, or corporations: whether these macro-beings actually have a distinct macro-consciousness of themselves as unified systems with multiplicitous parts, seen from the outside, the sum of the parts looks and acts a lot like a singular consciousness: and small deviations from the apparent intentionality of the macro-system by its individual parts can be understood without too much difficulty as evidence of complexity, not as something that belies the system's status as a unified whole. In other words, when the cells inside the bone marrow of someone become cancerous, we don't stop understanding the person as a unified whole. They are a person who wants to live who includes cancer cells. So too, I believe it makes at least practical sense to say coral reefs want to survive: corporations want to survive: and that the church, as a unified system of discrete individuals, wants to survive.

But the church's desire to survive and the utterances it makes and the actions it takes to do so, and the tone of those utterances and actions, are generally problematic. Why?

Because the central narrative of the church is one of freely-chosen service and freely-chosen dissolution in the service of systems beyond its own scope: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son (Himself), that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." The fact that that weird idea is at the heart of the church's message puts the church's efforts to survive as an institution on the corner, just past the library but before you get to the McDonald's – and if you get to the McDonald's, you've gone too far – in some degree of paradox with itself.

It's not in complete paradox with itself: at the end of the Gospel of Mark, as we all know, we find this passage: "Afterward he appeared to the eleven themselves as they sat at table; and he upbraided them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned." Now we all know this was tacked on after the initial Gospel was written, and we can probably guess why, but that really doesn't matter. We receive the Bible as a whole and we require it, at a minimum, to at least make sense within itself: and where there is an apparent paradox, we look for or we construct a larger comprehensive vision into which the paradox dissolves.

We are, after all, radical monotheists.

So: I don't want to proof-text this thing. I'm going to let it slide that the Gospel licenses the church to do missionary work but not to sit statically on the street corner. Let's assume life is always a fluid process: we're moving into a new territory every day. And I'm going to let it slide that some of the theological notions of a people who followed a pillar of fire for forty years aren't much use to a church trying to justify paying \$40,000 for new pews while people down the street are starving. I'm really going to let all that slide. I'm going to say merely that when the church struggles too vividly for its own survival as a static institution, it looks *weird*. It sounds *weird*. It feels somehow *off*.

And it feels the most off when it is couched in the language of offering help to others. I don't want to be harsh or overly simple, but I'm just going to put this simply: when someone shows up at my door talking about how they want to help me, and the first thing they do is ask me to join them, and I can sense in my God-given guts that I am merely a King of Hearts in a game of solitaire they are playing with themselves, I don't like it.

And if I get a sense that they are so convinced of their own beliefs that whatever I could ever bring to the table that stood against it would be perceived as a hurdle to be jumped or something to be slowly dissolved by their unseeing, unhearing “love,” I hate it.

As I remember the Gospels, people followed Jesus. They followed him. He was headed toward the poor and the sick and they followed him.

The mega-churches, for a variety of reasons that have to do with their theology, are able to credibly market themselves with the tools of the culture because the services they offer their members are, to such a large degree, cultural services: most notably: entertainment.

But when the mainline Protestant church, with its commitments to radical monotheism and, within that, social justice, diversity, history and reason, positions itself as one more static destination in a marketplace, and consciously markets itself to consumers with the tools of marketing, it puts itself in paradox with itself in a way that I feel I don’t even have to explain to you: it just doesn’t feel right and we know it.

It’s enough to say that. It just doesn’t feel right. It doesn’t feel like God.

I leave it to smarter people than me to explain why.

So: the third part of the church’s message: “Why not stop by our church on Sunday and check it out?” is not really getting out because it’s being tortured into incomprehensibility in the church’s own throat by its own well-deserved contempt. Watching the mainline Protestant church try to convince people to join is like watching a person eat wax: you assume you understand why they’re doing it: they’re hungry: but it’s just not *right*.

It’s *eerie*.

This is my opinion.

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Tomorrow I’ll talk about what I think the church should be doing. But I’d like to close today by asking the original question again and, finally, answering it.

The question is: what does the popular culture have to teach the church about doing a better job of getting its message out?

Well, a movie came out a while back, near the end of the last decade.

It was about a doctor, a sincerely good person, who wants nothing more than to help others. Most of all, he wants to help children: he wants to help children who feel at risk in a dangerous world. And I cannot stress enough: his desire to help is deeply sincere.

And in this movie, the focus of his helping work is a child who has an unfortunate problem: in a good world, full of life, he sees dead people. And they fill him with fear.

Keep in mind: in this movie, the notion of a life beyond this one is assumed. This is key.

And so our hero sets out to help the child. It's in his nature to do so. But near the end of the movie, the hero, due to a chain of freely-made choices he's made to devote his being to the well-being of others, is forced to realize that he himself is dead.

And at the moment he realizes it, the movie flashes back to a host of moments in which he had seemed to be moving alive through the world, but now, when we watch those moments, they are clothed in an undeniable eeriness. And we wonder why didn't see it.

The form in which he's known himself has dissolved and he is finally forced, out of love for others, to move on, into the mystery of whatever the life beyond holds for him.

It's a redemptive story. It's a story with a Judeo-Christian structure, in which compassion enacted through willful self-dissolution, results in positive transformation for everyone.

What if that's part of what popular culture has to teach the mainline church about getting its message out? What if it's time for the church to acknowledge that it already exists in an eerie shadowy state, caught between one form of life and the next? At the very least, were the mainline Protestant church to contemplate, seriously, the question of how its own self-willed dissolution and transformation into something new and possibly more modest might be holy, it would be acting in harmony with its own central narrative.

I'm sure when early Christianity drew converts from the faiths of the cosmopolitan Near East, the leaders of those faiths puzzled about how to best handle the leakage. Now, in the face of declining membership, the mainline church is doing the same thing. But desperation doesn't look good on mainline Christianity. It looks unnatural.

As Jeff Hagan said to me the other day, the mainline church is making a mistake if they think the mid-20th century was their heyday. The heyday of all the denominations that make up the mainline church was when faith sprang within each of them as a live force, not as a plan to increase membership: when people didn't have to be convinced to join: when they felt they couldn't afford not to. That kind of revival can't be planned by committees: and it can't be forced with the goal of preserving an antique form.

The church calls believers when the church is on the move: stepping out of the temple and into the wilderness where the poor and the sick and the disenfranchised are waiting for people with values *other* than those of the marketplace to give them a helping hand.

I'm not saying worship isn't part of Christianity: but neither is the church as an institution a valid target for faith. Our faith is in God: and as long as the church helps us direct our lives toward God, it deserves our loyalty: but the church as an institution is only worthy of our loyalty the way any institution is worthy of it: in a loving, limited, critical way.

If the rise of secular democracy is an effect whose primary cause, among many, was the radically monotheistic universalized Judaism of modern Christianity, then for the church to ask whether the God who is active in all being might be daring it to, at least partially, willingly diminish or dissolve parts of its historic mission, in the name of better serving others, into that sea of God-charged secularism, at least makes the church logically consistent: it also makes it brave, sonorous in its tonality, and faithful in its heart.

The message of mainline Protestantism is the biggest ghost in the machine of popular culture. Before the church itself becomes a troubling ghost, though, eerily wandering the halls of a secular world in which God is getting good work done, it needs to ask itself whether it's time to move on. Only a

radical faith in a God whose life extends beyond all deaths, whose infinite capacity for invention renders every creation holy, beloved, but, also, finite, could inspire such a leap. The mainline church worships such a God. It is uniquely situated, like its founder, to consider its own diminishment with an open heart, confident that the God who brought it into being through the diminishment and transformation of the God-charged forces that preceded it, has even greater things in store, to be delivered in forms yet unimagined, forms unlikely, homely, and human.

Thank you.