

critique

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2015 Issue 4

**DRIVING WITH THE BRAKES ON, AND
FACING GUNS AND HORROR**



CRITIQUE



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ABOUT CRITIQUE: *Critique* is part of the work of Ransom Fellowship founded by Denis and Margie Haack in 1982. Together, they have created a ministry that includes lecturing, mentoring, writing, teaching, hospitality, feeding, and encouraging those who want to know more about what it means to be a Christian in the everyday life of the twenty-first century.

Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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Keeping Up in a Fast Paced World



Judging by the media, the world is changing rapidly and there are more questions than answers in how best to respond. The world of high finance wonders what will happen if Greece and Puerto Rico default on their debts, and whether the ripples will trigger fallout that will reach us all. The Supreme Court has determined that gay marriage is a right, and so must be deemed legal in every state. Though numerous countries have launched air strikes against its positions, ISIS continues to advance, and terrorist and racial violence unfolds in sickening frequency, even as America's TSA fails—in spectacular fashion—a test of its ability to do its job.

My tendency when events and change seem to speed up is to ratchet up my own speed. Since the world is moving at a faster pace, I need to keep up by living at a faster pace. Only makes sense.

Except that it doesn't—make sense, I mean.

"Above all," paleontologist and Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said, "trust in the slow work of God. We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We would like to skip the intermediate

stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet, it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability—and that it may take a very long time. Above all, trust in the slow work of God, our loving vine-dresser."

Many will say *that* is what doesn't make sense.

The challenge is not to commit oneself to what makes no sense but to be changed so that we see life and reality with greater clarity. After all, when something makes absolutely no sense to me, there are two possible explanations: it may be idiocy or I may be an idiot.

Two of the most radically counter-cultural notions in the scriptures are "Be still" and "Wait patiently." If you doubt that, try living by them.

"Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him," David wrote so long ago. Yet everything in my world and in me seems designed to push me in the opposite direction until both stillness and patience look impossible, inefficient, and irresponsible. "Don't worry about evil people who prosper," David added, "or fret about their wicked schemes." Sometimes my reality is so far from his wisdom that I find myself fretting about fretting.

The verb, "be still" also means, "be silent," a condition that is equally difficult today. Our compulsion to answer our cell phones and check apps and email suggests we may not be all that comfortable with silence. My ability to distract myself is really quite impressive.

If what we are considering here does not seem normal, it is only because we are broken people living in an abnormal world and seeing it all through very broken eyes. When we glimpse life

and reality through the spectacles of scripture we still see dimly but, from that vantage point, being still, silent, and waiting patiently for the slow work of God turns out to be the only way of life that makes any sense at all.

"Make it your goal to live a quiet life, minding your own business and working with your hands," St. Paul tells the Christians in Thessalonica. "Then people who are not Christians will respect the way you live." That might be nice to try someday. ■

Source: Common Prayer: A liturgy for ordinary radicals by Shane Caliborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove and Enuma Okoro (Zondervan, 2010) p. 335. Psalms 37:1,7 from Revised Standard Version and New Living Translation; 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 from New Living Translation.



To the editor:

Just re-read the article in issue 2014:4 of *Critique* about Fanny Crosby's song writing. Maybe the author would benefit from more fiber in his diet.

Danny Bullington
Knoxville, TN

Denis Haack responds:

Your succinct note, Danny, has brought me no end of amusement. And it happens to be correct.

tion and congratulations? Scott's poem is more rich and beautiful, varied, and nuanced than the haiku. The haiku has a place because it has a more powerful experiential punch and leaves more room for the reader to be drawn into the subject. Thanks.

*Sun on old woman
We see warm colors beauty
She sees dark and cold*

I read the conversation between Luke and Greg [on Ferguson, *Critique* 2015:2]. It is really excellent, opening up new angles and questions but not drawing any hard conclusions. I would love to see the continuation.

God bless you, dear brother and sister.

Much love in Jesus,
Ellis Potter
Switzerland

Denis Haack responds:

The haiku is wonderful Ellis. It distills the essence of Scott's poem while opening up a world of its own. And I too would like to see a continuation of the conversation on Ferguson—please take note, Greg and Luke.

Dear Denis and Margie:

Thanks so much for *Critique* and "Letters from the House Between."

I haven't read them all yet but did get a look at Scott's lovely, painful, and insightful poem [*Critique* 2015:2]. I've "reduced" it to a haiku. Can you pass it on to him in apprecia-

Dear Denis and Margie:

Just wanted to send a little note to say I am still being encouraged, educated, and enriched by your work since encountering *Critique* in 2006. I am working as a helper at L'Abri in Southborough and have been able to refer students to your publication as a resource whenever discussions of Christianity and arts/culture arise. Thank for following Jesus, even when it hasn't always, perhaps, made sense to you. Your faithfulness has helped many people, myself included.

In Christ,
Chloe Rudman
Southborough, MA

Denis Haack responds:

Thank you for your kind words, Chloe. And blessings as you help at L'Abri. ■

TUNED IN: *SIRENS* BY THE WEEPIES

"This is Not the Way I Thought it Would Be."



Sirens (2015), the first full-length album by The Weepies in five years, released after Deb Talan, half the folk duo group successfully completed treatment for cancer, weaves a lovely fabric of quiet wistfulness, a palpable desire to make sense of life in a world that is not as it was meant to be.

*I don't need no trouble
But sometimes trouble needs me
I don't need no trouble
But it's plain to see
Sometimes trouble needs me*
["No Trouble"]

This is not the sound of artists raging against the unrelenting brokenness that haunts our steps, nor is there any hint of bitterness against the way hard times are distributed so unfairly. Deb Talan and Steve Tannen are musicians who love one another and find in their relationship a hint of hope that makes even the sadness bearable.

*When the sky is grey
Hope just hides away
I'll be your sunflower
When you can't stand up
Even love is not enough
I'll be your sunflower...
A little smile but your mouth is tight*

Gentle pedals crowd around your eyes
["Sunflower"]

"Referencing both the doppler ambulance wails and the mermaid-like mythical creatures that lead sailors to shipwreck with its title," *Paste* notes, "*Sirens* is not thematically a 'cancer album.' Rather, it's an album that happened to be made while battling and recovering from the disease." And rather than focus on just that struggle, Talan and Tannen use it as a chance to see more widely and reflect more deeply on the human condition we all share. They sing of regret over broken relationships ("Ever Said Goodbye"), gender dysphoria ("Boys Who Want to be Girls"), friends lost over time ("River From the Sky"), and the risk taken to love someone ("Fancy Things").

*I hear their voices, sirens singing in the street
I thought they might be calling out for you, for me
I hear their voices, sirens calling out emergency
For you, for me, for you, for you, for you
For you, for you, for you, for me*
["Sirens"]

Musically, *Sirens* is deeply compelling, and appropriately was recorded in Talan and Tannen's Iowa home. The couple is joined by a wonderful group of musicians as backup—many of them unable to travel to Iowa and so recording tracks wherever they happened to be at the moment, including Pete Thomas and Steve Nieve (Elvis Costello), Gerry Leonard (David Bowie), Rami Jaffee (Foo Fighters), Tony Levin (Peter Dinklage), Oliver Kraus (Sia) and Matt Chamberlain (Pearl Jam).

*This is not the way I thought it would be
Thought it would be much lighter*

*This is not the way I thought it would
Thought it would be much brighter
Does Not Bear Repeating"]*

Unless we've become numb to reality, that is exactly right. With *Sirens*, The Weepies help us renew our deeply needed, human yearning for hope. ■

Music recommended: *Sirens* (2015) by The Weepies.

Sources: Review for *Paste* by Hilary Saunders online (www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2015/04/the-weepies-sirens-review.html).



FACING GUNS AND HORROR

In a thoughtful and pained reflection, “The Inexplicable: Inside the mind of a mass killer,” Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard tries to comprehend the awful tragedy of Anders Behring Breivik. The country of Norway, Knausgaard notes, is not large and is “relatively homogeneous and egalitarian,” and so the events of July 22, 2011, were not merely a brief news sensation but an unfolding horror story that evoked shock, grief, and fear in the minds, imaginations, and hearts of every Norwegian. That was the day Breivik parked a van in the center of Oslo packed with explosives that he detonated, killing eight people, and then went to an island youth camp and massacred 69 people, most of them children and many at point blank range. Even the judge and attorneys at Breivik’s trial wept as he recounted, without remorse, what he had done, and why.

How could such a thing happen? How could it happen in Norway, a prosperous and free nation? How do Norwegians account for the fact that someone like Breivik lives among them? What does it mean for a society, a nation, a community of persons when one of its members, apparently not mentally ill, commits an unspeakable act and then

defends the act as good and necessary? These are the questions Knausgaard poses, the same questions we ask when blood-soaked images and details of similar atrocities—some closer to home—command our attention, break our heart, and fill our soul with dread. Though his subject is Norway, his reflection applies to every corner of the globe and the tragedies that unfold with sickening regularity in America.

We suspect we can never really know the answers to these questions, of course, at least not in a way that fully satisfies. Still, we can’t stop asking them. Our insatiable questioning, I suppose, can be taken as a sign, a proof of sorts, of our humanity and the conviction that something is terribly wrong with the world, and with us. Something simply is not right.

Christians have an added issue to address: how do we explain the biblical understanding of sin in connection with such tragedies? Original sin is one of the historic doctrines of the faith held in disdain by many in our culture today, and it doesn’t, at first glance anyway, necessarily explain enough to be very helpful. After all, we may all be sinners but we don’t all shoot children in the face and insist that doing so is good,

a valiant effort to save a nation from an insidious and dangerous influx of foreigners. Besides, the children Breivik slaughtered were not even among the foreigners and immigrants he feared and despised.

Knausgaard points out that killing does not come naturally to most human beings. “Even in the military,” he says, “where killing is not only socially acceptable but something that soldiers are encouraged to perform, the inner resistance to killing another is so strong that it must be broken down systematically.” Troops must be conditioned to kill their enemy, and reports from battlefields show that many hesitate, endangering themselves and their comrades in the process. It may not be too hard to push a button if you are operating a drone armed with guided missiles from the safety of a bunker half a world away, but it’s a different story when you are face-to-face with another human being. Then pulling the trigger is far harder than the movies suggest. Knausgaard’s careful reflections are worth quoting at length:

Murder is against human nature, but in extreme cases this can be overcome if the community to which one belongs

enjoins or encourages it. The events that are now occurring in Iraq and Syria, the brutal murders committed by the Islamic State, cannot be ascribed to people having suddenly become evil but, rather, to the disintegration of the mechanisms that in a civilized society typically prevent people from engaging in rape and murder. A culture of war and murder has arisen. It happened in Rwanda and in the Balkans. It is one of the possibilities human beings contain within themselves. However, it is so distant from what most of us experience that we cannot begin to identify with it. They burn prisoners in cages. The ruthlessness and the indifference to life that these actions suggest are unfathomable.

Breivik's deed, single-handedly killing seventy-seven people, most of them one by one, many of them eye to eye, did not take place in a wartime society where all norms and rules were lifted and all institutions dissolved; it occurred in a small, harmonious, well-functioning, and prosperous land during peacetime. All norms and rules were annulled in him, a war culture had arisen in him, and he was completely indifferent to human life, and absolutely ruthless.

This is where we should direct our attention, to the collapse within the human being which these actions represent, and which makes them possible. Killing another person requires a tremendous amount of distance, and the space that makes such distance possible has appeared in the midst of our culture. It has appeared among us, and it exists here, now.

The most powerful human forces are found in the meeting of the face and the gaze. Only there do we exist for one another. In the gaze of the other, we become, and in our own gaze others become. It is there, too, that we can be destroyed. Being unseen is devastating, and so is not seeing.

Breivik remained unseen, and it destroyed him. He then looked down, and he hid his gaze and his face, thereby destroying the other inside him. Five years before the massacre, Breivik isolated himself in a room at his mother's flat; he saw practically no one, refused visits, hardly ever went out, and just sat inside playing computer games, World of Warcraft mostly, hour after hour, day after day, week after week, month after month. At some point, this fantasy took over Breivik's reality, not because he experienced a psychotic break

but because he discovered models of reality that were as uncomplicated and manageable as those of the game, and so, incited by the power of his fantasies, especially by what they enabled him to become—a knight, a commander, a hero—he decided to bring them to life. He had been a nobody—that is to say, dead—and suddenly he arose on the other side, no longer nobody, because, by virtue of undertaking the inconceivable, which was now conceivable, he would become somebody.

Though it may be uncomfortable to reflect on such things, we all know intuitively that as Christians we need to concern ourselves with these issues. For one thing, such tragedies are not merely happening overseas, in Norway or Syria. Nor is their impact limited to soldiers, police, victims of attacks, and their families. I live in Minnesota near the Twin Cities, where a multitude of Somali immigrants have settled and from where a number of young Somalis have left to join ISIS. Reports indicate most were not deeply devout when they joined but all were marginalized, felt unseen, and had little hope they could thrive in America. Even more importantly, the issues Knausgaard explores in this article are issues addressed in the gospel of Christ. Being able to talk intelligently about these things with our neighbors and colleagues that do not share our deepest convictions and values is essential to our calling to follow Christ into the world.

Most importantly, Knausgaard correctly identifies a deep wound that runs through the heart of modern society. "Being unseen is devastating, and so is not seeing," he says, and people who doubt that this is not rampant in our world are too busy and distracted for their own good.

A proposal: Bring a copy of Knausgaard's article—or the above excerpt—to work or to some gathering where Christians and non-Christians might be willing to discuss it with you. And to prepare for that discussion, here are some questions that might help you reflect on the issues involved. ■

Source: "The Inexplicable: Inside the mind of a mass killer," in *The New Yorker* (May 25, 2015) pp. 28-32

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. As objectively as possible, briefly summarize in your own words what Knausgaard is saying. What sentence(s) best capture his thesis or his reasons(s) for his thesis?
2. With what do you agree in this excerpt by Knausgaard? Why? What might you question or challenge? Why? How would you express your concerns or disagreements to the author?
3. What words would you use to describe your reaction when you hear of atrocities in the news like the one perpetuated in Norway by Breivik? What attack had the greatest impact on you when you heard about it? Why?
4. To what extent has the frequency of racial and terrorist attacks seemed to numb your ability to react to such tragedies? What should we do to remain sensitive to the tragedy without being overwhelmed?
5. Do you find the doctrine of sin an adequate explanation for Breivik's actions? Why or why not? Consider the biblical concepts of (a) sin, (b) original sin, (c) the fall of Genesis 3, and (d) falling short of God's glory. What other biblical concepts or terms can be added to this list? How do you understand these concepts? From where have you adopted this understanding? How confident are you that your understanding is the historically orthodox biblical explanation of these concepts? What needs to be added to the discussion to make sense of what Breivik did?
6. You are discussing this excerpt with non-Christian friends and one of them, knowing you are a Christian says: "I guess you believe Breivik slaughtered all those children because Eve ate the apple, right?" How would you respond? What other caricatures or aspects of Christian belief deemed incomprehensible today might be raised?
7. You are discussing this excerpt with Christian friends and one of them says: "Breivik is a sinner. It's been going on since Cain killed Able. That's all you need to know to understand what happened." How would you respond?

8. Some Christians may disagree about how to discuss this issue with non-Christians. Some, for example, might hesitate to use the term “sin” in the conversation because they fear the religious connotations might cause some people to react negatively. Others would argue this hesitation means we want to be liked more than we want to stand for the truth of scripture. How would you respond?
9. Anders Behring Breivik insists that he is a Christian and that this is related to what he chose to do on July 22, 2011. If you are a Christian, how do you respond to that? Would you like his claim repeated in the media when his crime is mentioned? Many Muslims insist that when the media emphasizes that Middle Eastern terrorists are Islamic this rhetoric distorts the perception of the faith of many millions of Muslims who are convinced that terrorism is forbidden by Islam and the Qur’an. Research indicates that most Westerners who seek to join ISIS are not particularly devout. One researcher discovered that most have in common one thing: ordering *Islam for Dummies*. Discuss.
10. The Orthodox Church in America (oca.org) published *O Lord, Make the Evil Be Good: A Christian Response To Terrorism* to provide believers with a guide “to discuss and reflect on the orthodox Christian response to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, in the United States.” Those of us who are not part of the Orthodox Church in America would do well to read and reflect on it.
 - a) “Remember,” the Holy Synod instructs the faithful, “what God gives us is not protection from harm, but a way of living—and also a way of dying, when that time comes. The question for us is: How do I live a Christian life in the face of danger, not how do I live without danger?” Is this included in your understanding of living as a Christian in a world in which terrorism is a threat? Do you agree? Why or why not? Is this something you would mention to a non-Christian friend? Why or why not? How do we maintain this conviction while also believing that the state has a responsibility to protect its citizens from attack?
 - b) “The primary and prayerful Orthodox response to any tragedy and violence is personal repentance—never a call for vengeance,” the guide states. “To repent and turn toward God means that we are to align ourselves with Him and to acknowledge and pray for forgiveness for the many things we have done in opposition to what He has shown us to be healthy and life-giving. When we truly repent—truly change the direction of our life—then we are open to God working in our life, realize what it is we actually need, and can cry to Him in faith and humility (James 4). To repent also means to reconnect ourselves to our neighbor. Remember, Christ tells us all people—even our enemies—are our neighbors (Luke 10:29-37). This means we need to act more as Christians personally and corporately as a nation. We, as the Church in this land, need to show that our Faith is not something we say we believe, but is at the core of who we are and what we do. Even in the face of such anger and hate, we respond with love—the kind of love a father or mother has for his or her children when they do something that harms other people.” Discuss.
11. “Being unseen is devastating, and so is not seeing.” Who do you tend to not see? How might you find out if there is more you do not see? Who do you have contact with—even if only superficially—who might be or feel largely unseen? When Christ described the mission he had received from his father, he quoted a messianic promise first spoken centuries earlier by the prophet Isaiah. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” Jesus said, “because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind” (Luke 4:18, see Isaiah 61:1-2). Besides the physically blind that he healed, could this also have meaning for those of us who are blind to needy people who are around but out of sight?
12. What implications for Christian life and ministry do you see in Knausgaard’s excerpt? What texts of scripture seem to apply? What do you need to confess? What plans should you prayerfully make?

Driving with the Brakes On: W

by Clarke E. Cochran

Why does the health care system continue to fail millions? Why have poverty rates remained the same for thirty years? Why do problems like drug addiction, education reform, and world-record murder and incarceration rates remain resistant to resolution?

Citizens and policy makers across the political spectrum recognize these social ills. Policy experts regularly propose plausible solutions. Health care, education, and prison reformers come and go with their suggested reforms. All are convinced of the rationality of their proposals for a more just and decent system, with considerable agreement across the spectrum. Yet very little changes. Why?

CULTURAL ANCHORS DEFINED

Have you ever tried to sail a boat without hoisting the anchor? Or perhaps had the more familiar experience of starting a car and trying to drive it without releasing the parking brake? “Cultural anchors” refers to the way certain attitudes, beliefs, and values place a crippling drag on social change. These anchors are so deep as to be invisible or so self-evident as to be unquestioned.¹

The idea of cultural anchors helps explain the resistance of entrenched problems to transformation. In the policy world, dysfunctional health care, poverty and inequality, and poorly performing schools are entrenched problems because they perpetuate injustice, they have complex social and economic causes, and they have proven resistant to multiple efforts at change over many decades.

Cultural anchors go beyond policy

disagreements about facts, theories, or practicalities. They hold back actual engagement with real injuries. For example, during the time when slavery was widely accepted, opponents could not gain a foothold to challenge it because beliefs, fears, and assumptions about racial superiority were unquestioned in society, preventing movement in the direction of justice and the common good. Until those beliefs changed, slavery remained a widespread, accepted practice.

Cultural anchors are more profound obstacles to public justice and the common good than the left-right polarization today most often identified with policy stalemate. While polarization is indeed a barrier to justice, cultural anchors are more pervasive. Both left and right are part of U.S. culture, sharing common assumptions about rights, economics, and the meaning of America. Ideological polarization is a

manifestation of the drag of cultural anchors; it is not an anchor itself.

Cultural anchors are not necessarily all evil. Humans are culture-creating animals. We cannot live without anchors. One would be ill advised to drive a car without brakes, but it is almost as dangerous to apply the brakes in the wrong situations or to drive without knowing that the parking brake is engaged. It is not these anchors’ existence that is troublesome, but rather their harmful effects. Until we recognize our contemporary anchors and lift them, poverty and inequality, broken health care, high rates of incarceration, and other social injustices will remain impervious to change.

FOUR ANCHORS

If we understand cultural anchors to be those deep-seated beliefs, assumptions, loyalties, commitments, and fears that permeate a cultural group, we

Why Doing Justice is So Difficult

can discern four such anchors in U.S. culture and society:

I. Individualism and Rights

Claims of individual rights dominate American social and political life. Right to life versus right to choose. Right to free speech versus right to respectful treatment. Right to use of private property versus right to clean air and water. “I have the right to...” or “Government has no right to interfere with my right to...” are common battle cries.

In many ways, this rights culture is a good thing. It is the bedrock of freedom, including religious freedom. It is the foundation of respect for human dignity, and it contributed to the abolition of slavery and of women’s second-class status. Yet rights claims are also the foundation for a culture of individual self-assertion, and more significantly, the erosion of civic life and neglect of social justice and the common good.

Individual rights assume an absoluteness contrary to the Gospel. They assert the self as the sole master of land, property, and body. I can say what I want and do what I want so long as I don’t infringe on your similar rights. This is a recipe for alienation, separation, and mutually exclusive rights claims. If something basic is named a right, then everyone else must leave me alone to enjoy it. Or, if my right is somehow not satisfied, then someone else has an obligation to furnish what I need. Yet that obligation infringes on someone else’s rights, and the result is a zero-sum clash of rights, a game of see-saw where, if one person is up, another must be down.

Two immediate consequences follow. First, this zero-sum game undermines trust in government and in the possibility of public justice. Government is perceived as a tool to

advance the rights and freedoms of whoever controls it. Public justice is impossible because justice is defined as my rights being protected. Second, the “pursuit of happiness” degenerates into Epicureanism. I have the right to happiness; thus, if my marriage is not a happy one, I should have the unfettered right to leave it behind. Individual rights to happiness, not the social good of family, define contemporary marriage. Epicureanism creates a culture of “me” and “my space,” as well as a lack of discipline, self-sacrifice, and social vision. Social life is “hollowed out” from within,ⁱⁱ where niche news, class segregated churches, and lifestyle enclaves replace civic life.

II. Economism

Economism is the pervasive impulse to extend the model of free market competition from economic relationships to all social relationships. College students become customers who have contracts with professors. Physicians become health care “providers,” and their patients are customers to be satisfied. Churches compete for congregants by creating coffee bars, sports teams, and entertaining worship services.

The widespread acceptance of the market model exacerbates social problems and leads to consumerism. “More” and “bigger” govern economic life. GDP must grow, therefore cars, homes, and the borrowing to afford them must grow. Pervasive income and wealth inequality are another consequence. Because winners and losers are a natural function of economic markets, the thinking goes, they must be a natural function of health, class, educational, and other “markets.” Under economism, inequality is not simply a social and economic fact; it becomes

a pervasive belief system with a set of assumptions and commitments so deeply embedded in the cultural psyche that our eyes are blind to its harms.

III. American Exceptionalism

This is the deep-seated cultural belief that our nation has been especially chosen and blessed by God for a unique, even religious, mission to the world. One paradoxical benefit of our era’s angry partisanship is calling attention to this often-buried cultural assumption. “Manifest Destiny” or America as the “last, best hope of humankind” are features of this belief, but it is a heretical one from the perspective of orthodox Christianity.

Nevertheless, this belief pervades all layers of American culture, with deleterious consequences. One is fear of the other and the idea that something or someone can be “un-American.” This manifests in a cultural, not just economic, fear of immigrants and in the belief that they will somehow undermine American culture. Or the fear shown in some recent campaign slogans that “we need to take back our country,” as if some elected office holders are an alien species. We see harmful effects of American exceptionalism as well in the refusal of policy makers to learn from other nations—whether in crime policy, health care policy, or education. If we’re exceptional and “chosen,” what then can unexceptional and unchosen nations offer?

IV. The Idea of Progress

Americans cling to the idea of infinite progress, a belief linked to the prior ones outlined here. Because of our individual freedom, the economic incentives of the free market economy, and American exceptionalism, we

believe that there is no problem so large that America cannot solve it once it puts its mind to it.

The upsides of this commitment are space exploration, medical device innovation, and smart technologies. The downsides, however, include the denial of death, fascination with medical technology despite its very high cost and diminishing returns, and the refusal of any limits in material consumption, military power, or life itself. John Updike says that, for Americans, there is no concept of “enough.” In a recent book, physician Atul Gawande describes the American nursing home as the “consequence of a society that faces the final phase of the human life cycle by trying not to think about it.”

A life or a nation without limits is a life or a nation pretending to be God.

CHRISTIAN PRACTICE AND LIFTING THE ANCHORS

Cultural anchors are by definition deeply embedded, and it is no surprise to find them within the church as well as in the larger culture. Lifting these anchors requires first seeing them in our own life and language. The church has, within scripture and its traditions, powerful tools to lift these anchors and bring about profound transformation. Three are especially important: self-examination, prophetic resistance, and alternative institutions.

Self-Examination

Authentic Christianity finds its center in Christ, not culture, and our loyalties derive from older and deeper sources such as scripture, traditions, and practices. Spiritual traditions and practices furnish the opportunity to detach from the ways in which the

surrounding culture has infiltrated the church. Self-examination sees in the rich traditions of faith alternatives to the myths and images and commitments of the dominant culture.

For example, when it comes to exceptionalism, St. Augustine reminds us that we are aliens and pilgrims in this time and place. Our true home is elsewhere, and temporal loyalties are secondary. Catholic social teaching and neo-Kuyperian thought offer theological and conceptual language such as solidarity, justice, sphere sovereignty, and human dignity by which to resist the dominance of individual rights language. We can develop analogies other than see-saw and winner-take-all to shape our attitude toward economic life.

Prophetic Resistance

Self-examination helps us resist the attempts to sink cultural anchors into the church. We can refuse to use the language of economism in our preaching and teaching; we can refuse let the flag define our loyalties. Abolition of slavery, child labor, and denial of women’s right to vote depended in part upon the church’s refusal to take these evils for granted, as well as its work to end them.

Having examined itself, the church can resist the pull of the dominant culture and transform its own conscience. It can adopt a prophetic stance towards the culture and its practices. This is not to say that the church should be the arbiter of public life (and thus violating sphere sovereignty). Rather, the church has a public, prophetic role in decrying cultural beliefs and practices that violate solidarity, public justice, and the common good.

Alternative Institutions

Historically, the church has established counter-institutions to organizations formed according to the dominant culture. Catholic hospitals, Methodist child welfare bureaus, evangelical substance abuse programs, and Christian schools, for example.

The challenge for these institutions is to resist the tendency towards “institutional isomorphism,” where they become transformed by the culture instead of transforming the larger culture. Thus, Catholic hospitals over time come to look very much like any other hospital. Evangelical social service institutions begin to adopt the rights-based, economist language of “deserving and undeserved” poor, instead of the Christian vision of each and every person as an image of God, no matter their past or present choices.

At their best, these institutions can be the loci of alternative practices and resistance to the prevailing culture. They can powerfully demonstrate how it is not only necessary, but also possible, to lift anchors impeding transformation toward public justice.

Self-examination, prophetic resistance, and alternative institutions—not an easy formula, but a vital one for doing public justice. ■

Endnotes

- i. I owe the concept of “cultural anchors” to the late Jack Glaser, a long-serving theologian and ethicist with St. Joseph Health in Irvine, California.
- ii. I owe this insight to Drew Christiansen, S.J., writing in *America* magazine (11/1/10).



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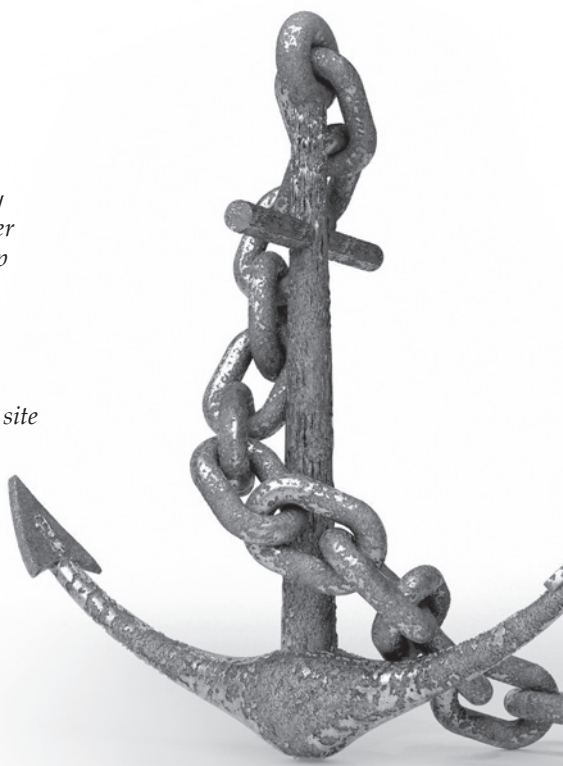
professor emeritus of political science at Texas Tech University, a fellow at the Center for Public Justice, and the author of numerous books and articles in health care policy, religion and politics, and Catholic social teaching.

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Capital Commentary is a weekly current-affairs publication of the Center for Public Justice. Published since 1996, it is written to encourage the pursuit of justice. Commentaries do not necessarily represent an official position of the Center for Public Justice but are intended to help advance discussion.

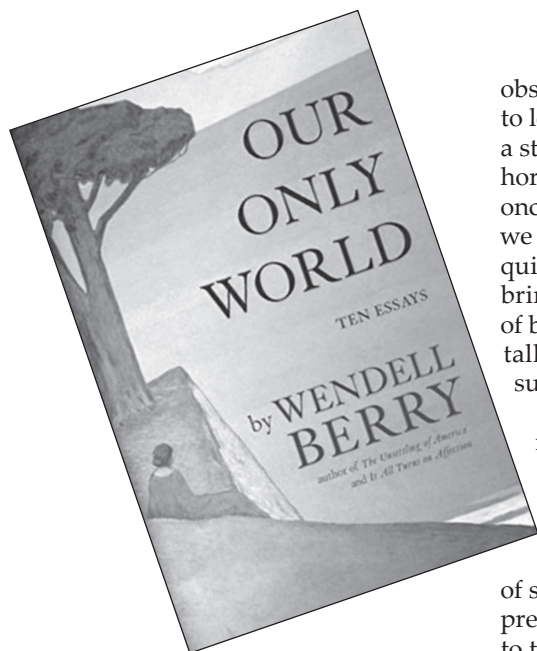
Editor's Note: We highly recommend the work of the Center for Public Justice and urge you to subscribe to *Capital Commentary* online at the Center's Web site (www.capitalcommentary.org).



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Where do you see the four “anchors” in your own life and in the life of your congregation?
2. Do you agree that cultural anchors described above are major obstacles to public justice?
3. Which beliefs and practices are most potent to resist the anchors described in this article?

Seeing What's Really Around U



When I was small it was not uncommon for some adult to mention that some fool or other needed “some sense knocked into him.” I never witnessed the deed and the fact that this was often linked to the expression, “a swift kick in the pants” only increased my confusion as to what the process actually included. The only clue I remember picking up was when an uncle said a “tour in the Marines on some godforsaken rock in the ocean would do the job,” a fate I hoped to avoid at all costs.

Having good sense requires seeing life and reality so clearly that we can flourish as a person even in a broken world. It may sound simple, but it isn't. It's closer to the notion of wisdom that is explored and demonstrated in the ancient wisdom tradition of the Hebrew scriptures than in the rarefied, abstract notion of philosophical reasoning proposed by the Greeks. Seeing life and reality with clarity takes a lifetime of

observation, an unhurried willingness to learn, and a way of seeing shaped by a story that is not limited to the narrow horizons of time and space. Every once in a while, if grace is with us, if we listen carefully, we might catch a quiet, wise voice of good sense that can bring a bit of clarity amidst the clamor of busyness, competing ideologies and talking heads that assault us. Finding such a voice is a bracing experience.

One such voice of good sense for me is Wendell Berry. A farmer and poet, his prose demonstrates that his feet are firmly planted in the reality of the ordinary, his mind is deeply rooted in the ancient truth of scripture, his heart is alive to God's presence, and his imagination is open to the priceless beauty of God's creation and our embodied relationship to it. His is a common sense that is uncommon.

There are a host of reasons to dismiss Wendell Berry. Conservatives dismiss him as an environmentalist. Progressives dismiss him as a Luddite. Evangelicals dismiss him for having bad theology. Secularists dismiss him for holding any theology at all. Read *Our Only World*—if you don't find something with which to disagree you probably aren't paying attention.

But dismissing Wendell Berry is a mistake—for several reasons. For one thing, even when I disagree with him I find that encountering his ideas clarifies my own in ways that enlarge my understanding and perspective. And he is one of the few public voices not beholden to the various ideologies/idolatries that compete for our submission. It's a refreshing change, like a taste of fine wine between rather unsavory dishes in a dirty restaurant. Another reason: Berry is an explicitly Christian voice that is not simply ignored by our

post-Christian culture—witness how *Harper's Magazine* (February 2015), a magazine not particularly friendly to Christianity, published an excerpt of *Our Only World*. He knows how to speak intelligibly and plausibly outside church circles. Another reason: Berry has spent his life in a small community in Kentucky, investing four decades in cultivating land and relationships in a landscape he has come to cherish. He may be guilty of many things, but being out of touch with real people living ordinary lives is not one of them. Another reason: Berry has carefully honed his giftedness with words so that he speaks with a quiet persuasiveness that is both convicting and compelling. Most of all, the reason we must not dismiss Berry is that the themes that he explores are ultimately rooted in the unshakable conviction that people are human beings, creatures bearing God's image living in God's good world, a creation of inestimable significance and dignity because it is the Lord's.

If you have not read Wendell Berry, a good place to begin is with his novel *Jayber Crow*. It explores themes of calling, finding purpose, being faithful, and what it looks like to reach deep fulfillment as a person even if you happen not to ever be in the limelight. It would make for excellent summer reading. Or winter reading, for that matter, or spring or fall. Just read it.

Our Only World is a collection of short pieces that, as the title suggests, address what it means to care for God's earth. Woven throughout are a series of commitments that usually get lost when this topic is discussed. If they appear at all, they almost always are accepted selectively and partially, distributed among ideological agendas that are usually allowed to dominate

the conversation. These commitments, however, are essential to a Christian view of things. Wendell Berry is explicit about the commitments he holds, and always tries to make clear how he believes they are best applied. I do not always agree with his specific applications, but realize that the burden is then on me to propose alternative applications that do justice to the foundational convictions underlying the discussion.

I am not qualified to list Berry's essential commitments in any sort of exhaustive way (I haven't even read all his books) and will not try to do so. But here are some that stand out to me that are firmly rooted in his Christian world and life view:

- People are created in God's image, are therefore significant in ways that transcend our understanding and must be treated with dignity and care. There are not any exceptions, nor can any be tolerated.
- The earth is the Lord's and, by divine action, is given into our care as stewards of God. How we treat the earth and use its resources matters. This means that any view of the earth that explicitly or implicitly considers its riches, resources, and places as expendable instead of stewarded is immoral.
- Violence can be done not just to people but also to the earth, and both are an assault on the dignity of God.
- Our bottom line must not be profit but human flourishing. Or put another way, any bottom line that does not take people and the earth into consideration must be restructured to acknowledge the reality of our calling before God.
- Human beings need place to flourish,

which means that local communities are often irreplaceable. Though a highly mobile society may doubt this truth, policies that do not embrace it will, to some extent, yield inhumane results.

- Just as we must be ready to sacrifice for the sake of people, we must also be willing to sacrifice for the sake of stewarding God's good earth. Both are a matter of faithfulness to God and essential to our humanness as bearing God's likeness.

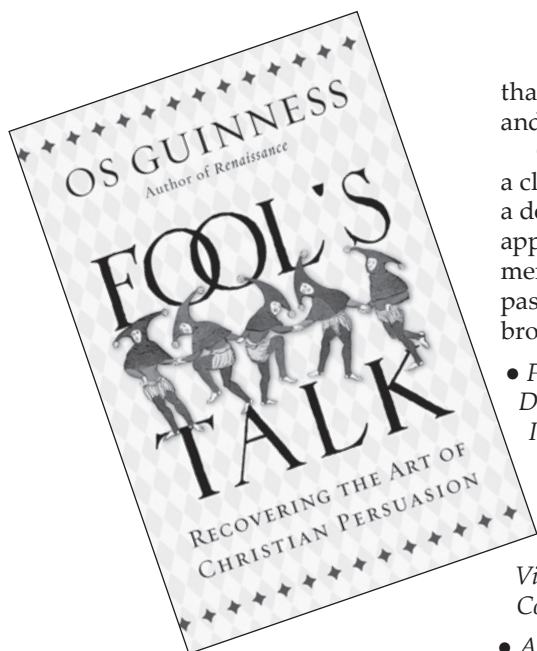
I have found it very frustrating to try to discuss caring for the earth. Most of the time the dominant paradigm is political, and so the conversation quickly degrades into sloganeering. That this is true in general does not discourage me—we live in a fallen world. What is discouraging is that this is true within the church as well as without. As Christians we must carve out safe places where we can review the essential commitments, explore their meaning and significance, and then propose a variety of policies and practices that are consistent with those commitments. That we might disagree as we move from convictions to policies to practices is not problematic. That we cannot discuss the essential commitments without sliding into politicizing the conversation should lead us to repentance and lament.

A good way to begin the conversation is by reading and discussing *Our Only World*. ■

Book recommended: *Our Only World: Ten Essays by Wendell Berry* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint; 2015) 176 pages.



Persuasive Faith in a Dismissive



Over the decades, Os Guinness has written books that have named exactly what's needed to be named for me to make sense of my world.

In *The Dust of Death* (1973) he identified the essential landmarks of the revolution that roiled out of the sixties and forever changed Western culture. What's more, his clear-eyed analysis was written from the perspective of Christian faith, so that rather than being reactionary or defensive his stance was compassionate and hopeful.

Three years later Guinness published *In Two Minds: The dilemma of doubt & how to resolve it* (1976) that allowed me to see the nature of faith, belief, doubt, and unbelief clearly for the first time. Though these are terms commonly used in the Christian community, the meanings and connotations assigned to them are often obscure and sometimes mistaken. Clarity brings not only a sense of assurance but also a quiet confidence as we walk through the buffeting

that faith absorbs in an age of cynicism and disbelief.

Guinness is a keen social critic and a clear, accessible communicator with a deep commitment to the gospel, an appreciation for the American experiment in freedom, and an unstinting passion for human flourishing in a broken world—as his book titles reveal:

- *Fit Bodies Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About It* (1994)
- *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (1998)
- *Steering Through Chaos: Vice and Virtue in an Age of Moral Confusion* (2000)
- *A Free People's Suicide: Sustainable Freedom and the American Future* (2012)

He's authored or edited more than 30 books, all timely and incisive, so most people will find a title that touches on a topic worth some thoughtful reflection and learning.

Most recently Guinness has published *Fool's Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion* (2015). If you are a Christian you need to read this book because it gets to the heart of where we find ourselves today at the beginning of the twenty-first century. *Fool's Talk* will help you understand your world, see why evangelical faith is held in contempt by non-Christians, and provide hope and guidance for ordinary believers for living and speaking the gospel creatively and persuasively to those who are uninterested and perhaps disdainful.

Almost all our witnessing and Christian communication assumes that people are open to what we have to say, or at least are interested, if not in need of what

we are saying. Yet most people quite simply are not open, not interested and not needy, and in much of the advanced modern world fewer people are open today than even a generation ago. Indeed, many are more hostile, and their hostility is greater than the Western church has faced for centuries. Through the explosion of pluralism in the last fifty years, our world has grown dramatically more diverse, and through the intensification of the culture warring in many Western countries, our world has grown far more dismissive of our faith. (italics in original, p. 22)

I want to be very clear here. I am not merely recommending *Fool's Talk*—though I recommend it highly—I am saying I believe it essential and necessary reading for Christians living in the West today.

We have lost the art of Christian persuasion and we must recover it. Evangelism is alive and well in the rapidly growing churches of the Global South, where the challenge is to recover an ardor for discipleship and a discernment of the modern world to match the zeal for evangelism. But in the advanced modern world, which is both pluralistic and post-Christian, our urgent need is for the recovery of persuasion in order to address the issues of the hour. Some branches of the Western church have effectively abandoned evangelism, for various reasons, and others speak as if Christian truths and beliefs are always and readily understandable to everyone, whatever the state of their listeners' hearts and whatever the character of their audience's worldview and culture. Others again have come to rely on formulaic, cookie-cutter approaches

World

to evangelism and apologetics as if all who hear them are the same.

This combination of the abandonment of evangelism, the divorce between evangelism, apologetics and discipleship, and the failure to appreciate true human diversity is deeply serious. It is probably behind the fact that many Christians, realizing the ineffectiveness of many current approaches and sensing the unpopularity and implausibility of much Christian witness, have simply fallen silent and given up evangelism altogether, sometimes relieved to mask their evasion under a newfound passion for social justice that can forget the gaucheness of evangelism. At best, many of us who take the good news of Jesus seriously are eager and ready to share the good news when we meet people who are open, interested or in need of what we have to share. But we are less effective when we encounter people who are not open, not interested or not needy—in other words, people who are closed, indifferent, hostile, skeptical or apathetic, and therefore require persuasion.

In short, many of us today lack a vital part of a way of communicating that is prominent in the Gospels and throughout the Scriptures, but largely absent in the church today—persuasion, the art of speaking to people who, for whatever reason, are indifferent or resistant to what we have to say. They simply do not agree with us and are not open to what we have to say. (*italics in original*, p. 17-18)

“This is a book,” my friend and bookseller Byron Borger of Hearts & Minds

books says in his review of *Fool’s Talk*, “that combines great learning, passion for God’s glory and biblical truth, and a great array of experience with life, with friendships, with conversations with world-class thought leaders as well as with ordinary people, from militant atheists to disillusioned churchgoers, older and younger, well-educated and less so. The writing is not simplistic, as this is no simple matter. Lives are at stake and while the destiny of each soul and the health of our post-Christian culture finally is in the hands of the God of heaven and Earth—we have to be attentive to serious matters in these serious times. Dr. Guinness has thought hard, read widely, listened well, and is always the teacher, inviting us to consider things not only in a new light, but in a deeper hue.” I agree. I also agree with Byron that Guinness would have done well to interact not just with classic stories and literature but with popular culture—but then the classics were at the heart of his education.

I urge you to read, reflect on, and discuss *Fool’s Talk*. It isn’t a quick read, nor should it be because Guinness is exploring important issues that require thoughtful analysis and response. But it clarifies where we are, how non-Christians hear us and why, what we have lost, and how it can be relearned and regained. ■

Book recommended: *Fool’s Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion* by Os Guinness (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015) 256 pages + notes + indices.

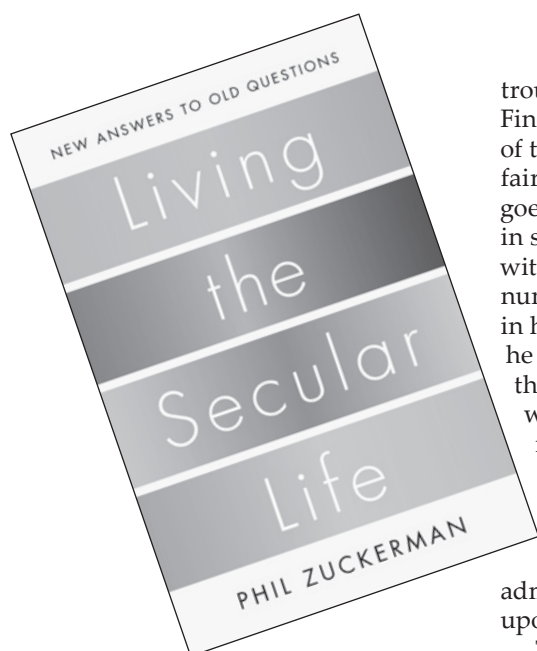
RESOURCE

Hearts & Minds bookstore is a well-stocked haven for serious, reflective readers. When ordering resources, mention Ransom Fellowship and they will contribute 10 per cent of the total back to us. ■

Resource: Hearts & Minds bookstore, www.heartsandmindsbooks.com



How to Be Secular



The purpose that motivated Phil Zuckerman to write *Living the Secular Life* is elegant in its simplicity. A convinced secularist and a professor of sociology and secular studies (Pitzer College), Zuckerman believes that secularism is badly misunderstood but, when understood, is commendable and plausible both as a way to see life and as a way of life. And since surveys show that “Nones”—people who hold no religious faith—are a rapidly growing demographic, he believes it is time that both secularists and religious believers understand it better. *Living the Secular Life* is, in essence, an accessible and practical apologetic for secularism written for ordinary people seeking to find their way in a pluralistic world filled with conflicting truth claims.

“Many people assume,” Zuckerman writes, “that a life lived without religion is not only somewhat void, but intrinsically problematic. After all, how does one deal with death without religion? How does one cope with life’s

troubles? Develop morals and ethics? Fine community? Experience a sense of transcendence? These are extremely fair questions (p. 3).” And Zuckerman goes on to address each issue in detail in succeeding chapters, complete with comments and insights from the numerous interviews he has conducted in his research. “What I have learned,” he adds, “and what shall be illustrated throughout the chapters ahead, is that while secular Americans may have nothing to do with religion, this does not mean that they wallow in despair or flail about in hapless oblivion. To the contrary, they live civil, reasonably rational, and admirably meaningful lives predicated upon sound ethical foundations” (p. 6).

Those of us who are not secularists but who want to understand our secular friends need books like this. It is inadequate to only learn about a worldview from someone who does not hold it, especially if it is a worldview with which we need to interact. I can learn a great deal from a Christian who teaches a class on Buddhism, especially if that teacher was at one point a Buddhist. But to really learn about Buddhism, to get inside it, as it were, it’s far better to learn from a serious Buddhist. The same is true of secularism. And since *Living the Secular Life* is not a technical philosophical study but is, instead, clear, civil, and written for a popular audience, it is a great place to begin our learning. Zuckerman is not seeking to be provocative but to be clarifying, to increase understanding of those who live secular lives, and to show that the myths about secularism promulgated by fearful religious pundits are simply untrue.

I would recommend *Living the Secular Life* for young adults who have been raised in Christian circles. Not only will

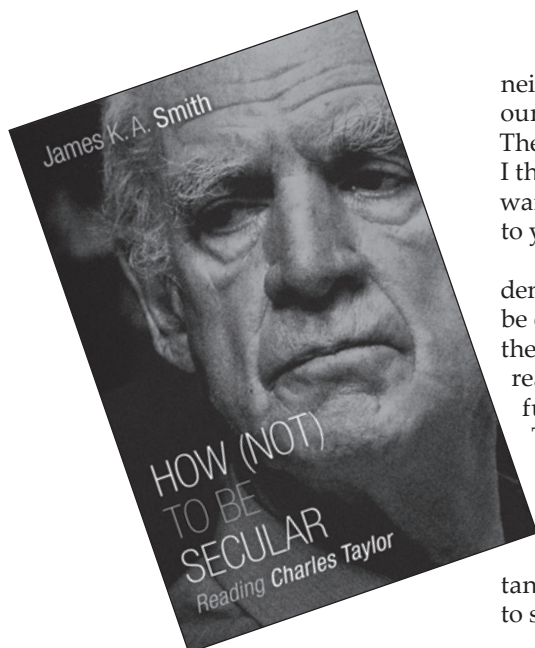
it help them understand their friends and world, it will allow them to hear a thoughtful presentation of secularism with which to test the reasons for their own faith commitment.

And as you read *Living the Secular Life*, please remember the principles and process of Christian discernment. Find places of agreement *before* identifying places of disagreement. Be as *objective* as possible with Zuckerman’s ideas, arguments, reasons, and conclusion. Listen with care *before* raising ideas of your own. When you don’t know, *admit* it. And *enjoy* the process of discernment, because it is a chance to learn, grow, and explore without fear.

- What’s being said?
- What is made attractive? How?
- Where do you agree? Why?
- What would you challenge? Why?
- How should you live out and speak about what you believe in an understandable way in our pluralist world—and before our secular friends and neighbors, especially now that you have a clearer understanding of those who choose a secular life? ■

Book recommended: *Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions* by Phil Zuckerman (New York, NY: Penguin Press; 2014) 224 pages + notes + bibliography + index.

Insight into Our Secular World



In 2007 McGill University philosopher Charles Taylor published *A Secular Age*, the culmination of a lifetime of careful study and thinking on the secularism that dominates our world of advanced modernity. It is a masterful accomplishment by a Catholic thinker and distinguished academician, weighing in at 874 pages, if you include the notes and index at the end, which I certainly needed as I read. It is full of rich insight and tells the story of how the world moved from a perspective shaped by a firm belief in transcendence and the divine in the medieval age to a world now dominated by the conviction that meaning can be found without any notion of transcendence or the divine at all.

The story Taylor tells is one we need to know if we are to follow Christ into the world with the gospel. He provides something like a worldview map for our time, an overview of the mental landscape increasingly adopted by our

neighbors and friends that do not share our deepest convictions and values. There are a number of points at which I think Taylor is mistaken, but I still warmly recommend *A Secular Age* to you.

Still, I also know that 874 pages of dense philosophical reflection will not be everyone's cup of tea. So, if that's the case for you, don't read it. Instead, read *How (Not) to be Secular*, a wonderfully accessible 143-page summary of Taylor's magnum opus by James K. A. Smith, philosophy professor at Calvin College. It's not beach lit of course, but will reward a careful reading—and I think it's important enough that I would encourage you to set aside time to do so.

How (Not) to be Secular provides readers three very helpful gifts. First, it summarizes the story Taylor tells and so allows us to see how we came to be where we are as the world went from the medieval period through modernity and into advanced modernity. In the process we can understand a bit more clearly how our non-Christian friends came to believe as they do. It won't make us agree with them but it'll allow us some insight into why they might find their beliefs to be plausible and even compelling.

Second, *How (Not) to be Secular* shows that the popular notion of becoming secular as a "subtraction story" simply is not true. This is the idea that, if you take a normal, educated person and subtract religious beliefs, doctrine, and dogma from them, you end up with a secular person. But Taylor demonstrates this is not true—the process of becoming secular requires the *addition* of a different set of beliefs, doctrines, and dogma. We are back on a level playing field.

And finally, *How (Not) to be Secular* provides readers with a set of terms from Taylor that allow us to make better sense of our secular age and the beliefs of our non-Christian, secular friends. Smith even provides a helpful glossary at the end of the book that is worth the price of the book all by itself. To wit, two examples:

- **Fragilization**—In the face of different options, where people who lead 'normal' lives do not share my faith (and perhaps believe something very different), my own faith commitment becomes fragile—put into question, dubitable.
- **Exclusive humanism**—A worldview or social imaginary that is able to account for meaning and significance without any appeal to the divine or transcendence.

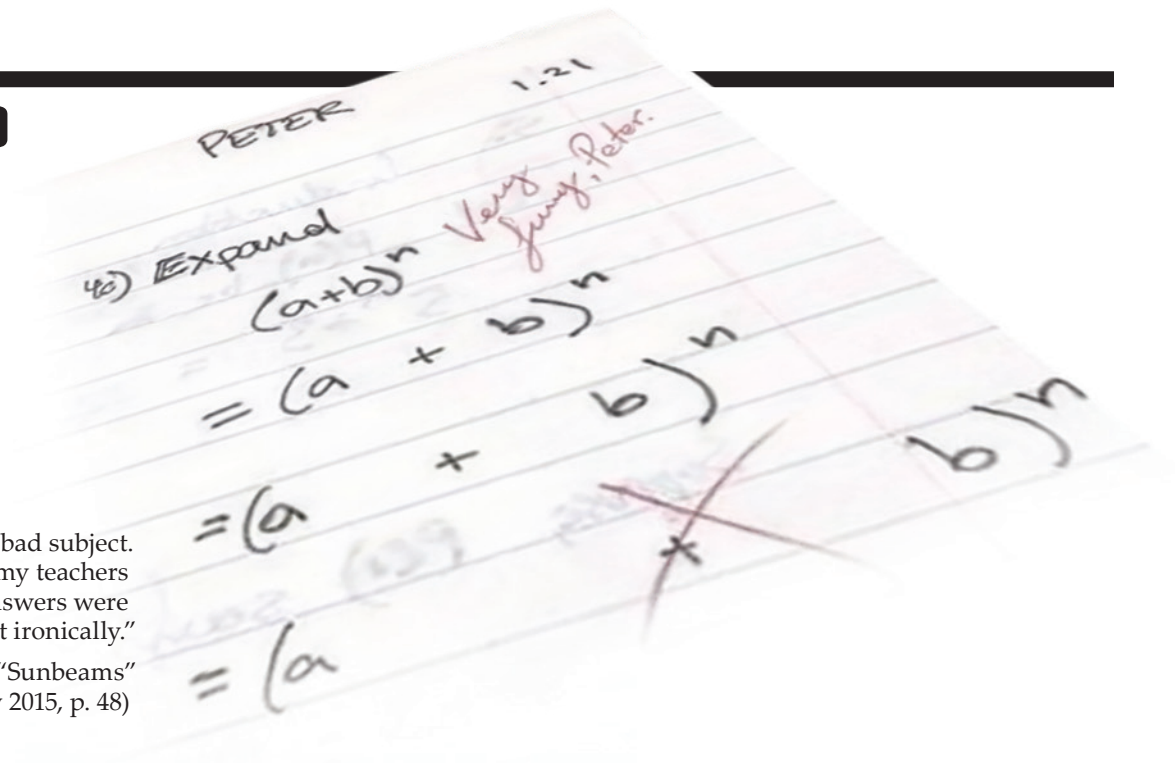
Smith realizes that, as thoughtful Christians follow Christ into the world, they can be in for a bit of a shock. "You thought you were moving to a world like yours, just minus God," he says, "but in fact, you've moved to a different world entirely." *How (Not) to be Secular* will help you make better sense of that entirely different world. ■

Book recommended: *How (Not) to be Secular* by James K.A. Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2014) 139 pp. + glossary + indices.

OUT OF THEIR MIND

"Math was always my bad subject.
I couldn't convince my teachers
that many of my answers were
meant ironically."

Calvin Trillin in "Sunbeams"
in *The Sun* (May 2015, p. 48)



In this cold commodity culture
Where you lay your money down
It's hard to even notice
That all this earth is hallowed ground—
Harder still to feel it
Basic as a breath

Bruce Cockburn in "The Gift"
on *Big Circumstance*, 1988

"A sobering thought...
What if, right at this very moment,
I am living up to my full potential?"

Jane Wagner in "Sunbeams"
in *The Sun* (May 2015, p. 48)

