

Public Theology in the Secular Age: Editor's Introduction

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Abstract

Discipleship and the Front Page: Public Theology in the Secular Age is an anthology of monographs offered to the general public as a contribution of distinctively Christian thinking about the personal and public implications for following Jesus Christ in “A Secular Age” (Charles Taylor, 2009). The monographs are written by subject matter experts—clergy, and laity; academics and practitioners; theologians representing a variety of traditions within the Church, as well as professionals from business, law, and medicine— with a common mission to leverage their expertise in the service of Christ and His Church. The work is a public theology initiative of the D. James Kennedy Institute of Reformed Leadership, a ministry and program of Faith for Living, Inc., a North Carolina nonprofit corporation. The collection address four areas of public life: Ideas, Daily Life, the Nation, and Triggers. Each *area* constitutes a division of the collection. Each of the four divisions contains three issues. The twelve issues represent the twelve chapter chapters in the book.

Rich media available at https://www.canva.com/design/DAEe2JvyVJs/watch?utm_content=DAEe2JvyVJs&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=publishsharelink

“Well, so that is that” (Auden, 1945).

Some argue *the case* out of anecdotal evidence, and others from social research; in both cases coming to the same conclusion: *Western Civilization, as we knew it, has reached a tipping point*. And then some.

From a loss of meaning after two world wars, the advent of the atomic and nuclear age with its apocalyptic storm clouds permanently hovering over the ancient, verdant fields of Scandinavia and the war-ravaged urban cities of East Africa alike, casting shadows that many of us prefer to ignore; the Balkanization of peoples within heretofore stable and unified Western nation-states; and a denial of perspicuity in favor of “the theater of the absurd” (Esslin, 1960); the West was becoming a tinderbox for conflagration (Milton, 2019). It may be that the global pandemic (2020-21) became the accidental spark to ignite the brush pile of the Great Books of Western Civilization. The populist movements within Britain (*viz.*, Brexit) and the United States (American First), with growing dissatisfaction among remaining member-nations over the failed dream of the EU, may have been unmistakable signs of coming change, a change for the worse. Reacting to a sense of government overreach, corruption, and a dramatic break between an elite in the centers of influence (Hunter, 2010), and those on the outer rings, nationalism and populism are predictable outcomes to a failure to steward democracy and representative government.

Deconstructionism’s pestilence essentially felled a sufficient number of tall oaks of Western ideals to create a dried-debris forest-floor of yesterday’s ideas—ideas planted in the nutrient-rich soil of Greco-Roman democratic ideals, Pauline teaching of Jesus Christ, Reformation, John Locke, Samuel Rutherford, Jonathan Edwards, Jefferson, Madison, Adams, and Edmund Burke— ideas that were quietly deconstructed as we slept, worked, and played (Hollis, 1990). Rather than a dramatic new and lasting social experiment, many perceived postmodernism as a dangerous prelude to a more complex multi-layered cake, a cake laced with arsenic, a confection created out of the old yeast of atheism.

There was much work done in defense of the ancient walls. Christian voices from T.S. Eliot, and Karl Barth sought to strengthen the foundations. Later twentieth-century voices such as Walker Percy and Thomas Sowell labored with *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* to identify the enemy that was breaching the walls (Sowell, 2002). Prodigious voices from both literature and academia, the plumbing trades for societal influence, assessed, diagnosed, and treated the signs of pathology with the lights of the Reformation, and the American founding—religious liberty and the divine rights of the governed—. However, in hindsight, one could justifiably argue that the more dystopian ideals of the French Revolution and Enlightenment, in the end, proved more appealing than the Magna Carta, more enchanting than the Reformation, and less intellectually demanding than the American founding. Post-structuralists like the Irish playwright Samuel Beckett, and French social philosopher Michael Foucault continue to influence disciples in the arts and letters, higher education, government and administration, and even religion. The Nietzsche-Derrida-Foucault devotees see the ancient walls of decency and social order as mere bricks to be dismantled. The deconstructionists, like an efficient road crew, did their dismantling work in the relatively unseen shadows of the darkness, unnoticed by those entering the freeway in the morning. Yet, day by day, year by year, the project began to show evidence of being completed. Their values are despised though their efficiency is admired; but, this is as one admires the unifying efficiency of Stalin by mass murder. Western narratives that were written in history, taught in nursery rhymes as well as law schools and seminaries, were re-written with nonsensical assertions, Orwellian word scramble, and revisionist histories. Post-American heroes and heroines were needed to depict the secular age envisioned. Thus, American school children were introduced to the invention icons of revolution. These tribal figures of history who were born of Socialist commitments, and usually worked for a veritable Balkanization of America based on group and sub-group identities, rather than unity around the Constitution.

It would have been 24 August 410 A.D. Had you been hunting or fishing on that day, perhaps, at the very northern edges of the Empire, you would have been distracted by an ominous vibration beneath your feet. An earthquake? You put your ear to the ground. No. it is not an earthquake. This is herd movement, a massive stampede across the northern hinterlands like you have never sensed before or after. How did W.H. Auden conclude his brilliant poem (1951), *The Fall of Rome*?

Altogether elsewhere, vast Herds of reindeer move across Miles and miles of golden moss, Silently and very fast. (Nicolet, 1972)

If we put our ear to the ground, would we, too, sense a vast movement of reindeer across the primordial plateaus of Europe, buffalo across the plains of North America, and deer moving across the midlands of England? Australia and New Zealand would surely not be exempt from the startled herds, for they are the West in law and language, customs, and media connectedness. Why do they move so “silently and fast?” In 410 A.D., the massive movement of the reindeer preceded the allied armies of Alaric: the unified Goths and Vandals. The mighty Roman Empire had passed the tipping point. King Alaric’s powerful armies, more brutal than Rome, more determined, and more unified, defeated the Eternal City and rendered it finite.

The example of Alaric and the Gothic-Vandal sack of Rome is, perhaps, an overused historical illustration for decline and fall. However, some things that seem trite are told and re-told because they carry ageless wisdom and warning.

If we in the West have reached the tipping point, the point-of-no-return on the downward slide of the bald rock, how will we live, move, and pursue happiness in a new age now arrived? To put it another way, how shall disciples of Jesus Christ live out their faith with Biblical and doctrinal integrity in a new Babylon? The Secular Age (Taylor, 2009) and the possibility of a post secularism (Habermas, 2010)—the character of both representing likely obstacles to faithful expression of the Christian faith, if not outright oppression, isolation, and exclusion —represents the intellectual classifications of the times in which we live in the early years of the twenty-first century. Voices such as Miroslav Volf (Yale) (Volf, 2011) and James Davison Hunter (UVA) have wrestled with this question and provided well-considered responses. (Hunter, 2010)

The aim of this book is to assess, diagnose, and respond to challenges of Christian living in the Secular Age

(Taylor, 2009), an all-encompassing phrase borrowed from Charles Taylor, by discipline; or, if you prefer, by areas of common life. How does the Secular Age effect healthcare? What does that mean for believers? What might we anticipate? How do we respond? What are the salient features healthcare in the new Babylon that should concern us? How shall we respond?

Reputed Christian scholars and practitioners representing a variety of disciplines and backgrounds, come together to conduct theology in the service of the Church—to support Christians in our rapidly changing milieu in the West, to pose questions, consider the issues, and provide responses. This book is an anthology of essays that seeks to be a “signpost in a strange land” (Percy, 2000) a torch, a guide, and a trusted shepherd for a flock embarking on, likely, a most treacherous journey.

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