

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Note to Evangelicals: “Let’s Start Talking About Our Theology, Not Politics”

Although American civilization manifests a radical pluralism when it comes to worldview choices, secularism is the preferred face of this culture. As a culture, we respect the right of a person to choose, but we do not like to discuss the nature of those religious choices. Instead of engaging in the implications and the consistency of a worldview choice, our culture prefers silence. When worldview choices are discussed, it quickly drifts to politics, not theology. The end result is that the public square is indeed naked (to use the late John Neuhaus’s words.) As a Christian, I find all of this especially disturbing. My fellow evangelicals seem more prone to talk about the virtues of Donald Trump than the uniqueness of the Christian worldview. Columnist E.J. Dionne, Jr. has noted this in a recent column when he observed the following:

- “Religion has been subsumed by politics.
- Many liberals have accepted the view that religion now lives almost entirely on the right end of politics.
- The popular media tend to focus on the most extreme and outlandish examples of religion rather than the more thoughtful kind.
- The quieter forms of religious expression—left, right and center—rarely win notice on covers of magazines or anywhere else.”

The politicization of religion is obvious in our culture today, for, when it is discussed, rarely do we talk about the nature of God or how to contemplate the Exodus or the Resurrection. Immediately, we focus on culture war issues (e.g., abortion, same-sex marriage or whom you will vote for as president). It is not that these matters are unimportant; they are important. But the unintended result is the cultivation of superficiality and shallowness when it comes to religious conviction. For some, the test of whether someone is really a Christian is that person’s view on these culture war issues or on a particular candidate in the upcoming election. Dionne quotes Berkeley historian, David Hollinger: “The absence of sustained, public scrutiny of religious ideas in our time has created a vacuum filled with easy God talk.” For the secular wing of American culture, genuine Christianity is the promotion of right-wing extremism or conservative politics.

Consider two examples of how genuine, biblical Christianity is about more than conservative politics:

1. One of the most famous atheists of the last two decades was Christopher Hitchens. He died of esophageal cancer in 2011. Larry Taunton, of the Fixed Point Foundation and a devout Christian intellectual, organizes debates between Christians and atheists. In 2010, he organized a series of debates in various parts of America and, for some of these debates, he actually drove Hitchens to these events. That means they had hours to talk and reflect on their respective worldviews. In a recent book by Taunton, he summarizes details of those drives. In one, Hitchens was reading from the Gospel of John out loud and asking what was “the precise reason Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus.” He asked Taunton, “where is grace in the Old Testament?” which resulted in a discussion about God’s covenant with Abraham. Taunton offers no evidence that Hitchens ever made a decision of faith, but these long conversations between Hitchens and Taunton were not about politics or culture war issues. They were about Jesus, His miracles and key theological ideas in Scripture. Taunton demonstrated real affection for Hitchens as a man and a willingness to engage him not at the level of the superficial but at a level that challenged Hitchens’s worldview.
2. The other example gives focus to one of the most famous atheists of the 20th century—Bertrand Russell. Along with A.N. Whitehead, Russell was the founder of analytic philosophy. He stressed the absolute nature of impersonal, physical matter. There is no God, only matter; He advocated for the eternality of the material universe. The result was a bleak view of human life, its meaning and its purpose. Consider this extended quotation:

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of the universe in ruins. . . . Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built (*Why I Am Not a Christian*, editor Paul Edwards [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957], p. 107).

There are several interesting observations about Russell’s “world which science built for our belief.”

1. To Russell, humans are “accidental collocations of atoms.” Yet, Russell uses terms not associated with accidents: “loves,” “beliefs,” “despair” and “soul.” These words do not fit with his worldview. As John Piper argues, he borrows these terms from another worldview. He is using language beyond physical matter, an odd thing for a materialist to do.

2. Piper asks, did Russell live “his philosophy?” How did he talk to his three children about their hurts, their pains, their sorrows, for after all his three children were merely “an accidental collocation of atoms.” How did he talk with his three wives? Did he speak of them or to them as “accidental collocations of atoms?” Could he, did he, tell them he loved them? As a rabid materialist, what did love actually mean to him?
3. Russell’s self-annihilating worldview concludes that “only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built.” In other words, the soul’s habitation is built upon nothing, for humanity can only look forward to “extinction in the vast death of the solar system.”

The Bible affirms the reality of death, sorrow and despair, but it identifies the cause—sin. And it identifies the solution to this cause, namely the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Easter Sunday is the triumph over the tragic, desperate, unfounded worldview of ardent secular materialists such as Bertrand Russell. 1 Corinthians 15:17-20 makes the strong case for hope not despair, for triumph not defeat and for a foundation that cannot be shaken:

¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead. . . . [ESV]

As we move forward in this confusing culture, we who love the Lord and love His Word, let’s make a vow: Let’s covenant together to start talking more about what we believe than about politics. Let’s start talking more about the sound doctrine that produces godly living than the political culture. Let’s watch less Fox News and read more of the Bible. When someone asks about our beliefs, let’s direct the conversation to Jesus, who He is and what He has done. Let’s disassociate ourselves from the political illusion and embrace and proclaim Jesus as the solution to the challenges of the human condition.

See E.J. Dionne, Jr., “A Secular Society Needs a Little Religion . . .” in the *Omaha World Herald* (28 August 2016); Mark Oppenheimer’s article on Christopher Hitchens and Larry Taunton in the *New York Times* (14 May 2016); and John Piper, “Strange Collocation” in *World* (24 October 2009), p. 46.