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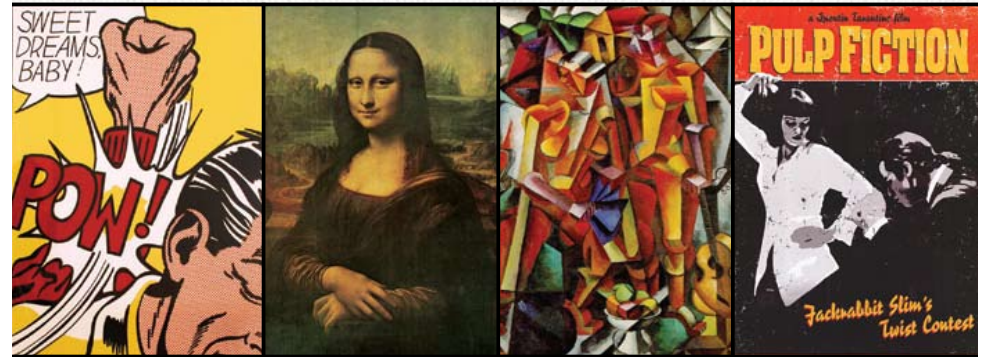
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SAVING LEONARDO

*A Call to Resist the Secular Assault on
Mind, Morals, & Meaning*



NANCY PEARCEY

Author of Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity

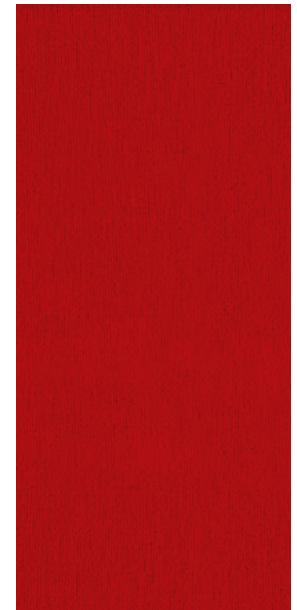
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Leonardo da Vinci

Hence the anguish and the innermost tragedy
of this universal man,
divided between his irreconcilable worlds.

(Giovanni Gentile, Leonardo's Thought)

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INTRODUCTION

Why Americans Hate Politics

During the 2008 presidential campaign, a troubling trend emerged—one that signals a crisis far broader than politics. Polls revealed that many young people feel alienated from the political process. They have grown disillusioned with a style of political debate that seems shrill, harsh, and irresolvable.

Of course, people in every age have complained that politics is stained by corruption and wheeler dealing. But today's disillusionment runs deeper. It is the tragic fruit of a secular worldview, which has decoupled politics from morality. And by recognizing how it happened, we can shed new light on the destructive impact of secularism across all of life. Politics is a microcosm that concentrates the forces at work through the rest of society.

A secular approach to politics first took root in the universities, the seedbed where world-views are planted and nurtured. As William Galston of the Brookings Institution explains, in the modern age, scholars decided that the study of politics must be “scientific”—by which they meant value free.¹ As a consequence, political theory was no longer animated by a moral vision. It became purely pragmatic.

This represented a radical departure from the heritage of the American founders. At the birth of our nation, politics was assumed to be a profoundly moral enterprise—the pursuit of moral ideals such as justice, fairness, and the common good. James Madison, principal author of the U.S. Constitution, said the goal of government was to secure “the public good.” As a recent

article explains, the founders assumed that “government is not simply about securing individual rights and interests but some more substantial and transcendent good.”²

But today, after decades of treating politics as value free, many political scientists reject the very concept of a transcendent good.

How did such a dramatic reversal occur? Through much of the twentieth century, American academia was dominated by the philosophy of empiricism, the doctrine that all knowledge is derived from the senses—what we see, hear, touch, and feel. Even moral statements were reduced to feelings. According to empiricism, we call things *good* when they give us pleasure. We call them *bad* when they cause pain.

Thus was born the fact/value split—the idea that humans can have genuine knowledge only in the realm of empirical facts. Morality was reduced to subjective preferences. The term *values* means literally whatever the individual happens to value.

This was a crucial turning point in the American mind. For if values are subjective, then they have no place in the university where we pursue objective research. In every field of study, knowledge claims were surgically separated from moral claims. Political thinkers decided that statements about the public good were nothing but masks for private taste. As Galston explains, they concluded that saying, “X is in the public interest” was merely a covert way of saying, “I like X.”

Today we are reaping the bitter harvest of that cynicism. For when moral convictions are reduced to arbitrary preferences, then they can no longer be debated rationally. Persuasion gives way to propaganda. Politics becomes little more than marketing. Political operators resort to emotional manipulation, using slick rhetoric and advertising techniques to bypass people’s minds and “hook” their feelings. Sound familiar?

Finally nothing is left but sheer force. Economist Lionel Robbins voiced the view of most social scientists: When we disagree over values, he said, “it is a case of thy blood or mine.”³

No wonder American voters are disillusioned. In a book called *Why Americans Hate Politics*, E. J. Dionne says, “Americans hate politics as it is now practiced because we have lost all sense of the public good.”⁴ Without the conviction that there exists an objective good, public debate disintegrates into a cacophony of warring voices.

The disillusionment is so widespread that a book came out in Britain with nearly the same title: *Why We Hate Politics*. “Politicians are assumed today not to be selfless representatives of those who elected them, or benevolent guardians of the public good,” the author says. How could they be, if there *is* no public good? “They are, instead, self-serving and self-interested rational utility-maximizers,” advancing only those policies that benefit themselves.⁵ Secular political philosophies inevitably end in sheer pragmatism and utilitarianism.

Because the word *secular* is the opposite of *religious*, many people assume that secularism is a problem for religious groups only. Not so. When politics loses its moral dimension, we all lose. When political discourse is debased, the entire society suffers. The reason Christians should be

concerned is not to protect their own subculture, but to protect the democratic process for all people.

The same secular forces have exerted a destructive impact in every area of life. In the following chapters, you will learn to recognize and resist secular ideas in science, philosophy, ethics, the arts and humanities. We will examine the concepts and events, the thinkers and artists who led the way step by step in creating worldviews that undermine human dignity and liberty. And we will demonstrate that the only hope lies in a worldview that is rationally defensible, life affirming, and rooted in creation itself. As the Declaration of Independence puts it, human rights are unalienable only when a society regards them as endowed by the Creator. When Americans recover a message of liberty, justice, and the public good, then idealistic young people will no longer have reason to hate politics.

Part 1: The Threat of Global Secularism

The book is divided into two parts. Part one describes the growing threat of international secularism and how it affects us all. Sociologists inform us that secularism is going global, radiating out from urban centers on every continent. It is a monolithic worldview we must now all engage, no matter where we live or work. Chapter 1 asks: Are we up to the task?

Chapter 2 zooms in on the concept at the core of modern secularism: the polarization of facts from values. This affects far more than politics, cutting to the concept of truth itself. The fact/value split was a major theme in my earlier book *Total Truth*. But this chapter takes the concept into new areas, showing that it is not only a view of truth but also a strategy for gaining power—and ultimately for imposing political control. Those who fail to recognize this central strategy will continue to lose ground both culturally and personally. And society as a whole will continue to suffer. Secular ideologies preach liberty but practice tyranny.

The fact/value dualism is only the tip of the iceberg, however. Chapter 3 widens the lens to reveal its connection to controversial issues that threaten the dignity of human life itself—abortion, euthanasia, genetic engineering, and the destruction of human embryos. These practices rest on a dualistic view of the human being. In science, humans are viewed as nothing but complex biochemical mechanisms (the fact realm), while in ethics, the individual is treated as an autonomous self, making ungrounded choices (the value realm). The same dualism drives sexual practices such as homosexuality, transgenderism, and “hooking up.” This chapter gives you the conceptual tools you need to respond to today’s cutting-edge ethical issues.

Part 2: Two Paths to Secularism

Ideas are far easier to understand, however, if we go up for a bird’s eye view to see how they developed over time. Part 2 widens the lens still further to trace the historical rise of secularism. Virtually all modern worldviews cluster into two major groups, originating in the clash between

the Enlightenment and the Romantic movement. Once again, we encounter the same dualism: The Enlightenment focused on the fact realm; Romanticism sought to protect the values realm. We might think of them as two paths to secularism. By tracing these parallel paths running side by side through modern history, we will gain surprising new insights into the worldviews that shape our world today.

Chapter 4 starts off with a crash course in how to detect worldviews in the arts and culture. The common stereotype is that art is merely a matter of personal expression. But the truth is that artists interact deeply with the thought of their day. They translate worldviews into stories and images, creating a picture language that people often absorb without even thinking about it. Learning to “read” that language is a crucial skill for understanding the forces that are dramatically altering our world. This chapter ends with an overview of the two paths to secularism, setting us up to explore them in detail over the remaining chapters.

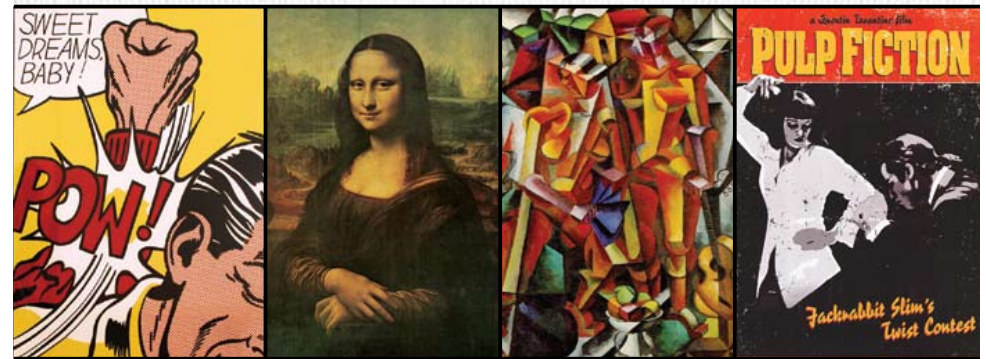
Chapters 5 and 6 explore one path to secularism—the cluster of worldviews that are offshoots of the Enlightenment. You probably remember terms like *Enlightenment* from high school history courses. You may even have studied worldviews such as empiricism, rationalism, naturalism, and materialism. But now these worldviews come to life as you see them expressed artistically in styles like impressionism, cubism, and those angular metallic structures that have sprouted up in our cities under the rubric of “public art.” Writers and novelists played a role as well, crafting stories that portray humans as Darwinian organisms in the struggle for existence. As we walk through these chapters, you will “see” worldviews unfold before your eyes through painting, poetry, and novels.

We typically think of artists as Romantics, so chapters 7 and 8 turn to worldviews rooted in Romanticism. This path to secularism takes us through some of the most controversial worldviews of our time—existentialism, Marxism, postmodernism, deconstructionism, and New Age spirituality. Artists and writers make these worldviews tangible, helping us to experience them “from the inside” in styles such as expressionism, surrealism, and abstraction. Images and stories bring the ideas to life in a way that a purely abstract discussion could never do.

Chapter 9 identifies worldviews as they filter down to popular culture, where they have mass impact. This is the area that concerns parents the most, of course. They are eager to find ways to equip themselves and their children to counter the destructive impact of secular doctrines conveyed through music and movies. This chapter offers tips and tools for critiquing worldview themes preached by Hollywood.

The epilogue offers an inspirational vision of how each individual can become a culture-shaping influence. Those best qualified to understand the arts are those who genuinely love them, and who are striving to weave their own lives into a work of art that will attract others to the beauty of truth.

Part 1



The Threat of Global Secularism

Chapter One

“Through art we can know another’s view of the universe.”
—Marcel Proust

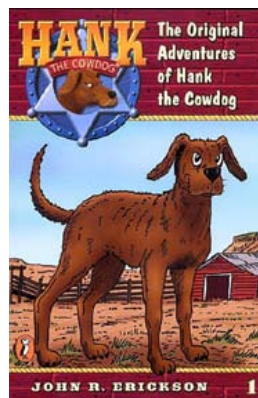
Are You an Easy Mark?

Hank the Cowdog is a humorous, homespun yarn for kids. Or it was, until the forces of political correctness got hold of it. Children’s author John Erickson has created a dog character with a comic tough-guy swagger, the “Head of Ranch Security” living on a cattle ranch in West Texas. Over the years, I came to know Hank like an old friend because my son Michael is an auditory learner, which drove me to the library shelves in search of books on tape that would appeal to him.

The Hank stories, with their corny humor and mock macho tone, proved to be perfect. Michael would listen by the hour to tapes of Erickson spinning out tales about Hank and his run-ins with a caricatured cast of critters—a stub-tailed sidekick named Drover, an uncouth coyote clan, and a couple of backwoods buzzards. The action is centered on a family ranch owned by High Loper and his wife Sally May, with their son Little Alfred. Working for them is a ranch hand who lives down the road, a bachelor cowboy named Slim Chance (modeled on Erickson himself in younger years).

Stealth Secularism

The down-home rural story proved unacceptable, however, to big-city television executives. Several years ago CBS selected *Hank the Cowdog* for its “Storybreak” program, a video series based on children’s books to air during Saturday morning cartoons. Initially, Erickson



1-1 John Erickson
Hank the Cowdog

Imposing a secular ideology

Erickson was puzzled by the drastic changes. “At first I thought someone had made a mistake,” he told me. “Then I realized that at such a high level of professionalism, people don’t make mistakes. The changes had to be intentional.”¹ He was right. But it took several years for Erickson to figure out what that intention was.

When he began to read books on Christian worldview, he finally realized what had happened: He had been caught in the crossfire of clashing worldviews. His humorous little story had been subverted by the forces of political correctness. Marriage? A trap for women. Family? An outmoded and oppressive social institution. Children? A barrier to women’s career aspirations. Cattle ranch? A scourge on the environment. So a revised script had been scabbled together in which Sally May was transformed from ranch wife to ranch boss, ordering around the hired hands instead of raising Little Alfred.

“They had taken the family out of my story!” Erickson was stunned as the implication sank in. “They had removed all traces of the kind of home life that had been a source of strength to me, my parents, my grandparents, and back as far as we could trace our family history.” And for what reason? “Because someone at the network had decided to use a Saturday morning cartoon series—and my *Hank* book—as a platform for their own ideology.”

Blindsided by CBS

Stories and images can be powerful means for conveying ideas. Every time we read a book or watch a movie, we enter into an imaginative expression of the artist’s worldview. It may be present subtly as a background belief, or expressed overtly as an intentional agenda. But it is there.

felt honored. When the video was broadcast for the first time, his entire hometown of Perryton, Texas, threw a celebration for its local author. But as Erickson sat down with two hundred schoolchildren to watch the video, he noticed that the story rang false at several points. For one thing, High Loper and Sally May were no longer married. Instead Sally May had been promoted to ranch boss. Loper had been demoted to a ranch hand who worked for her, along with Slim. In fact, all three adults lived together in a kind of bunkhouse.

What had happened to the family home? For that matter, what had happened to the *family*? Little Alfred had disappeared completely. Apparently a child was an unwanted nuisance on the CBS version of the ranch. Did I say ranch? No, the cattle ranch had been converted into a chicken farm. And the location was no longer west Texas but Arizona, set against a backdrop of saguaro cacti.

Writers and artists do not go home at night and study systematic philosophy. Yet they are whole persons who bring their basic assumptions about life into the study or the studio. “Stories offer meaning to the ‘facts’ of life,” writes Robert K. Johnston in *Reel Spirituality*. They always “have an informing vision, or worldview, embedded in them.”²

When the CBS producers imposed their politically correct worldview on the *Hank* video, they did not request Erickson’s permission. They did not even notify him. He was simply blindsided. “I am embarrassed that it took me so long to recognize what happened,” Erickson told me. “I don’t like getting whipped. I was an easy mark because I didn’t know I was in a fight.”

What about you? Do you know you are in a fight? Worldviews do not come neatly labeled. They do not ask permission before invading our mental space. Do you have the tools to detect the ideas competing for your allegiance in movies, school textbooks, news broadcasts, and even Saturday morning cartoons? Are you equipped to teach your children, students, and colleagues to recognize the most powerful worldviews of our age?

Or are you an “easy mark”? If so, your work and accomplishments could well be co-opted and redirected by others with their own ideological agenda to impose, as *Hank* was. And you won’t even know how it happened.

Secularism Goes Global

Among the worldviews competing in America’s pluralistic society, there is one that we all encounter in some form. It has become nearly universal, crossing ethnic, racial, and national boundaries. Sociologists describe it as an emerging global secularism. “There is, without question, a globalized *elite* culture,” writes sociologist Peter Berger, “an international subculture composed of people with Western-type higher education.” They tend to congregate in large metropolitan areas, so that elites in New York City have essentially the same secular mind-set as their counterparts in London, Tokyo, and Sao Paulo.

These urban elites exert power far out of proportion to their numbers. As Berger writes, “They control the institutions that provide the ‘official’ definitions of reality,” such as law, education, mass media, academia, and advertising.³ In short, they are society’s gatekeepers. People who have the power to control the “‘official’ definitions of reality” are in a position to impose their own private worldview across an entire society.

As a consequence, global secularism is an international worldview that we all need to engage, no matter where we live or work. Political scientist Benjamin Barber dubbed it “McWorld,” a homogenous global culture dominated by McDonalds, Macintosh, and MTV. “Common markets demand a common language,” he explains, “and they produce common behaviors of the kind bred by cosmopolitan city life everywhere.”⁴

That cosmopolitan lifestyle spills over into small towns and rural areas through television, advertising, music, movies, and fashion. Young people are most likely to be drawn in. Today

teenagers in small towns often have more in common with teenagers in big cities than with their own parents, pastors, and teachers. In the words of Timothy Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, “It is the culture/values set of world-class cities that is now being transmitted around the globe to every tongue, tribe, people, and nation.”

What does that mean practical terms? It means that “kids in Iowa or even Mexico are becoming more like young adults in L.A. and New York City than they are like adults in their own locales.”⁵ The sobering implication is that adults in those locales must get up to speed on big-city metropolitan culture if they hope to communicate with *their own* kids.

The goal of this book is to equip you to detect, decipher, and defeat the monolithic secularism that is spreading rapidly and imposing its values on your family and hometown. We will trace its historical development and analyze its impact on some of the most controversial issues of our day. Because it is propagated through “Western-type higher education” (Berger’s phrase) the best way to get a handle on it is to ask what the universities are teaching. What is taught in the science department, the philosophy department, and the art department shapes a society’s “official definition of reality.” Over time it filters down to the courtroom, the public school classroom, and the Hollywood production studio. Just ask John Erickson.

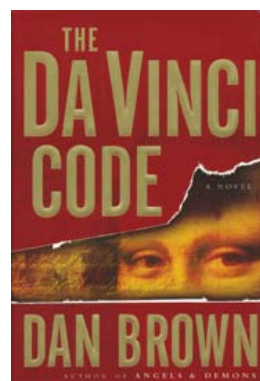
Da Vinci in the Big Apple

I discovered first hand how the global urban culture filters down when I shared a cab with a young unmarried couple in Manhattan. They were quintessential New Yorkers. He was a financial manager and Jewish. She was a lawyer and Asian. At first she acted aloof and business-like, tapping out messages to clients on her Palm Pilot as the cab plowed into

traffic. Eventually, however, we struck up a conversation, and when she learned that I was in New York City to teach for a Christian summer program (World Journalism Institute) she immediately went on the offensive.

“What do you think of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*?” (The book had been out about a year.) “All my friends are losing their faith because of that book. What about you?”

I decided to leave details aside and take aim at the book’s core claim—that the Bible is historically unreliable. Over the blaring horns of New York City traffic, I explained that the New Testament can be tested by exactly the same methods that scholars use to test any other ancient document. For example, historians can compare manuscripts in different languages from all around the Mediterranean world—Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Greece—to see how widely the texts diverge from one



1-2 Dan Brown
The Da Vinci Code

Fiction as biblical criticism

another. If variations are minor, then the texts were copied accurately and the version we have today is close to the original. And that is exactly what historians *do* find. Consequently, they have been able to reconstruct the original text with about 99.5 percent accuracy. There is no evidence that the New Testament texts were doctored or that legendary material was added later.

The young lawyer was intrigued. Then there’s the age of the texts, I explained. We have fourteen thousand fragments of the New Testament, many of them dating from mere decades after it was first written. Compare that to other ancient texts. We have only about ten copies of Caesar’s *Gallic Wars*, and the earliest is from about one thousand years after it was first written. With Plato and Aristotle, we have even fewer copies, and the time gap is even longer. Yet no one doubts the authenticity of the classical writers. By normal objective standards of historical scholarship, the New Testament text is incredibly accurate. There is nothing else like it in the ancient world.⁶

What about the Gnostic Gospels? In the novel, Dan Brown claims that the Gnostic Gospels give an earlier (and hence more authentic) account of Jesus’ life, a view that has become widely popular. But professional historians say the Gnostic Gospels were written about a century *after* the New Testament, not before.

We continued talking all the way to the airport. By the time we arrived forty-five minutes later, the young woman had dropped her Big-City-Lawyer persona and was thanking me warmly. She confided that she had been raised in a church but had never heard Christianity defended by reasons and evidence.

As I stepped out of the cab, it struck me that our conversation had been sparked by a novel, a work of fiction. Yet should that be surprising? After all, where do most people wrestle with the big questions of life—about God, morality, and the meaning of life? Today’s most influential worldviews are born in the universities, but they touch all of us through the books we read, the music we listen to, and the movies we watch. Ideas penetrate our minds most deeply when communicated through the imaginative language of image, story, and symbol. It is crucial for Christians to learn how to “read” that language and to identify worldviews transmitted through cultural forms.

An evangelical radio commentator once advised his audience to take *The Da Vinci Code* and “throw it away!” But putting on blinders is not the way to develop critical thinking. Nor is it the way to show love and compassion for the millions of people who were influenced by the book and who need answers to its false claims. Artists and writers are the most important conduit of worldviews. As philosopher William Barrett wrote, an age sees itself “in the looking glass of its art.”⁷ Anyone who wants to “understand the times and know what to do” (1 Chron. 12:32) must learn to interpret the images in that looking glass.

March on the English Department

Yet that radio commentator was expressing a view far too common in the church. The arts are often dismissed by Christians as mere entertainment, a leisure activity. Aren't there more pressing issues calling for our attention—such as what's happening in the White House?

Secular people know better. Consider a much-quoted line by Todd Gitlin, former president of the radical Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). After the 1960s student protests, Gitlin said, the Left began “marching on the English Department while the Right took the White House.”⁸ Today we must ask ourselves: Which was the more effective strategy? The 1960s radicals who avoided the draft with student deferments made their way up through the universities, became professors, and inculcated their radical ideas into the minds of generations of young people—ideas that shape the way they now vote.

This explains why Christians and other moral conservatives continue to lose ground culturally, in spite of a huge increase in political activism in recent decades. Sociologist James Davison Hunter, author of *Culture Wars*, says evangelicals have grown adept at mobilizing money and manpower to reach political goals. But they overlooked one crucial fact: that America's secular elites had already reached an *intellectual* consensus on the legitimacy of things like abortion and homosexual rights “far earlier than any kind of legislation or court decision that would ratify that consensus.”⁹

In short, what came first was a shift in worldview. Ideas are born, nurtured, and developed in the universities long before they step out onto the political stage.

That is true today more than ever because politics itself is dominated by the Ivy League. Through most of America's history, the nation has had a reputation for being pragmatic, not ideological—focused on building gadgets and making money. As Calvin Coolidge famously said in the 1920s, “The business of America is business.” Many of the nation's presidents have been military heroes. Despite exceptions like Franklin Roosevelt's Brain Trust, intellectuals have not been at the center of political power.

That changed with the 2008 election of Barack Obama. *Newsweek* welcomed his presidency by announcing, “Brains Are Back.” The *New Scientist* hailed him as “the intellectual president,” “a former academic who is deeply familiar with the world of thought.” Indeed the entire Obama administration is filled with graduates from Ivy League universities. A *New York Times* article dubbed them “Achievetrons,” listing the leading university each one graduated from.¹⁰

What this means is that the controlling force in politics is no longer business but ideology. Those who marched on the English department are now in the White House, bringing with them the radicalized secular ideologies they learned in the classroom. This is a trend that will continue long after the current president leaves office. Modern societies are knowledge-based societies, where information and expertise are as critical as economic resources. Those with the authority to define what qualifies as knowledge wield the greatest power.

Co-Opting Christian Culture

John Erickson discovered just how strategically that power can be wielded. The television network did not reject his *Hank* story outright. Instead it co-opted the tale to convey a message that he himself rejected. “When I made my deal with CBS,” Erickson told me, “I never dreamed they would use my story as a vehicle for mocking the values of my parents, church, and community.” His audience was co-opted as well. They were deceived into thinking they were getting a story from an author they trust, about characters they had grown to love. Instead the television producers distorted the story to convey their own elite secular worldview.

This gives a clue to the way society has been secularized over the past centuries. Throughout Western history, Christians have founded vast numbers of charities, orphanages, hospitals, YMCAs, schools, and universities—many of which were later co-opted and taken over by secular forces. The scientific enterprise itself arose out of a biblical view of nature (a topic covered in later chapters) but is now often deployed as a weapon to attack Christianity. You might even think of the family. Demographic studies show that religious families consistently have more children. The question is: Can they *keep* them? Parents invest enormous amounts of time, money, and emotional energy into raising their children, only to lose them to secular worldviews pounded into their minds through public education and the entertainment culture. A study in Britain found that non-religious parents have a near 100 percent chance of passing on their views to their children, whereas religious parents have only about a 50/50 chance of passing on their views.¹¹ The Erickson story is a microcosm of a broad pattern of secularization.

The process of co-option is so successful that Christians themselves no longer recognize their own heritage. Because it was the dominant worldview in Western culture for nearly two millennia, many of its tenets came to be regarded as simple common sense—like wallpaper that we no longer even notice. As a result, one of the most important steps in recovering a Christian worldview is simply to recognize it, reclaim it, and reconnect it to its biblical roots.

For example, our family had been reading Erickson's *Hank* books for years before we discovered that he is a Christian. Michael excitedly relayed the news to his friends. (He had prodded them into reading the books.) One boy replied, “I don't see anything particularly Christian about the *Hank* stories.” Perceiving a teachable moment, I told the boys about the CBS rewrite, explaining how the editors had deleted the very concept of family from the story. “We do not typically think of such foundational moral concepts as respect for marriage and family as distinctively Christian,” I explained, “because in the past virtually everyone in America agreed. But today a monolithic secularism is challenging the basic social ethics once taken for granted.” Western societies no longer share a moral consensus broadly informed by a biblical worldview. We should not be surprised, then, that the singular freedoms and democratic institutions built upon that consensus are disappearing before our eyes.

It is becoming clear that much of what used to be considered common sense is not common at all. Instead it is a product of the West's distinctively Christian heritage. Today it can no longer be simply assumed. It has to be intentionally articulated and defended.

When in Rome, Conquer

The challenge faced by Christians today is parallel to that faced by the early church. The Roman Empire encompassed a vast variety of ethnic groups, each with its own gods and rituals. Then there was the intellectual class, which took over the philosophers of ancient Greece—thinkers so influential that we still know them today: Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, the Epicureans. Virtually every major philosophical position that would arise in later centuries was already prefigured among the ancient Greeks. Any person brave enough to consider and accept the claims of Christ faced a pluralistic society with a wide diversity of secular and religious options—just as we do today.

How did the early church supplant those diverse and often hostile ideas? It studied, critiqued, argued against, sometimes adapted, and finally overcame them.¹² Individuals also demonstrated their commitment by authentic living, to the point of sacrifice and even death. One of the most amazing success stories in history is the way Christianity supplanted classical religions and worldviews to emerge as the leading influence on Western culture.

What does this suggest about the best strategy for engaging global secularism today? We often hear Christians speak about recovering the vitality of the early church. But which aspect of the early church are they thinking about? It's a safe bet they are *not* thinking about the way the early church went on the offensive against the dominant intellectual systems of the age. Today's churches pour their resources into rallies, friendship evangelism, and mercy missions that distribute food and medicine. And these are all vital. Yet if they aspire to the dynamic impact of the early church, they must do as it did, learning to address, critique, adapt, and overcome the dominant ideologies of our day.

To use a biblical metaphor, all Christians are called to be missionaries, responsible for learning the language of the society they are addressing. Within the boundaries of their native land, they may not face a literal language barrier. But they do face a *worldview* barrier as they seek to communicate with people whose thinking differs from their own. And they need training in how to overcome that worldview barrier. They must learn how to frame the biblical message in ways that connect with people's deepest convictions.

To use another biblical metaphor, Christians are called to be ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20). Living in the Washington, DC, area, I often meet graduate students preparing to be ambassadors and diplomats, and they are very familiar with the concept of worldview. Their graduate courses teach that the critical factor in engaging a foreign culture is not learning the language but learning the worldview.

After all, the first rule of effective communication is *Know Your Audience*. To get a message across to people, you must address their assumptions, questions, objections, hopes, fears, and aspirations. In short, their worldview.

The Simple Gospel Is Not Simple

In the middle of a conversation, a friend suddenly burst out, "What's all this talk about *worldview*? Suddenly it seems that everywhere I look in Christian books and magazines, everyone is talking about *worldview*. What's wrong with just preaching the Word of God?" My friend, a strikingly beautiful Jamaican, had grown up in a fundamentalist home and found it incomprehensible that Christians would devote time to analyzing worldviews. Isn't it better to just preach the simple gospel?

The answer is that the ultimate goal *is* to preach the gospel. But the gospel is not simple to those whose background prevents them from understanding it. Today's global secular culture has erected a maze of mental barriers against even considering the biblical message. The goal of worldview analysis is to knock down those barriers—to "demolish strongholds," as the apostle Paul puts it (2 Cor. 10:4–5), so the Word of God can be heard in all its fullness. The term *stronghold* in the original Greek literally meant a castle or fortress. Paul used it as a metaphor for the arguments and ideas that build walls around people's minds and prevent them from knowing God: "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God."

This explains why the great theologian J. Gresham Machen could write, "False ideas are the greatest obstacle to the reception of the gospel."¹³ Not pop culture. Not consumerism. Not moral temptation. False ideas.

Christians are called to tear down mental fortresses and liberate people from the power of false ideas. This process is sometimes called pre-evangelism because its purpose is to prepare people to hear and understand the gospel message. Once the walls are torn are down, then the message of salvation is the same for everyone—scientist or artist, educated or uneducated, urban or rural.

Questions Children Ask

Traditionally, churches have responded to fortresses not by demolishing them but by building counter-fortresses—with thick, high walls to shut out the world. They adopted an isolationist strategy to shield people from false ideas.

While visiting our home, a teenage boy went to wash his hands for dinner and came back with a suppressed grin and a sidelong glance at me as though he had just seen something naughty. "I can't *believe* you have a book on *Marxism* in your bathroom!" he exclaimed. Apparently in this teen's home, the message was that Christians don't read that sort of thing. They don't expose

themselves to worldly ideas. But if we do not read and analyze Marx, then how will we demolish the Marxist stronghold that has enslaved millions of people over the past century? How will we teach our children to discern Marxist ideology—and a host of other secular ideologies angling for their allegiance on the college campus and in the entertainment culture?

An isolationist strategy ultimately backfires. A recent study by Fuller Seminary found that when teens graduate from high school, they often “graduate from God” as well. But the researchers also discovered one factor that proved most effective in helping young people retain their Christian convictions. What would you expect it to be? More prayer? More Bible study? As important as those things are, surprisingly, the most significant factor was whether they had a safe place to wrestle with doubts and questions *before* leaving home. The study concluded, “The more college students felt that they had the opportunity to express their doubt while they were in high school, the higher [their] levels of faith maturity and spiritual maturity.”¹⁴

In other words, the only way teens become truly “prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks” (1 Pet. 3:15) is by wrestling personally with the questions.

This runs contrary to the typical approach in most Christian homes and churches. When I taught an apologetics course for homeschoolers, one mother confided that she hesitated to sign up her son. “I’m not sure I *want* him to know about people who don’t believe in God,” she said. Many people operate as though the definition of faith were, Don’t ask questions, just believe. They quote Jesus himself, who taught his followers to have the faith of a child (Mark 10:15). But I once heard Francis Schaeffer respond by saying, “Don’t you realize how many questions children ask?” The Fuller study shows that students actually grow more confident in their Christian commitment when the adults in their life—parents, pastors, teachers—guide them in exploring questions and grappling with the challenges posed by prevailing secular worldviews. By the time these teens leave home, they have learned how to practice Paul’s maxim: “Test everything. Hold on to the good” (1 Thess. 5:21).

Paintball and Whipped Cream

That may sound like a challenging agenda for teenagers. But young people are attracted by a challenge. That’s the message of *Do Hard Things* by Alex and Brett Harris.¹⁵ The book blasted up the best-seller lists, giving ample evidence that teens are hungry for richer fare than the typical church youth group offers.

Sadly, many churches simply mirror the pop culture that youngsters are already immersed in. When our sons were younger and attended Vacation Bible School, we were disappointed that the programs offered very little teaching. Instead they tried to draw kids in by using loud music, silly skits, and slapstick games—lots of paintball and whipped cream. There’s nothing wrong with good clean fun. But the force of sheer emotional experience will not equip teens to address the ideas they will encounter when they leave home and face the world on their own. Young people

whose faith is mostly emotional are likely to retain it only as long as it is making them happy. As soon as a difficult crisis comes along, it will evaporate.

That’s exactly what happened to a journalist named John Marks, author of *Reasons to Believe: One Man’s Journey among the Evangelicals and the Faith He Left Behind*. “In my experience as a teenager, I never had a strong adult mentor who represented the faith in any mature way,” Marks writes. “Most of my ‘pastors’ were Young Life leaders or youth group leaders who were decent people but didn’t have much intellectual or theological wattage.”¹⁶ As soon as he faced a serious tragedy he could not make sense of with his limited theological knowledge, he abandoned his “journey among the evangelicals” and left his faith behind.

My own journey began in 1971 when I visited L’Abri Fellowship founded by Francis and Edith Schaeffer. I am deeply grateful that God led me to a ministry that did actively engage with ideas and culture. And yet, after only a month I packed my bags and left. Why? Because I found L’Abri so intensely attractive that even there I was afraid of being drawn to Christianity for emotional reasons instead of genuine conviction. Eventually I went back, but at the time I knew instinctively that an emotional experience was not enough. I wanted to build my life on the conviction of truth.

Voddie Baucham, a former all-American football player, offers a catchy athletic metaphor. “Sending young people into the world without a biblical worldview,” he says, “is like sending a ballplayer onto the field without a playbook.”¹⁷ Team spirit is not enough. An athlete needs to comprehend the game’s strategy.

De-Coding Worldviews

What’s the best way to make sure young people are equipped with a biblical playbook, so they can apply biblical strategies to their lives? In recent years, the evangelical world has been swamped with books and conferences devoted to worldview teaching. The typical approach is to compare and contrast using grids and charts: existentialism, naturalism, Marxism, postmodernism, and so on. When I first became a Christian, I pored over books like these, eager to learn how to defend my new convictions. I worked hard to memorize the tenets of all the *isms* that I was encountering on the university campus.

Today I am still convinced that Christians need to understand worldviews. But I am *not* convinced that memorizing charts is the best method. It treats worldviews as isolated, disconnected, ahistorical snippets, reduced to thumbnail summaries to be memorized instead of genuinely understood.

What’s worse, consuming prepackaged, predigested material can foster intellectual pride and laziness. It is all too easy to stick a label on an idea, slot it in the correct category, and then dismiss it without actively thinking it through. One of my students had already taken several worldview courses before signing for my class. But she had grown disillusioned. “I had pages and pages of notes and diagrams,” she told me. But “I realized I had become very proud, placing everyone in

neat philosophical categories. I had stopped listening to people because my knowledge trumped all. Communication became a matter of proving I was right.” The study of worldview and apologetics can descend into little more than a game of *Gotcha!* where winning the argument is all important.

A biblical motivation for studying worldviews should be the same principle that motivates *all* authentic discipleship: The goal is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind,” and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37–39). Loving requires knowing the person well. We nurture love for God by studying a biblical worldview to become more deeply acquainted with his truth, his character, his purpose in history and in our lives. And we demonstrate love for others when we study *their* worldview to get inside their thinking and find ways to connect God’s truth with their innermost concerns and questions.

To adapt Baucham’s metaphor, Christians should not only know their own playbook, they should also know the other side’s playbook. As the apostle Paul wrote, we must become “all things to all people” in order to win them over (1 Cor. 9:22 esv). The phrase does not mean merely dressing like the natives and learning their customs. Above all, it means becoming familiar with their interpretation of the world, so that we can enter empathetically and compassionately into their experience of life.

What the Media Ignores

The need to grapple with secular worldviews is growing more urgent than ever as secularism goes global. But we can be encouraged in the task by knowing that Christianity is going global as well. In terms of sheer numbers, the center of gravity in the Christian world has already shifted to Asia, Africa, and South America. According to historian Philip Jenkins, in a few decades, white western Christians will be only one in five compared to black and brown Christians. (Islam is growing too, but not as fast. “By 2050,” Jenkins says, “there should still be about three Christians for every two Muslims.”)¹⁸

The rise of global Christianity has come as an unwelcome surprise to the Western media and intelligentsia. In fact, until recently, they refused to take it seriously. Their assumption was that religions are always an expression of culture—and therefore Christianity is an expression of *Western* culture, imposed on Asia and Africa only through the coercive force of colonialism. As the colonial age ended, surely Christianity would die out while indigenous religions would revive. Better yet, the Third World would become modern and secular. Neither prediction has come true. Instead Christianity has exploded. South Korea now has five of the world’s ten biggest churches. China has probably close to one hundred million Christians. More Chinese attend church each Sunday than are members of the Communist Party. In Africa at the start of the twentieth century, Christians were only 9 percent of the population; today they are 44 percent.¹⁹

Third World Christians typically wed their biblical commitments to strong tribal beliefs in the reality of the supernatural world. This means that they can sometimes meld pagan and biblical teachings in a wildly syncretistic mix. It also means, however, that they have no trouble believing that God acts supernaturally in history—both in biblical miracles and in modern miracles, such as healing. They are also firmly committed to biblical morality in areas such as marriage and sexuality.

Why did non-Western people suddenly discover God? During the colonial period, becoming a Christian meant selling out to foreign invaders. But when the imperial powers retreated, for the first time Africans were free to read the Bible in their own language and appropriate it for themselves. And that’s just what they did, in huge numbers. Africans discovered that Christianity is not inherently Western but universal. It is “translatable” into any cultural idiom. As a result, it does not destroy indigenous cultures but actually affirms what is best in each one. We might say there have been repeated re-enactments of the day of Pentecost when people from multiple nations heard the gospel “in their own language” and were converted (Acts 2:8). According to Lamin Sanneh, a former Muslim from Gambia who now teaches at Yale University, “Christianity is the religion of over two thousand different language groups.” There are more Christians who “pray and worship in more languages than in any other religion in the world.”²⁰

This Third World Pentecost is producing social benefits as well. Even critics are beginning to take notice. “As an atheist, I truly believe Africa needs God,” writes journalist Matthew Parris. Why? Because Christianity liberates people from the “crushing passivity” created by African worldviews: “fear of evil spirits, of ancestors, of nature and the wild, of a tribal hierarchy.” Freeing people from such deeply rooted fears takes much more than material help or technical know-how. A worldview can be replaced only by another worldview. Having grown up in Africa, Parris witnessed first hand how those who became Christian gained a sense of dignity and confidence. “They approached you direct,” he says. “They walked tall.”²¹

The same benefits are coming back full circle to the West as immigrants flood in from Asia, Africa, and South America. “On a typical Sunday, half of all churchgoers in London are African or Afro-Caribbean,” Jenkins reports. “Of Britain’s ten largest megachurches, four are pastored by Africans.” In France, the city of Paris has two hundred fifty ethnic Protestant churches, most of them black African.²²

In America, over the past fifteen years, more than one hundred new churches were started in New York City alone by African immigrants from countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Congo, and Ethiopia. In these churches, reports the *New York Times*, you are likely to see people playing conga drums, dressed in brightly colored kente cloth with head wraps. Moreover, these new arrivals are “overwhelmingly highly educated and professional.”²³ Global urban secularism is being met by global urban Christianity.

Reversing Secularism

Even among native Europeans, who are more secularized than any other people group, there are signs of a reversal. “Italy is no longer a completely secular country,” lamented a philosopher of science at the University of Milan. This was after a survey revealing that almost two-thirds of Italians want schools to cover scientific evidence for both evolution and creation.²⁴ In Holland, a quiet revival is taking place through lay ministries such as workplace prayer meetings. A survey by the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics found that between 2003 and 2004, church attendance among under-twenties rose from 9 percent to 14 percent. When the study was published, commentators were skeptical. Not Holland! Not young people! The pattern was confirmed, however, by other government research.²⁵

The turning of the tide is reflected in news headlines. In 1966 the cover of *Time* magazine asked, “Is God Dead?” In 2009 the cover of a new book announced, *God Is Back*. A major factor in the reversal was the fall of totalitarian regimes with their state-enforced atheism. Around the world there is now a trend toward self-rule and democracy, says a *Foreign Policy* article, and it has opened the door to religious groups seeking a greater public impact. “Democracy is giving the world’s peoples their voice, and they want to talk about God.”²⁶

Why has this religious revival come as such a surprise to secular pundits? Ever since the Enlightenment, social scientists have accepted the secularization thesis—the idea that as societies modernize, they secularize. This was treated as an automatic, inevitable process. The more advanced, the less religious. The founder of sociology, Auguste Comte, proposed that all societies progress through three stages—from religious to metaphysical to scientific. This was the application of evolutionary concepts to culture: Cultures evolve from simple and primitive beliefs to ever more enlightened and sophisticated beliefs.

The secularization thesis relied on several assumptions, however, that proved false. For example, it assumed that religion survives only in protected enclaves like the rural villages of past ages. In such a homogeneous setting, religion had a taken-for-granted quality. No one questioned it, just as modern people don’t question the law of gravity. But what happens when diverse religions clash and compete in the mixing bowl of pluralistic, multi-cultural urban areas? Then, according to the theory, religions lose their plausibility. In *The Secular City*, Harvey Cox writes that societies secularize when the “cosmopolitan confrontations of city living exposed the relativity of the myths and traditions men once thought were unquestionable.”²⁷

Yet religion has refused to die out despite the “cosmopolitan confrontations of city living.” The secularization thesis has been debunked—tossed on the graveyard of failed theories.

Why were the experts so wrong? It turns out that, historically, Christianity has *not* been a religion of rural villages. In the Roman Empire, Christianity first took hold in the cities—so much so that the word *pagan* actually means someone from the countryside.²⁸ Even here in America, Christianity has been centered in the cities. In *The Churching of America*, two sociologists show

statistically that during the rapid urbanization of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both Protestants and Catholics actually predominated in cities more than in rural areas. So it should not be surprising that today Christianity continues to thrive precisely in large, pluralistic urban areas.

No “Born” Christians

The secularization thesis relied on a second faulty assumption—that when people’s convictions are challenged, they grow weaker. In reality, they grow stronger. In past generations, many people simply “inherited” their religion, following the tradition of their family and ethnic group. I was raised Lutheran because my ancestors on both sides were Scandinavian. But in today’s large urban centers, it is no longer possible to remain Christian out of tradition. People face too much opposition and have too many alternatives.

To use sociological labels, traditional societies are “ascription” cultures where an individual’s identity is derived largely from family, tradition, class, and social role. By contrast, modern societies are “achievement” cultures where individuals make their own choices about what job to take, who to marry, and what to believe. They are more likely to treat worldview commitments as something they seek out, investigate, weigh, compare, and adopt as a matter of intentional commitment and practice. As a result, says sociologist Christian Smith, those commitments are actually stronger.

And because large numbers of people are concentrated in major metropolitan areas, there is also a greater probability of finding like-minded people to form supportive subcultures. Thus, surprising as it may sound, “rather than being a source of secularization and religious decline, pluralism strengthens religion.”²⁹ Just as the early church thrived in the diversity of the urban setting, so modern churches have the resources to thrive in pluralistic metropolitan areas. As East meets West, and North meets South, global Christianity has an unprecedented opportunity to challenge the global secular culture at its core.

Where the Action Is

The resurgence of religion is becoming evident even on secular university campuses. At Harvard, students are increasingly “churchgoing, Bible-studying, and believing,” says Jay Harris, the dean who administers the General Education program. “We have a very strong evangelical community.”³⁰

Law professor Stanley Fish is witnessing the same trend. “Announce a course with ‘religion’ in the title, and you will have an overflow population,” he writes. “Announce a lecture or panel on ‘religion in our time’ and you will have to hire a larger hall.” A reporter once asked Fish what would come next on campus after the current fad of multiculturalism. What would replace “the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy?”

“I answered like a shot: Religion,” Fish writes.

Moreover, he adds, students are no longer interested in studying religion the way an anthropologist studies an ancient culture, treating it as a quaint custom of bygone ages. Instead they are looking to religion for viable answers and guidance for life. They are treating it as a genuine “candidate for the truth.”

“Are we ready?” Fish asks his fellow professors. Are we prepared to discuss religious questions with students on those terms? “We had better be, because that is now where the action is.”³¹

Are *you* ready? The Christian community has an unprecedented opportunity to be where the action is. People are hungry for alternatives to the dominant secular worldviews. The door is wide open to make a compelling case for Christianity as a positive agent of individual and cultural renewal. We must determine never again to get whipped because we didn’t know we were in a fight. Never again be blindsided by a secular agenda. Never again allow schools and charities and ministries to be co-opted to serve a secular ideology. We must educate ourselves in a biblical worldview to maintain the integrity of our lives and our work, becoming a living alternative to the secular juggernaut.

The first step is to identify and counter the key strategies used to advance the global secular worldview. Let’s get started.

Chapter 2

*“Reason defines one kind of reality (what we know);
faith defines another (what we don’t know).”*
—Lisa Miller, religion editor, Newsweek

Truth and Tyranny

During the 2008 presidential campaign, ABC News published a disturbing article about young evangelicals. The reporter had interviewed several teens attending a Christian youth rally in New York City. The good news was that they expressed a strong commitment to biblical ethics. Most were pro-life, with some even ranking abortion as their number one political issue. But then there was a strange disconnect: Many of the *same teens* said their favorite political candidates were pro-choice. To the reporter, that sounded like a contradiction, a case of cognitive dissonance. “Doesn’t that bother you?” he asked.

“Maybe a little bit,” one teen replied, “but it’s all personal preference. I mean, you can’t really pass judgment on someone because that’s their belief.”¹

Moral convictions are *all personal preference*? Where had these teens picked up such a relativistic view of morality? These were young people who were attending a religious rally, who embraced biblical ethics, who probably went to church regularly. Yet they had accepted a secularized view of truth that reduces Christianity to a subjective preference, draining it of any spiritual or cultural power. They had absorbed the central tenet of global secularism.

Easy Marks

The key to understanding modern secularism is its view of truth. Think of it this way: Before you decide what you believe, you must first decide what the credible options are. That list is