

NO ONE IS IMMUNE

**REFLECTIONS ON GRAHAM WARD'S *THE POLITICS OF DISCIPLESHIP:
BECOMING POSTMATERIAL CITIZENS***

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Presented to the Christian Theological Research Fellowship
2009 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion
Montréal, Québec November 9, 2009

“It is often said that a new religion brands the gods of the old one as devils.
But in reality they have probably already become devils by that time.”

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 15

“Both sides have the virus, and must fight against it.”

—Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 709

Converting the Converted

In the best Christian tradition, Graham Ward has, in *The Politics of Discipleship*, performed a true service—particularly for his Christian readers. While I think it is fair to say that one of the book's primary messages is directed at a Christian audience (which is not to say that this is its only intended audience), at the same time the book does much more here than merely preach to the converted. The book instead calls for the conversion of the converted. That is to say, this book succeeds, in rather arresting fashion, to show Christians, especially those living in affluent Western societies, how deaf they have become to their faith's true calling. The book severely criticizes what Ward calls “Christian accommodationism” to the powers that be, and with that dares Christians to be “impolite”—to turn from this accommodating stance and instead respond redemptively to

the chasm that yawns between the world Scripture promises will one day come into reality, a world of justice and *shalom*, and the one human beings are now busily setting up, one in which “[t]he forces of dehumanization, dematerialization, and depoliticization are strong and hegemonic; new poverties and new slaveries proliferate; and we are sleepwalking into a future that threatens to overwhelm if grace and transcendent goodness cannot prevail.”¹

In setting themselves against the brokenness of this world, Ward also declares it time for Christians to be apocalyptic—not simply to pronounce doom in a posture of alienated detachment from the world’s fate, but rather to bear witness to “radical change, the end of something once thought invulnerable, a state of affairs once considered the truth about the way things are in the world.”² Ward means his book to be apocalyptic in just this sense; he intends it to be a form of revelatory truth-telling that unmasks the ‘aura of inevitability’ that surrounds our current broken reality like a halo, an apocalyptic treatise whose intention is to call for radical change to the *status quo*, as well as the reorientation of those Christians who have become far too comfortable with it—a conversion of the (so-called) converted. Ward’s message to his fellow Christians is one they ought to take seriously, because it opens upon the larger question concerning how global Christianity might put its best foot forward in today’s world, and thereby prove to be a source of healing within it. After exploring Ward’s message to his Christian audience, I will go on to explore the merits of his impolite apocalypticism as one voice in the larger conversation about how best to address the troubles of our times.

¹ Ward, Graham, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens*, 300.

² *Ibid.*

Remembering how to be Christian

Let me start these comments by saying that I am in deep sympathy with Ward's project with regard to his Christian audience. There is a deep struggle now taking place for the heart and soul of Christianity, and it matters a great deal who at the end of the day will get to say what Christianity stands for, who at the end of the day will be in a position to draw from its tremendous semantic and cultural resources; for there is no guarantee that these resources will be available to future generations of Christians should today's Christians allow them to fall into oblivion through neglect, disuse, distortion, or sheer forgetfulness. It is important, then, that the language, insights, and practices of this family of historical religious traditions retain or reinvigorate a home use, a culturally relevant field of operation and deployment, so that they do not become mere empty shells or vestigial remnants of a pattern of living that has long since passed away. So Ward's book leads me to ask: Do Christians today still know how to be Christian? And: If they have forgotten, can they re-learn or reinvigorate a life pattern with which they have lost touch?

Let me illustrate my worry here with an example. My sleep has recently been disturbed by a rather off-the-cuff remark Stanley Cavell makes in his essay, "Excursus on Wittgenstein's Vision of Language." In this essay, Cavell attempts to explain the intimate link that Wittgenstein posits between linguistic meaning and the process of learning how to use a word, a process of initiation through which the language we learn and the things we know come to us as of a piece. The example he gives to illustrate this is a moment in the communal process through which his daughter eventually comes to learn the word 'kitty'. At a certain point, Cavell assumes his daughter to have learned

the word, until he comes across an instance in which she is stroking a furry inanimate object while uttering the word ‘kitty’. After noting several possible interpretations in which this apparent mistake might be understood otherwise, Cavell finds himself forced to conclude that, although by this point she is well on her way, his daughter has yet to master this word and the various ways it can be competently used in the world into which she is being initiated:

“Kittens—what we call ‘kittens’—do not exist in her world yet, she has not acquired the forms of life which contain them. They do not exist in something like the way cities and mayors will not exist in her world until long after pumpkins and kittens do; *or like the way God or love or responsibility or beauty do not exist in our world*; we have not mastered, or we have forgotten, or we have distorted, or learned through fragmented models, the forms of life which could make utterances like ‘God exists’ or ‘God is dead’ or ‘I love you’ or ‘I cannot do otherwise’ or ‘Beauty is but the beginning of terror’ bear all the weight they could carry, express all they could take from us. We do not know the meaning of the words. We look away and leap around.”³

Cavell’s explanatory gloss in the above passage is telling, I think, especially concerning the cultural milieu that Ward would have his book address. It is as if today’s Christian, at least of the ‘accommodationist’ sort (and who among us has not made our deals with the devil?), has forgotten the meaning of his words; or it is as if the words he uses, although they appear to be the same ones that have been used before, mean something different and altogether more trivial now. He is just mouthing the words. As a result, today’s Christian, and also the larger human community to which he belongs, has lost something of the world and of love and of God, something of which previous generations were perhaps more intimately familiar (but, not being myself an historian, I leave that question

³ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 172-73. My emphasis.

open⁴). These words seem no longer to bear all the weight they could carry, and no longer express all they could take from us.

Ward is keen to redress this situation, and so one could interpret this book as an attempt at a certain kind of memorial retrieval—reminding Christians today that the words we so blithely invoke once carried much more weight, or are still capable of expressing much more than we now allow them to take from us, more than we evidently seem willing to give. But it would be wrong to read this book as simply an exercise in nostalgia. Nostalgia is a form of escapism that fails to take the measure of, to consider the difficulty, importance, and responsibility involved in, the task of memorial retrieval. The nostalgic stance is one that is as ahistorical as the modern forgetfulness it pretends to eschew. It simply does not care enough about the present or the future to understand the ways in which the past—which is never past—both shapes our present and bestows upon it the possibility of nurturing alternative futures, of allowing us to be shaped by alternative narratives and visions that have the power to shatter the aura of inevitability that crowns a damaged present.⁵ If we care about the present state of reality, and hope for a future that is different in substance than the one we now seem to be making, nothing could be more important than for us to engage in such tasks of memorial retrieval. These tasks are not conservative efforts to return to the romanticized glory of ages past; instead, they are attempts to excavate alternative visions that can revivify modern imaginations, allowing us to imagine alternative futures into which we might in fact project our

⁴ For a criticism of the historical forgetfulness involved in Radical Orthodoxy's tendency to valorize the premodern over the modern, see Zuidervaart, "Good Cities or Cities of the Good? Radical Augustinians, Societal Structures, and Normative Critique," 148.

⁵ I owe my rather condensed way of putting the relationship between past, present, and future here to my engagement with the work of Hannah Arendt. See Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. I work out this understanding in more detail in Kuipers, "Amor Mundi in a (Post)Liberal Era: The Relevance of an Arendtian Theme for Christian Self-Understanding Today."

ownmost possibilities.⁶ The ability to influence the ‘cultural imaginary’, therefore, is paramount according to Ward, because it is the cultural imaginary that “opens a space for what is possible.” The memorial retrieval of a religious orientation can play a key role here, he says: “Religious practices in a secular age are concerned with changing the cultural imaginary—that is, rereading and rewriting what appears to be the case in ways that are both critical and constructive. In a time of remythologization, new beliefs become believable as the conditions for believing, the structures of believing, change.”⁷ Ward considers our damaged present to be just such a time, a time ripe for reflection upon alternatives to the reigning mythologies of secularist society. He intends his effort of memorial retrieval to make a signal contribution to such reflection.

Ward thinks this effort is so urgent precisely because he has taken the measure of what we are up against in our faltering attempts to have a broken world steer a different course, or be guided by a different lodestar. The first half of Ward’s book, simply entitled “The World” is devoted to a fine-grained analysis of the contemporary geopolitical situation. According to Ward, we are up against the forces of a globalized capitalism that enervates democratic participation, and which is energized by the aspirations of a modernist secularism that still draws its words of power from a religious heritage (Christianity) it otherwise rejects. Ward would have no trouble, then, recognizing in this movement the same “self-concealing philosophy” that Charles Taylor

⁶ I am here describing the task of memorial retrieval as a hermeneutical task, one that allows for a certain distanciation of the real from itself. See “The Hermeneutic Function of Distanciation,” in Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 75-88. Following Heidegger, Ricoeur describes the moment of ‘understanding’ that results from our interpretive efforts as one that allows for “the projection of our ownmost possibilities at the very heart of the situations in which we find ourselves” (86). Interpretation in this sense allows for “a distanciation of the real from itself” that opens up new possibilities for being-in-the-world (86). Although Ricoeur is here discussing the imaginative power of literature, I see no reason to prevent extending this power to the task of memorial retrieval that Ward recommends Christians undertake, not least because of the prominent role played by the deployment of various literary genres throughout the Bible (not to mention the texts of other religious traditions).

⁷ Ward, Graham, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens*, 164.

also notices in *Sources of the Self*, a philosophy Taylor describes as doubly parasitic: “First, it is parasitic on its adversaries for the expression of its own moral sources, its own words of power, and hence for its continuing moral force. But second, since it undermines all previous formulations of the constitutive good which could ground the life goods it recognizes, without putting any in its place, it also lives to some degree on these earlier formulations.”⁸ While Taylor is here speaking of the philosophers of the radical Enlightenment, it is not too far of a stretch to apply his characterization to the philosophy informing the forces of capitalist globalization, which is arguably a child of that same Enlightenment. As Ward notices, the forces of globalizing capitalism continue to march on in spite of mounting evidence that they do not bring the fruit they originally promised: ~~‘How are they able to do this?’ he asks. They can do this precisely~~ because they draw energy from spiritual sources that have proven themselves to be powerful cultural motivators. For him, globalization on both the cultural and economic levels has led to the emergence of a form of “detraditionalized religion, a religion without past or future” that draws its inspiration and words of power from Christianity. The globalism he describes is “a myth formed out of the universalisms of Christianity” that uses, but at the same time also distorts, Christian understandings of such things as freedom, enjoyment, transcendence, faith, and peace, to name just a few.⁹ “As a myth,” Ward explains, “it governs and generates cultural imaginings; it fashions hopes, beliefs, dreams, and desires. Thus despite the counterfactual evidence of globalization’s ‘achievements’—the accumulating evidence that it does not result in ‘a universal free market but an anarchy of sovereign states, rival capitalisms, and stateless zones’ ...—the myth can remain powerful.

⁸ Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, 339.

⁹ Ward, Graham, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens*, 106-07.

The imaginative power of such a myth remains socially and culturally determinative. It enables us to forget.”¹⁰

For Ward, one’s ability to resist such a powerful and amnesiac spiritual force requires “the *gravitas* of belonging to a metaphysical and theological worldview.”¹¹ Ward is searching for what he elsewhere calls a “postmaterial” worldview—one that does not succumb to the blandishments of instant gratification promised by consumer capitalist society, and which in so doing works its way clear of the distorted values that seem to govern free market capitalism. To resist these seductive blandishments, we need to appeal to something equally robust: “Postmaterialist values, unwedded to market capitalism, have a hard road to travel—unless they are allied with global religious practices, values, and institutions rooted in a theological commitment.” Importantly, Ward also insists that this theological commitment be more self-critical than the commitment it seeks to replace: “A more radical postmaterialism would issue from an engagement with the theology and metaphysics that globalization seeks to mimic; it would recognize the true nature of its desires, discerning the degree of its own fantasies and the depths of its own forgetting.”¹² Here Ward insightfully provides a plausible explanation for Christianity’s accommodationist fall: the values that drive the global expansionism of consumer capitalism are historically tied to traditional religious values—to such an extent, in fact, that today’s Christian might easily mistake these values for her own. Such forgetfulness, says Ward, must not be allowed to carry the day.

Yet Ward’s awareness of the pitfalls into which our visions of the good, Christian or otherwise, all too easily stumble creates a tension in the position he takes in this book.

¹⁰ Ibid., 107-08, quoting John Gray’s *False Dawn: The Delusions of Global Capitalism* (London: Granta Books, 2002), 194.

¹¹ Ibid., 233.

¹² Ibid., 116.

The tension, as Lambert Zuidervaart has pointed out, is one between modesty and confidence.¹³ Ward's modesty is present throughout the book, and perhaps no more concisely than when he states: "The church's address to the world issues from a struggle, an internal struggle to discern the truth of its own vision and its mission. There is no voice from above, not even in the Christian Scripture, no voice that descends unmediated from some Empyrean realm."¹⁴ Ward thus recognizes the provisional and precarious nature of *all* human judgment, and the fact that, bereft of access to a God's eye point of view, Christians cannot unambiguously distinguish what is 'church' and what is 'world' as two discrete entities. On the other hand, Ward's confidence emerges with his conviction that the theological perspective he (so impolitely) promotes does indeed possess 'the goods' to combat the various malaises of modernity he describes in the book's first section. He does not, for example, allow such modesty to prevent him from suggesting, at the end of the book, that Christians ought to be forthright and admit that what they hope for in the political domain is some version of theocracy.¹⁵ It is this tension between Ward's robust theological commitment, on the one hand, and his humble recognition of the all-too-human follies to which it may easily succumb, on the other, that I wish to explore in my final section of this response. I am not saying that this tension is fatally damaging, or that it is without creative potential. Still, it presents certain temptations that I think, and perhaps Ward would agree, we would be well advised to guard against.

Ain't it Grand that No One is Good? (Confessions of a Wittgensteinian Calvinist)

¹³ See Zuidervaart, "Good Cities or Cities of the Good? Radical Augustinians, Societal Structures, and Normative Critique," 141.

¹⁴ Ward, Graham, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens*, 24.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 294 ff.

Ward's efforts at memorial retrieval, which I heartily endorse, are, in the end, only important if the world actually needs authentic Christians living in it—that is, if the Christian message he would have his co-religionists remember is one that does in fact prove to be truly redemptive. Christianity in the sense Ward intends must show itself to be the healing word and deed that our broken world so desperately needs, and would be diminished without. Now, not only is Ward convinced this is the case, he thinks that only something as metaphysically and theologically robust as he understands Christianity to be will be strong enough to counter the deep spiritual roots of secularistic modernity: “The way beyond our present deepening postdemocracy,” he tells us, “is the fostering of a postmaterialist culture that is built not on the shifting sands of ephemeral human desires but on the rock of what is true and good and realistic. In other words, changes to processes, economic and political, have to be preceded by, and grounded on, changes in transcending values and vision.”¹⁶

Here it seems Ward is in agreement with Taylor in preferring an understanding of the good that transcends or goes beyond what Taylor calls “ordinary human flourishing.”¹⁷ Taylor does not mean to say here that there is anything wrong with ordinary human flourishing, for it is precisely its intrinsic goodness that gives the point to a Christian renunciation, or letting go, of it as an ultimate end for human life. All the same, Taylor insists that Christian faith is indexed differently; while not denigrating ordinary human flourishing, it nonetheless strives to set its sight by a good that moves beyond this, a good that Taylor associates with *agape*, or God's love for the world.

¹⁶ Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens*, 74.

¹⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 17.

Both Taylor and Ward consider this Christian interpretation of the good (as beyond ordinary human flourishing) as both different and better than contemporary secular-humanist alternatives. For example, there is an interesting bit in *A Secular Age* where Taylor compares the virtues of a secular-humanist motivation for pursuing social justice and solidarity with the virtues found in a Christian motivation for pursuing the same things. While he deeply admires the self-giving service of a secular humanist such as Albert Camus, he nonetheless resists the temptation to view what he calls Camus' "heroic individualism" or "altruistic unilateralism" as the ultimate in selflessness; for, according to Taylor, it misses something important about love that Christianity does not: "This is a bond where each is a gift to the other, where each gives and receives, and where the line between giving and receiving is blurred. We are quite outside the range of 'altruistic' unilateralism." Taylor continues: "Could it be that, in a very different way, something analogous lies behind the sense of solidarity between equals that pushes us to help people, even on the other side of the globe? The sense here would be that we are somehow given to each other, and that ideally, at the limit, this points us towards a relationship where giving and receiving merge."¹⁸ Taylor thinks that the Christian understanding of *agape*, because it takes into account the sense that "we are somehow given to each other," and also "points us towards a relationship where giving and receiving merge," provides a better account of the good than at least this particular secular-humanist alternative.

Taylor contrasts the motivations of secular humanism and Christianity with respect to efforts to attain justice and universal solidarity because he is trying to name an ethos that can bear universal human respect, but for which he thinks certain versions of

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 702.

Christianity provide a better account. He goes on to say that he thinks this understanding of universal human solidarity can be real for us, “but only to the extent that we open ourselves to God, which means in fact, overstepping the limits set in theory by exclusive humanisms. If one does believe that, then one has something very important to say to modern times, something that addresses the fragility of what all of us, believer and unbeliever alike, most value in these times.”¹⁹ The idea here seems to be that Christians have a better way of accounting for something (universal solidarity) that most people, religious or otherwise, already profess to cherish. Christianity gets something right here that other positions do not. The cultural importance of this epistemic status lies in Taylor’s claim that “getting it right will help to strengthen it.”²⁰

I think that in this book Ward shares Taylor’s sense of the importance of “getting it right,” and by “getting it right” I think both authors mean something more or less akin to a theoretical account, one that is better able to explain or justify—or, perhaps better, *ground*—the pursuit of and longing for universal solidarity than other accounts currently on offer. And this is precisely where I want to insert my question in this closing section. How important is it to ‘get it right’ here, to have all of our theological and metaphysical ducks lined up in a row? [Or, put somewhat differently, does such theoretical grounding really precede all attempts to change our cultural direction, is that a requirement for meaningful change? Or, on the contrary, does philosophy and theology not always arrive too late to provide such grounding? That is, is the ground not always already there, and is it not always rougher than our theories seem to require?] I ask these questions because, in spite of his affirmation of the importance of this effort, Taylor still warns against a

¹⁹ Ibid., 703.

²⁰ Ibid., 702

temptation that arises when we take ourselves to have so ‘gotten it right’. Throughout history, he notices, “[t]he goodness which inhabits our goal, or our vision of order, is somehow undone when it comes to struggling to realize it.” He continues:

The paradox is, that the very goodness of the goal defines us, its builders and defenders as good, and hence opens the way to our grounding our self-integrity on a contrast case who must be evil as we are virtuous.... There is no general remedy against this self-righteous reconstitution of the categorizations of violence, the lines drawn between the good and evil ones which permit the most terrible atrocities. But there can be moves, always within a given context, whereby someone renounces the right conferred by suffering, the right of the innocent to punish the guilty, of the victim to purge the victimizer. The move is the very opposite of the instinctive defense of our righteousness. It is a move which can be called forgiveness, but at a deeper level, it is based on a recognition of common, flawed humanity.²¹

Now I am confident that Ward would affirm most everything Taylor says in this passage, and his book is full of warnings against precisely such self-righteous presumption. So I do not want to take this reflection in the direction of such an accusation. What I do want to say, in closing, is that perhaps the pitfalls associated with ‘getting it right’ are a sign that, in insisting on its importance, we have not taken Christian renunciation far enough.

I say this because I think we ought not to confuse the task of being salt and light to a world desperately in need of such things with attempts at theoretical self-justification (grounding). When we slide from the former into the latter, we are all too easily tempted to assume a ‘no flies on me’ posture that bars the way to achieving the very effective solidarity our cherished version of the good envisions. That is why I read Luke 18:19 as such a liberating passage: “There is not one good person on earth. No one is good but God.” I do not read this passage as saying that everyone but God is bad, nor do I use it as a whip with which to flagellate myself according to some misguided form of Christian asceticism (or populist Calvinism). Instead, I read it as a passage that frees me from

²¹ Ibid., 709

having to make myself good, from the task of justifying myself, and, perforce, from the need to construct theoretical self-justifications of the hope that is in me.

In *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein offers us the following snippet: “What is good is also divine. Queer as it sounds, that sums up my ethics. Only something supernatural can express the Supernatural.”²² Read in the light of Luke 18, I take Wittgenstein’s aphorism to say that when I do good, that is not something I generate on my own steam, but something that happens when the divine is free to work in and through me. Knowing I am not good, and cannot make myself good, paradoxically frees me for the Good. The witness of such goodness will not be found in any theoretical account, but rather in the fruits of a life so animated. That witness is all the justification we can have and all the justification we need (and I am not in this paper attempting to supply for it unawares). Self-justificatory theoretical attempts to *ground* such goodness accomplish no more than when I place my hand on top of my head in order to tell you how tall I am. I haven’t thereby shown you anything you can’t already see. What is more, renouncing such attempts at theoretical self-justification may also give those tempted to engage in them the eyes to see and the hearts to affirm goodness wherever they find it, no matter how much our broken world falls short of the ideal.

Taylor warns us that “wherever action for high ideals is not tempered, controlled, ultimately engulfed in an unconditional love of the beneficiaries” an ugly dialectic in which people may be reduced to means who are then easily sacrificed to and for the purity of these ideal ends risks repeating itself. While I in *no way* wish to claim that Ward wishes to court a self-righteousness that might succumb to such an ugly dialectic, what I am flagging is my discomfort with the idea that theoretical self-justification can

²² Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 3.

help defend us against such a rather nasty consequence (that “getting it right” helps make such resistance “stronger”). As Taylor himself admits, “just holding the appropriate religious *beliefs* is no guarantee that this [unconditional love] will be so.”²³ I think it is no accident, then, that Professor Ward’s book ends with a list of people whose actions by themselves bear witness to the *agape* which is gracefully at loose in our world.²⁴ On my argument, that is precisely where we should be pointing, and nowhere else. My question for him would be, ‘do we need more than this *agape* in order to counter the destructive spiritual forces at work in the world?’. My sense is that this is a question of faith, and not one of justification.

²³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 697.

²⁴ See Ward, Graham, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens*, 301.

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