

completely recognizable by figures like Thomas Traherne and Julian of Norwich, and presents a view of creation which stands desperately in need of retrieval in our own context of increasing environmental degradation. Thus, while we ought not to read these figures uncritically, we would be utterly impoverished if we read them uncharitably, or if we failed to read them at all: “And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.” (1 Cor 12:21).

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Aaron Renn, *Life in the Negative World: Confronting Challenges in an Anti-Christian Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 2024. ISBN 978-0310155157, xvi+246 pp., hbk \$27; also audiobook, Kindle, Nook.

As the subtitle suggests, this is the latest of recent books describing the challenges facing Christians in an America that is increasingly skeptical (if not hostile) to traditional belief. The perspective is somewhat different from the earlier books, in that the author is a former IT consulting partner—rather than theologian or political pundit—who tailors his arguments to fellow evangelicals. Early on, he cites examples of why the best known of such books—Rod Dreher’s *The Benedict Option*—was rejected by evangelicals, justifying the need to develop “a more evangelical-friendly version of or alternative to it.” (33).

His biggest contribution builds on his taxonomy of three cultural eras of the past 60 years: when American society was positive towards Christianity, when it was neutral, and (since the 2014 *Obergefell* decision) when it has been negative. Renn first proposed this taxonomy in his February 2022 article in *First Things*.

What I found most provocative was how this explained three evangelical strategies during the first two periods. In the positive era, the “culture war” of Jerry Falwell worked when Christian morality still held sway with a large fraction of the population, while the “seeker friendly” model of Rick Warren and Bill Hybels assumed that (at some level) many unchurched were still seeking a church. Meanwhile, in the subsequent neutral era, the “cultural engagement” of Tim Keller, Andy Crouch, Hillsong, and others sought to meet educated urban residents in a way that was meaningful for them.

From his typology, Renn argues all three strategies are obsolete, because the cultural contexts they addressed are now gone. I think most recognize that 1950s suburban Protestantism has vanished on the coasts (even if hints remain in the Bible Belt), but it's also helpful to let go of models from the 80s or 90s that no longer work either.

His other key idea derives from his awareness of the importance of Christian institutional integrity. To help shape the culture, he calls for a stronger evangelical role in think tanks (where he's worked) and K-12 schools (as a father). However, he inexplicably omits higher education. Anglicans (like conservative Lutherans and now Methodists) understand the crucial role of faithful seminaries in shaping the church, while sound Christian or Christian-friendly doctoral universities are needed to staff these seminaries (and also think tanks). Perhaps most surprising is the omission of undergraduate programs—here Wheaton is exemplary while Baylor and Grove City also come to mind—where doctrinal and academic excellence shape the next generation of evangelical leaders.

Alas, these recommendations don't seem to use a consistent definition of "evangelical." Sometimes it might include all conservative Christians (or at least conservative Protestants), sometimes it includes evangelicals within denominations (such as the Baptist Warren and Presbyterian Keller), and other times it is limited to evangelical institutions outside of denominational or other ecclesial structures. Some "evangelicals" reliably espouse historic Christian beliefs (Keller) but others less so (Hillsong).

At the same time, his evangelical-friendly advice may be less useful for other Christian groups. His underlying assumption of "once saved, always saved" emphasizes success by adding new Christians, while followers of *The Benedict Option* build stronger Christians through spiritual formation and discipline.

Even for those for whom evangelicalism is unfamiliar, the book provides a new and useful perspective with both its diagnosis and prognosis. Perhaps unintentionally, it also identifies possible challenges for how evangelicals and other Biblically orthodox Christians can together speak truth to an increasingly negative world.

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