

The Pastor in a Secular Age Book Study

Week 2 – Chapters 1-4

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Introduction

Along with the study guide, the two big ideas from Chapters 1-4 will be reviewed in a two-part video series. The first focuses on enchantment/disenchantment and the second on the porous/buffered self.

Summary

Chapter 1 gives us a layout in broad strokes of the direction Andy will trace through the story of the six pastors. Chapter 2 uses Thomas Beckett to illustrate the transition from an enchanted world to a disenchanted world. For Beckett, the material world that we live in is enchanted with the spiritual. To do something physically is to do something spiritually and vice versa. Chapter 3 is short and does not have a singular figure it follows. Instead it points to two changes necessary for disenchantment to take hold: the creation of a private (vs public) life, and the distinction between creation and nature. Finally, in Chapter 4 we meet Augustine and the turn inwards. Before Augustine, God was out there. Now God is in here, in the heart of the person, so when we look inwards, we can find God.

Key Quotes and Ideas

Social imaginary: a Taylor term describing our shared ability to understand reality; “what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society” (6); might be called a worldview in some writers

Immanent frame: an important Taylor term; “the immanent frame is that of living in impersonal orders, cosmic, social, and ethical orders which can be fully explained in their own terms and don’t need to be conceived as dependent on anything outside, on the ‘supernatural’ or the ‘transcendent.’” (12).

Nova effect: a Taylor term referring to the possibilities of transcendence that come from an open immanent frame. Like a star exploding, there are many different paths leading to experiences of transcendence.

Ontological: a philosophical term meaning the study of being; it contrasts with epistemology, the study of knowing; modernity moved away from “being” to “knowing.”

Disenchantment: a term that Taylor gets from Max Weber describing the shift from a view where the transcendent or super-natural permeates and works in the world to one where calculations, science, and observation can explain all that happens.

Personhood: a key Andy term that takes on more meaning as the book progresses; roughly means when humans become fully human through the encounter with God

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism: a term coined by sociologist Christian Smith but popularized by practical theologian Kenda Creasy Dean; describes the faith of contemporary young people; Moralism is the drive to be a good person; Therapeutic is the point of faith is for me to feel better; Deism is that God is not an active agent in the world today. For a fuller description see **Further Reading**.

Relating to Real Life

“Ultimately, I guess, I don’t know what to do, because I don’t know how to talk about God in a way that people sense and recognize” (22). Do you identify with the pastor? In what ways is your faith in sync or out of sync with others?

Andy quotes Taylor, saying, “One of the most striking fruits of this sense of innate human innocence has been the transfer of so many issues which used to be considered moral into a therapeutic register. What was formerly sin is often now seen as sickness” (74). Does our theological training set us up for failure because it focuses on the moral but what people look for is the therapeutic?

Agree or Disagree

“Because there is no enchanted realm and the deluge of demons has stopped, unlike our ancestors we can take long holidays from prayer, liturgy, and confession. We get to those practices when we feel like it and are seemingly on worse for the wear” (33). Can we really stop praying with little or no effect?

Given that we want to find meaning in the events of our lives, is this true? “It becomes much harder for her to trust that a personal God can act to heal her. It is less frightening to assume that it is just the odds or bad luck that makes her sick – it’s nothing personal” (56).

Relating to Ministry

In the contemporary time management movement, do we not see some of the keeping “the devil in the forest” that Andy talks about? Could “repent of sin, find discipline, and therefore be free from hell” (10) describe our underlying assumptions about productivity?

When describing the move from enchantment to disenchantment, Andy writes, “And *some* people are kind enough to concur, wishing their children to be baptized and finding some personal meaning in communion.” Is it significant that people find “personal” meaning in a communal sacrament?

A number of times, Andy uses the sacraments as an example of enchantment/disenchantment (see pg. 36-37, 39). What is your answer to his question, “Can [the sacraments] possibly bear the weight of divine action in a disenchanted world” (42)?

A buffered self leads to a sense of freedom from obligation and restraint. This contrasts with a sense of freedom for where obligation and restraint protect us from things that might harm us (see p. 69). This leads to the possibility of disengagement and a sense of invulnerability (p. 70). Which vision of freedom do we promote?

Lingering Questions

If it is true that “in Becket’s time [the real fears] were fire, famines, and plague” and within their enchanted framework people invoked divine protection, how can we reasonably invoke divine protection against something like COVID-19 in our disenchanted time? Does the pastor have the authority to talk of providence today?

“We now pastor not to *porous* selves who are fundamentally open to spiritual forces, like Augustine, but to *buffered* selves. Metaphorically, the inner lives of people in our congregations are not located in tents or tenements, where the smells, noises, and motions of the spiritual are ambient, surrounding us whether we like it or not. Rather, people now live in big, quiet mansions, set back from the street, with security systems wired to trip if the self is invaded – particularly by any so-called spiritual force” 68. Andy uses an evocative economic image here. Is this image telling us that the buffered self is partly a product of economics? How much of the secular age is driven by capitalism?

Further Reading

Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*

Michel

Foucault,

<https://foucault.info/documents/foucault.disciplineAndPunish.panOpticism/>