

# The Pastor in a Secular Age Book Study

Week 4 – Chapter 10-11

## Summary

These chapters put us into Part 2 where Andy does his constructive theological work. Chapter 10 has a long meditation on the movie *Arrival* as it relates to God's being as a being-in-event. Chapter 11 develops that more by introducing a stronger understanding of personalism and focusing on the event horizon of suffering and despair. Both chapters do some heavy lifting theologically and draw on previous work, both Volume 1 from this series but others (eg. *Christopraxis*; *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*). While in conversation with classic theology, Andy develops his own trajectory largely in conversation with Robert Jenson (at least in this book) but also Eberhard Jungel and ultimately, Karl Barth.

## Key Quotes and Ideas

Actualism – while Andy does not use this word, Chapter 10 is in some ways an extended meditation on this idea. Theological actualism says that God is as God does. To separate action from being is false. There is no being without action and vice versa.

“God arrives and acts not in some metaphysical transcendental state but in history” (194). In other words, God is an agent who acts in time not a being who is beyond our imaginations.

Personalism – Chapter 11, with its story of MLK Jr., is a discussion of how personalism interacts with actualism. Personalism is a philosophy that says our identities are made by our encounter with another person. Jewish philosopher will contrast I-It relationships where there is no person involved with I-Thou relationships where the relationship creates two separate but related persons. Whenever we use the word “dehumanizing” we have entered into an I-It relationship.

Non-essentialism – key to understanding both actualism and personalism is that they are both non-essentialist. This means that there is no “essence” of God that gets revealed. Nor is there an “essential” spark or substance that gives value to humanity. An example might be the term *imago dei*. There is no agreement on what this term means theologically. Some believe that there is an essence or substance or characteristic inherent to humans given at creation. This essence could be a soul or a characteristic like rationality. Language of “inalienable rights” is essentialist because it focuses on a thing given to humans at creation. In contrast, a personalist understanding of the *imago dei* would start with the fact that humans have a specific form of relationship with God. Whether that relationship is Creator/created or Parent/child is less important than the fact that it is the relationship that defines the image of God. Trinitarian theology has developed this idea in relation to the social Trinity (Father relates to Son relates to Spirit).

## Relating to Real Life

The word apocalyptic means “to reveal” especially associated with the end of time. Andy suggests that we all have these apocalyptic events but struggle to put words to them. Can you put words to some of the apocalypses in your life?

## Agree or Disagree

Andy argues that we are often tempted into understanding God through our human experience or through our ideas about who God is. These are connected to “liberal” and “conservative” understandings. Is this fair and accurate?

## Relating to Ministry

Actualism, personalism, and non-essentialism all run against the way that many people understand the world. Accountants and engineers live within what Andy describes as the “scrim of causality” (177). Do you think that you can explain the alternatives? Does the use of popular culture help or hinder?

Nobody can argue that MLK Jr. was not one of the greatest civil rights advocates the US has ever had. At the same time, Andy seems to argue that he was not motivated by an “ideology” rooted in his own identity or his own politics. Rather, he was moved by an encounter, an event. Can we reframe our quest for righteousness and justice in these terms?

“The pastor’s job is to bear the darkness, to join the pull of the event horizon of nothingness.” (211)

This is made complicated, not just by the secular age which obscures our ability to see God, reducing us either to experience or to ideology. It is complicated by the demands of ministry themselves. There are at least two aspects of this. First is that as humans we too are pulled along the event horizon of our own darkness. The second, as inter-personal beings with identities tied inextricably to others, when we as pastors come alongside someone do we not also bring our most intimate relationships along with us? Think of a pastor who follows the event horizon of their congregation without heeding the fact that their own marriage and/or family is dissolving because they are not attending to it. Can we go too far?

## Lingering Questions

In this kind of understanding of the event horizon, it is easy to see how a pastor could get overwhelmed by everyone’s darkness. At other places in his writings, Andy is articulate about being open to the other and the necessity of being closed as well. It will be a few chapters on that Andy deals with this question but it is worth considering even now. How open can we be to other people’s events without losing our own sense of identity and relationship with God?

## Further Reading

*Arrival* (2016) dir. Denis Villeneuve