



MARS HILL AUDIO

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& Christian conviction

Journal 148

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\*An asterisk means that the book is in print; if you wish to purchase it from our friends at Eighth Day Books, call 1.800.841.2541.

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**Secularism & the myth of neutrality**

Steven D. Smith’s *Pagans and Christians in the City: Culture Wars from the Tiber to the Potomac*\* (2018) is published by Eerdmans. Other books by Smith include *Foreordained Failure: The Quest for a Constitutional Principle of Religious Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 1995); *Law’s Quandary* (Harvard University Press, 2004); *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse* (Harvard University Press, 2010); and *The Rise and Decline of American Religious Freedom*\* (Harvard University Press, 2014). Some of the material that Smith developed in his most recent book was presented in three lectures he gave at Princeton in 2017 as part of the James Madison Program’s Charles E. Test Lectures. The lectures were titled “The Pagan City, the Christian City, and the Secular City,” “Culture Wars as Pagan Counterrevolution,” and “Coming Home? The Imminent Immanent City.” Video for these lectures is available online (search for them by entering the lecture title). Texts are also available for download in pdf format at the SSRN website.

One of the great challenges for Christians in coming years is to deconstruct the claims of “neutrality” which mask what amount to religious commitments on the part of those who think of themselves as safely “secular.” By “secular,” they mean free of any commitment to ultimate values. Critic Stanley Fish — not a figure typically associated with traditional religious commitments — waged a long (and apparently unsuccessful) battle against such liberal masking in books and in a *New York Times* blog with the admonitory name “Think Again.” In a 2007 post titled “Liberalism and Secularism: One and the Same,” Fish demonstrated how in the name of neutrality, the liberal state enforces the “evisceration” of religions grounded in the transcendent. But this is not neutrality, as the wills of individuals are regarded as sacrosanct. Fish writes: “The liberal order does not extinguish religions; it just eviscerates them, unless they are the religions that display the same respect for the public-private distinction that liberalism depends on and enforces. A religion that accepts the partitioning of the secular and the sacred and puts at its center the private transaction between the individual and his God fits the liberal bill perfectly. John Locke and his followers . . . would bar civic authorities from imposing religious beliefs and would also bar religious establishments from meddling in the civic sphere. Everyone stays in place; no

one gets out of line.

“But what of religions that will not stay in place, but claim the right, and indeed the duty, to order and control the affairs of the world so that the tenets of the true faith are reflected in every aspect of civic life? Liberalism’s answer is unequivocal. Such religions are the home of ‘extremists . . . fascists . . . enemies of the public good . . . authoritarian despots’ and so forth.”

“This harsh judgment . . . is inevitable given liberalism’s founding premises. . . . Liberalism, if it is to be true to itself, must refuse to entertain seriously an argument or a project the goal and effect of which would be to curtail individual exploration, self-realization (except in one direction), free expression and innovation. Closed-mindedness with respect to religions that do not honor the line between the secular and the sacred is not a defect of liberalism; it is its very definition.”

more on

**Other books mentioned**

Willem H. Vanderburg’s *Secular Nations under New Gods: Christianity’s Subversion by Technology and Politics*\* (2018) is published by the University of Toronto Press, as was his 2000 book *The Labyrinth of Technology*. Jeffrey Bilbro’s *Virtues of Renewal: Wendell Berry’s Sustainable Forms*\* (2019) is published by the University Press of Kentucky. Emma Mason’s *Christina Rossetti: Poetry, Ecology, Faith*\* (2018) is published by Oxford University Press, as was Alison Milbank’s 2018 *God and the Gothic: Religion, Romance, and Reality in the English Literary Tradition*\*. Timothy Larsen’s *George MacDonald in the Age of Miracles: Incarnation, Doubt, and Reenchantment*\* (2018) is published by IVP Academic.

The **MARS HILL AUDIO** Journal is produced at our studio in rural central Virginia, outside of historic Charlottesville. The Journal is one of several audio products we distribute, all of them intended to encourage greater wisdom about interaction with contemporary culture.

If you would like more information about our work, consult our website at [marshillaudio.org](http://marshillaudio.org).

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