

The Allure of the Iron Cage

Reactions to Steven D. Smith's
The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse

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Recently, against my better judgment and somewhat by accident, I became involved in today's predominant form of public discourse: an online discussion with strangers. I found myself the lone defender of the fairly straightforward idea (it seemed to me at the time) that pirating movies is an immoral act. I was quickly informed by my two interlocutors, digital Robin Hoods both, that movie moguls are rich; that movie (and music) stars are not really "working" anyway; that even if they are, they are getting paid too much.

One wonders what key grips, prop handlers, and boom mic operators would have to say. But what a Christian would say should not be in doubt. I brought a biblical moral framework to the issue. *Thou shalt not steal. The labourer is worthy of his hire.* My worldview does not guarantee that I see all things clearly; it only means I have access to a clear standard by which to judge all

things¹ (though that judgment is subject to my own fallenness and finiteness, I readily grant). I chose to use my Christian moral framework explicitly in this public discourse, citing the eighth commandment, and this is what I was told by the other participants:

Participant 1: “Quoting the bible. Hah. I’m done.”²

Participant 2: “Not everyone has the same religious background as you, so for your moral arguments to carry any weight you need to stop making faith-based arguments.... I’m not talking right and wrong at this point, just thought processes and reasons.”³

When I pointed out that these proposed ground rules for our public-discourse-writ-small effectively put duct tape over my mouth, eliminating anything I could feasibly contribute to the discussion, Participant 2 decided he had not used enough tape. To his credit, he seemed to dislike the task I had forced him to perform, and he told me kindly,

I am not asking you to compromise your principles, but your arguments need to hold up to those who don’t believe as you do, otherwise you’re only “preaching to the choir.”⁴

He almost seemed concerned for me—like I was a culturally jet-lagged foreign exchange student who just did not understand that “football” is played by entirely different rules around these parts.

THE STATE OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE

This online discussion reflects—on several levels—the state of public discourse in America generally, and not merely in the infamously impossible world of blog comments. Christians and other religious people who try to appeal to divine authority are swiftly informed that they are not playing by the rules—if not verbally, then by the exit of other discussion participants. Christians are told that they need to appeal to (secular) “thought processes and reasons,” not revelation.⁵

¹ A (dated) Barna study indicates that the Christian moral framework has failed with teens in this area. “Fewer Than 1 in 10 Teenagers Believe that Music Piracy is Morally Wrong,” Barna.org study, April 26, 2004. <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/139-fewer-than-1-in-10-teenagers-believe-that-music-piracy-is-morally-wrong#.U7tGA41dXsQ>

² See <https://plus.google.com/u/0/114767285101354762213/posts/EMTgpoK8baN> or <http://bit.ly/1soDw8I>; May 30–June 14, 2014. Quotations have been slightly corrected for grammar and spelling so as not to reflect poorly on my Internet interlocutors.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ This is true in all aspects of public discourse—journalism, for example. James Davison Hunter writes, “Prior to the twentieth century, news media made little effort to be unbiased. Newspapers openly took sides on behalf of political parties or on behalf of certain issues. It is really only in the last century that the news made the concerted effort to remain free of political bias. What is new, then, is not that the news

The power of secularity as an ideal, a worldview, is evident precisely because it shows up in pure form all over American public discourse. John Rawls himself, whose advocacy of “public reason” has helped shape the current ideals of secularity,⁶ could hardly have stated his position more concisely than this commenter on a recent *New York Times* opinion piece:

We should start from this basic precept: the job of government is to pass secular law, not religious. There is no provision in any of the founding documents of this country that allows members of the government to impose their religious views on citizens who may or may not subscribe to them. No law should make it through any legislature that isn’t backed by a strong, solid secular argument, not dependent on any deity who’s existence can’t be proven. That doesn’t mean secular [law] can’t be in harmony with religious doctrine—only that it can’t depend on it.⁷

Average participants in public discourse speak this way; so do elites.⁸ And yet I see no reason for Christians to whine about the way secularists have pushed Christian convictions out of public discourse. What else might we expect? Following James Davison Hunter, I have no wish to contribute to the discourse of aggrievement many American conservatives have set up as an alternative.⁹ Instead, I see our cultural moment as an opportunity to expose what is, ultimately, an intellectual idol that has blinded and damaged my neighbor. I propose to do this for the good of that neighbor, not merely for my own politics. What wise-as-serpents, harmless-as-doves rhetorical strategies can best knock down this particular Dagon and free his acolytes?¹⁰

media is prejudiced one way or another, but that it is so under the pretext of being neutral.” *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 307.

⁶ See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, expanded edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 215–216.

⁷ Comment by “Bill from Charlottesville” on Charles M. Blow, “Religious Constriction,” *New York Times*, June 8, 2014, <http://nyti.ms/1pIliMo>.

⁸ Regular *New York Times* opinion writer Charles M. Blow’s article, to which the previous comment was appended, ended with “Religious fundamentalism at the expense of basic scientific facts threatens to obscure America’s beacon of light with a bank of fog.” Ibid.

⁹ “To the extent that collective identity rooted in *ressentiment* has been cultivated and then nurtured through a message of negation toward ‘the other,’ many of the most prominent Christian leaders and organizations in America have fashioned an identity and witness for the church that is, to say the least, antithetical to its highest calling. The political options taken by the Christian Right, the Christian Left, and the neo-Anabaptists are perfectly legal, of course, but that doesn’t mean that the way many of them engage their politics is either salutary or constructive. Not least, it creates a dense fog through which it is difficult to recognize each other as fellow human beings and impossible to recognize the good that still is in the world.” Hunter, *To Change the World*, 175.

¹⁰ Finding such strategies is a major strength of the work of Timothy Keller, particularly in *The Reason for God: Belief in the Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008).

THE DISENCHANTMENT OF SECULAR DISCOURSE

Steven D. Smith's *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse*¹¹—called “an important book” by Nicholas Wolterstorff¹²—provides such strategies. It analyzes the problems of secular public discourse so incisively that it cannot fail to be useful to religious people—whatever their politics—who find it difficult to explain to fellow players in the public discourse game that they *are* in fact players and not referees. (After the red card, discussion tends to bog down.)

This paper will summarize Smith's book and then examine reactions to it among religious and non-religious people. What lessons—or portents—do those reactions hold for religious actors in the American public square?

The title *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse* is an allusion to Max Weber's claim that the Enlightenment brought on the “disenchantment of the world.”¹³ The supernatural purposes which were assumed by all in the premodern world to be operating everywhere had been stripped away, leaving what Weber called an “iron cage” in which (here Smith summarizes) “life is lived and discourse is conducted according to the stern constraints of secular rationalism” (23). Smith is proposing that disenchantment is just what is happening today—or at least should happen—to secular discourse. The mystique it carries, a mystique born of its pragmatic value over time (who can deny that American secular democracy has delivered tangible benefits?), is being and should be “disenchanted.”¹⁴

The controlling metaphor for the first chapter is rich (26–27). Smith speaks of two major crime families running black markets upon which the national economy depends. Those two families, the “dominant normative families” for secular discourse,

are the autonomy-liberty-freedom family and the equality-neutrality-reciprocity family. . . . These powerful and eminently respectable normative families do a good deal of legitimate business, for which we may all be grateful—I certainly am—but they also run extensive smuggling operations. (27)

Not all implicit premises used in human communication are smuggled in. Smith defends his choice of the “smuggling” metaphor by arguing that the implicit premises of secular discourse are

¹¹ Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010. Subsequent references appear in parentheses.

¹² Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Escaping the Cage of Secular Discourse—A Review Essay,” *Christian Scholar's Review* 40, no. 1 (2010): 93–99.

¹³ “The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the ‘disenchantment of the world’ [*die Entzauberung der Welt*].” Max Weber, “Science as Vocation,” Munich University, 1918. See http://de.wikisource.org/wiki/Wissenschaft_als_Beruf.

¹⁴ This interpretation of the title as both descriptive and prescriptive does not appear in the book, but it was confirmed by an interview Smith gave to Ken Myers in *Mars Hill Audio Journal* 103, July 1, 2010; disc 1, track 2).

not merely those things that must be assumed for any discourse to proceed. They are not like the shared background information of context that we all rely on for daily communication.¹⁵ Smith's argument is that the two normative families of American secular discourse are guilty of assumptions that are not just implicit but illicit—by their own rules. Some Italian shops feel they must pay the *pizzo* to the mafia to stay in business.¹⁶ Secular discourse likewise finds itself unable to carry on the business of society without regular recourse to *petitio principii*.

Smith—who went to BYU (BA) and Yale (JD) and has taught law at two Catholic schools (Notre Dame and, currently, San Diego University)¹⁷—insists that he is not suggesting that other forms of discourse are necessarily superior, such as religious discourse, for example. He says, “My suggestion is simply that the sort of discursive failing that can be described as ‘smuggling’ is especially characteristic of our times, and of conversations carried on within the secular cage.” (38) Smith summarizes his book's thesis:

The secular vocabulary within which public discourse is constrained to operate today is insufficient to convey our full set of normative convictions and commitments. We manage to debate normative matters anyway—but only by smuggling in notions that are officially inadmissible, and hence that cannot be openly acknowledged or adverted too. The pervasiveness of smuggling allows our conversations to be less pointless or ineffectual than they might be. But the fact that we must smuggle in, and hence cannot fully own up to, our real commitments—often cannot articulate them even to ourselves—ensures that our discourse will often be barren, unsatisfying, and shallow. (39)

The next five chapters of the book detail individual cases in which accredited participants in purportedly secular discourse attempt to smuggle in an *ought* where they can only officially advert to an *is*. I will spend most of my time on just two of those chapters, the ones focusing on euthanasia and the harm principle.

Euthanasia

Smith's first smuggling example comes from court cases on euthanasia. If a religious actor in the public square wishes to explain smuggling to a secularist, this chapter probably provides the easiest and clearest example.

Smith cites the “Philosophers' Brief,” an amicus brief provided to the Supreme Court in the late 1990s as it took up two euthanasia cases, *Washington v. Glucksberg* and *Vacco v. Quill*. The brief

¹⁵ Smith gives the example of someone saying to someone else, “Hey, let's walk over to the deli. They've got some great-tasting roast beef.” And he shows how many assumptions about the world are implicit in such a statement: the idea that tasty food is superior to non-tasty food, the idea that we can walk, the idea that the world is real. Failure to state all of these implicit assumptions is not smuggling. It is necessary, or communication would be impossibly burdensome (35–36).

¹⁶ See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pizzo_\(extortion\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pizzo_(extortion)).

¹⁷ See <http://www.sandiego.edu/law/faculty/profiles/bio.php?ID=731>.

was produced by several prominent moral philosophers including Ronald Dworkin, Thomas Nagel, and John Rawls. In their very first substantive paragraph, they affirm the necessity and validity of the iron cage:

Denying that opportunity [doctor-assisted suicide] to terminally ill patients who are in agonizing pain or otherwise doomed to an existence they regard as intolerable could only be justified on the basis of a religious or ethical conviction about the value or meaning of life itself. Our Constitution forbids government to impose such convictions on its citizens.¹⁸

And in their very last paragraph (and throughout), they call on the support of the autonomy-liberty-freedom family, concluding that euthanasia ought to be a qualified but protected right:

Each individual has a right to make the “most intimate and personal choices central to personal dignity and autonomy.” That right encompasses the right to exercise some control over the time and manner of one’s death.

Notice the qualification: “*some* control.” Dworkin and his fellow writers believe that the state retains a compelling interest—one overriding individual autonomy—to refuse euthanasia to certain people.

But why, given their autonomy argument? Dworkin wrote an entire book about this and similar issues called *Life’s Dominion*.¹⁹ Smith mines this work and zeroes in on Dworkin’s answer:

We believe that a successful human life has a certain natural course. It starts in mere biological development—conception, fetal development, and infancy—but it then extends into childhood, adolescence, and adult life . . . It ends, after a normal life span, in a natural death.²⁰

Ending a life before nature has taken this course is a bad thing, Dworkin says, a “kind of cosmic shame.”²¹

Judges faced with euthanasia cases, particularly *Compassion in Dying v. Washington*, took the same tack as Dworkin. Judge Barbara Rothstein argued in her opinion on that case, “Obviously, the State has a strong legitimate interest in deterring suicide by young people and others with a significant natural life span ahead of them.”²² Smith quotes other American judges who objected

¹⁸ Ronald Dworkin, Thomas Nagel, Robert Nozick, John Rawls, Judith Jarvis Thomson, et al. “Assisted Suicide: The Philosophers’ Brief,” *New York Review of Books*, March 27, 1997. Note that both religious and metaphysical (“ethical”) convictions are disallowed.

¹⁹ *Life’s Dominion: An Argument About Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²² *Compassion in Dying v. State of Washington*, http://leagle.com/decision/19942304850FSupp1454_12144.xml.

to physician-assisted suicide for healthy young people, and they too spoke of “life ended prematurely” or of death coming “too early” (56).

But legal scholar Ronald Dworkin, judge Barbara Rothstein, and the others Smith quotes are performing an act of intellectual and moral legerdemain so quick that they themselves may not be aware of it, Smith says. Why should the “natural course of life” imply anything normative about my particular life? Has Hume not taught us that the mere fact that something is—because most human lives in America last threescore and ten—does not mean it ought to be? To assume a connection between *is* and *ought* in this case is to allow a metaphysical assumption into the cage—one that overrules my individual, autonomous decision. And if we have no access to the created order from within the cage, how can anything be a “*cosmic* shame”?

Smith shows how even the court justices most vocal on the “neutral” principle of autonomy, balked at allowing doctor-assisted suicide to those who were not terminally ill. But if individual autonomy should allow an eighty-three-year-old to end her physical pain with a doctor’s help, why would it not let a twenty-three-year-old end her emotional pain the same way? “Get your rosaries off my ovaries!” becomes “Get your metaphysical assumptions out of my human rights!”

The Harm Principle

In my own abortive attempt at public discourse about movie piracy, I tried to help my interlocutor dig down to his moral foundations. The whole idea of an ultimate moral basis seemed bewildering to him, but he ultimately stumbled onto the harm principle,²³ a utilitarian idea most closely associated with John Stuart Mill. Stealing is wrong when (and only when) it harms someone.

Smith’s next chapter focuses on this ever-present principle.²⁴ Its appeal is its simplicity and apparent universal validity. Who in today’s public debates would confess that he supports harming anyone else?

²³ He wrote, “Taking physical property harms the person you take the property from; copying digital property does not harm the person who you take it from, and only marginally harms the original producer. In a lot of industries the first product costs millions, but the second one costs only a few dollars as you have the original to copy from—yet they still make millions. A lot of people likely aren’t willing to pay the asking price for some digital property, so they pirate. If they weren’t able to pirate they wouldn’t buy, so the original producer isn’t out anything and the person who had the copy they copied still has their copy.” <https://plus.google.com/u/0/114767285101354762213/posts/EMTgpoK8baN>, June 6, 2014.

²⁴ Essential reading on the harm principle can be found in moral philosopher Jonathan Haidt’s book *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Writing as a liberal to liberals, Haidt’s mission is to inform them that (as he says in one chapter title) “There’s More to Morality than Harm and Fairness.” Haidt thinks liberals boil morality down to precisely the same two families of discourse Smith names: the autonomy-liberty-freedom family (Haidt’s “harm”) and the equality-

But, Smith asks, who gets to define “harm” (77)? Some Americans experience what they believe to be genuine harm when they see pornographic images displayed on public billboards or homosexual immoralities displayed in television commercials. They experience genuine psychic distress because of the broader society’s willingness to countenance such evils.

The liberal replies that the sexual acts of consenting adults harm no one and that conservatives who are offended should simply watch a different channel. But, Smith wonders, would liberals say the same thing about gladiatorial games to the death? Merely to live in a community that allows such games—even between consenting adults, fought before other consenting adults—would seem to many liberals (and conservatives) to be a genuine reason for psychic distress. It would constitute harm by the liberal definition (82–84).

Thinkers such as Mill and his modern elaborator, Joel Feinberg,²⁵ have recognized that “harm” may be defined variously. They have had to refine their definition of harm lest it impede the individual liberties they wish society to enjoy (88–89). Feinberg in particular has offered up a technical term, an extensive list of what he calls “hurts,” things that are in themselves “evil” (his own terminology) but do not constitute in a technical sense “harms,” the kinds of actions that justify coercive force to stop them (91).

The harm principle is suddenly not so simple. And Smith shows convincingly that the thinkers who employ it are forced to equivocate. It turns out that they have a very self-interested definition of what counts as a harm, but they cloak it in what sounds like a neutral principle. The utilitarian ends up “render[ing] the whole concept of ‘harm’ question-begging and circular” (90).

There is nothing wrong with the harm principle, Smith argues, as long as everyone in the public square realizes that

responsible and meaningful debates [should] neither contend over the harm principle nor expect it to do any real work in resolving contentious issues. Instead, they [should] engage with the larger theories or visions or commitments from which particular understandings of “harm” are derived. (105)

But this is precisely what the iron cage was designed to avoid. As long as the harm principle’s “proficiency in facilitating intellectual smuggling” remains, Smith says, it is very unlikely that its users will abandon it in favor of genuinely substantive discussion (106).

neutrality-reciprocity family (Haidt’s “fairness”). Haidt argues that conservatives typically have more moral bases and that this fact should be instructive to liberals. See Haidt’s site, moralfoundations.org.

²⁵ Joel Feinberg, *Harm to Others: The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

Religious Freedom

Smith has written extensively on religious liberty.²⁶ In this chapter, he makes the very perceptive historical-theological point that the concept of the “secular” is originally drawn from Christian theology. There were (and are), in fact, “secular clergy” in the Catholic Church. The *secular*, going back at least to Augustine and appealing to Jesus’ “render unto Caesar” command, was thought to be one of two realms both making valid claims of authority over all individuals and *both ruled over by God*. The active tension between the two raised persistent jurisdictional questions—which realm rules over what? Some people, notably Simon Stylites,²⁷ attempted to reject the secular realm—the temporal, Caesar, the City of Man—altogether. But no one ever took “secular” to mean “not religious” (130).

Today, however, the very concept of the secular has been secularized (128–129). Modern secularism takes the tack opposite to that of the ascetics: it attempts to deny (or at least privatize) the spiritual, the divine, and the City of God. Instead of being a significant part of an overarching worldview, secularism has itself become a worldview (130).²⁸ The problem of jurisdiction disappears. The secular has simply eaten it up. It is not the Religious Right that has broken down the wall of separation between church and state, Smith argues; it is secularism. Now the issue becomes justice—how the secular state may treat the church fairly within the competing landscape of countless other interest groups.²⁹

²⁶ See Steven D. Smith, *Foreordained Failure: The Quest for a Constitutional Principle of Religious Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) and *The Rise and Decline of American Religious Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

²⁷ Simon Stylites is the Christian ascetic who spent thirty-seven years atop a pillar.

²⁸ Damon Linker, a card-carrying liberal, wrote recently, “From the dawn of the modern age, religious thinkers have warned that, strictly speaking, secular politics is impossible—that without the transcendent foundation of Judeo-Christian monotheism to limit the political sphere, ostensibly secular citizens would begin to invest political ideas and ideologies with transcendent, theological meaning. Put somewhat differently: Human beings will be religious one way or another. Either they will be religious about religious things, or they will be religious about political things. With traditional faith in rapid retreat over the past decade, liberals have begun to grow increasingly religious about their own liberalism, which they are treating as a comprehensive view of reality and the human good. But liberalism’s leading theoreticians (Locke, Montesquieu, Jefferson, Madison, Tocqueville, Mill) never intended it to serve as a comprehensive view of reality and the human good. On the contrary, liberalism was supposed to act as a narrowly political strategy for living peacefully in a world of inexorably clashing comprehensive views of reality and the human good.” “How Liberalism Became an Intolerant Dogma,” *The Week*, July 11, 2014. Linker wrote a book with a similar message: *The Religious Test: Why We Must Question the Beliefs of Our Leaders* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010).

²⁹ That this is the direction modern American secularism has taken can be seen in the increasingly common impatience secularists show with religious exceptionalism. Religion is one special interest group among many, not a separate realm equal in importance to the state. Why should religious groups enjoy tax exemptions and other boons from the state?

The Quest for Universal Values

Smith's next chapter examines the stimulating modern classic, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* by historian Carl Becker.³⁰ In his four Storrs Lectures, delivered at Yale in 1931, Becker argued deftly and elegantly that the worldview (he uses that word, but titles his chapter on it "The Climate of Opinion") of famous Enlightenment figures was far more indebted to Christian assumptions than they appeared to be aware. Becker pointed out, in particular, that their supposedly empirical, objective, historical quest to discover "human values" was faulty. Without an ultimate standard by which to judge human values, Hume, Diderot, Voltaire, Franklin, Jefferson, et al. could only smuggle in their own. Smith summarizes Becker: "While purporting to derive ethical guidance from human experience, in fact they systematically imported their own preconceived values [often inherited from the Christian past they disdained] and imposed these values onto human experience" (157).

But then Smith turns the tables on Becker, noting that his urbane, liberal take-down of his intellectual predecessors failed to offer any alternative basis for morality. Becker seemed to regard the question, "What is morality?" as not worth answering (160).

Then Smith turns to one of the premier moral philosophers of our day, Martha Nussbaum, and her essay "In Defense of Universal Values." Smith demonstrates that her effort to base these values in human "capabilities" is viciously circular. "Which capabilities?" Smith asks since humans are adept rapists and pillagers, after all. Nussbaum basically answers, "The good ones—the capabilities we know intuitively to be good" (172). In effect, Nussbaum is not arguing for "universal values" at all but only listing her own values and hoping that the universe will sign on (173).

Scientism

Smith's entire book is basically a presuppositionalist critique of secularist liberalism—one often using the categories and history of law.³¹ And Smith is at his most Van Tillian in his chapter on scientism. His major source is a legal philosopher from Notre Dame (not unlike Smith) named Joseph Vining. Vining's argument is that our beliefs are not as subject to our control as we think; one overriding task of a well-ordered life is the discovery of what I *really* believe. What I claim to believe may be proven false by my actions.

So what do scientific denizens of the iron cage really believe? Vining points out that they do not seem to be able to live as if morality is a mere evolutionary adaptation, something made further

³⁰ New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932.

³¹ This is not unlike almost the entire oeuvre of the subject of my previous Bible Faculty Summit paper, Stanley Fish. See Mark Ward, "The Dwarfs Are for the Dwarfs: Stanley Fish, the Pragmatic Presuppositionalist," *Answers Research Journal* 6 (2013): 265–278.

relative by its differences among cultures. Scientists also do not seem to be able to reduce their own field “to the sorts of objective, impersonal ‘systems’ and ‘processes’ into which [science] characteristically attempts to reduce its own subjects of study” (198–99).

Scientists do not seem to be able, Vining thinks, to treat other persons the way they view them in theory—as complex systems of miniscule whirling parts (206). Scientists cannot, he thinks, use at home with their wives and children the definition of love as evolutionary-adaptation-of-complex-systems that they use in class to describe penguins mating (207).

It is not merely that naturalism and totalizing scientism cancel themselves out, as C. S. Lewis, for example, has argued. It is that naturalism’s and scientism’s most ardent proponents cannot account for their ardor within their totalizing theory. The hard determinism that necessarily accompanies naturalism seems to exclude the scientists, who are allowed somehow to stand outside the closed system of cause and effect to which everything and everyone else is subject.

Smith’s Prescription

Smith’s final chapter draws together the threads of his argument and concludes by offering an excessively modest, even banal suggestion for American public discourse: bend the bars. Open up the cage. Allow people to advert to their value systems.³² Is the current practice of pretending we have no value systems (largely to the disadvantage of religious people since they by nature advert to their value systems) really the best our pluralistic society can do (221)?³³ Is it not more respectful—even more classically American—to just shoot straight?

Smith is not willing to make predictions about what will happen if the iron cage is unlatched. But he encourages America to “open up the cage and see what happens” (225).³⁴

RESPONSES TO SMITH

I found Smith’s analysis to be not just persuasive but decisive (Smith’s prescription I found somewhat less congenial).³⁵ The rules of secular discourse proscribe metaphysical or theological assumptions. And yet there they are, everywhere, in the very best public discourse we can muster as a culture—in law, in academe, in journalism, in social media, in science.

³² His advice is similar to that of mature evangelical historian George Marsden, who recommends at the end of his recent book *The Twilight of the American Enlightenment: The 1950s and the Crisis of Liberal Belief* (New York: Basic Books, 2014) that Abraham Kuyper’s thought provides a starting point for Christians seeking peaceful pluralism(162).

³³ Smith describes our current system in America as “a generally secular but unevenly policed public discourse supplemented by sporadic incursions of religion and by rampant smuggling” (221).

³⁴ Smith does, however, note that shutting down the intellectual black market immediately could do more harm than good (34).

³⁵ “Openness” is just another word for “tolerance”—liberalism’s founding value.

So an irenic, witty, and concise legal scholar writes an accessible book published by Harvard in which he rather modestly—but deftly—demonstrates that the bedrock underneath all the strata of public discourse in America has gone missing. The book is somewhat old news; the reviews have now come in.³⁶ Intellectuals have had their chance to read his case. How have they responded, and what instructions do their responses hold for religious Americans wishing to speak for the good of their neighbor in the public square? I will focus on responses by non-evangelical religious people³⁷ and then, especially, responses by avowed secularists.

Responses from Non-Evangelical Religious Writers

Responses to Smith’s book from religious writers provide insights into the state of natural law arguments, into what religious liberals make of presuppositionalism, and into ways religious Americans might counter secular objections to Smith’s proposal.

Jewish: Rabbi David Wolpe in the Weekly Standard

Rabbi David Wolpe, writing in the *Weekly Standard*, agreed with Smith’s analysis and prescription. Wolpe anticipated the main objections of secular readers—that inviting religion into the public square invites high-temperature conflict because with religion, the moral “foundation is solid, but also rigid.” Wolpe, however, pushes back: “Religious life is rife with disputation. Saying one is religious does not close off the argument—indeed it often invites it, even within the same faith.”³⁸

Catholic: R. J. Snell in Anamnesis Journal

At the end of his very sympathetic rehearsal of the contents of Smith’s book, Catholic philosophy professor R. J. Snell scores a point against his own view as a proponent of natural law.³⁹ He notes,

It is not perfectly clear to me how the secularist position can ever be refuted if one begins from within the position—all good arguments would be disqualified from the get-go, and ideology would reign supreme.⁴⁰

³⁶ The book is old news in more than one sense: the author himself has written basically the same critique before in *Law’s Quandary* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2004).

³⁷ Evangelicals have paid some attention to Smith’s book. Ken Myers interviewed Smith to discuss his book (*Mars Hill Audio Journal* 103, July 1, 2010; disc 1, track 2). Kevin Walker of the Institute for Faithful Research reviewed Smith’s book for *The Review of Politics* 73, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 325–28. Mark Eckel of Crossroads Bible College (a graduate of Baptist Bible College, Clarks Summit) reviewed the book for the *Englewood Review of Books* 3, no. 27 (<http://erb.kingdomnow.org/featured-the-disenchantment-of-secular-discourse-by-stephen-smith-vol-3-27/>). Nicholas Wolterstorff (“Escaping the Cage,” 93–99) gave a thorough, positive review of Smith’s book that was nonetheless willing to be critical at points. Smith later wrote “A Response to Nicholas Wolterstorff,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 40, no. 1 (2011): 101–3.

³⁸ “Talk of God,” *Weekly Standard* 15, no. 38 (June 21, 2010). Another Jewish source reacted in a similarly appreciative way to the book: “Recommends,” *Tikkun* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 81.

³⁹ R. J. Snell, *Perspective of Love: Natural Law in a New Mode* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014). Snell aims explicitly in the book to rehabilitate natural law for Protestants skeptical of it.

The iron cage rules out natural law (though the leading families smuggle a normative natural order in anyway, as Smith showed with euthanasia); Snell suggests that what is needed is to begin from within a different position. This sounds more like presuppositionalism than a Catholic natural law apologetic.

Catholic: Jeffrey Pojanowski in Jurisprudence

Jeffrey Pojanowski, associate professor at Notre Dame Law School, was interested in Smith as a religious doppelgänger of some Scandinavian legal theorists who, recognizing the same smuggling Smith spotted, have doubled down on their naturalism.⁴¹ Pojanowski recognizes with Smith (and with Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*⁴²) the quandary that law in the West is in. We have always talked about our laws as if they encode moral truths; when the worldview in which those moral truths once made sense is gone, what do we say about law?

Catholic: Michael Moreland in Commonweal

Michael Moreland had “two lingering reservations” in his otherwise very positive review of Smith’s work.⁴³ Insightfully, he noted that not all issues brought up in courtrooms have such a clear connection to moral issues as euthanasia. Judges and lawyers, he says, do not have a “free license to practice moral philosophy.”⁴⁴ They are at least attempting to apply existing law accurately. Second, Moreland was uncertain about the success of recovering a natural teleology.

Catholic: Peter Admirand in Heythrop Journal

Self-described “postmodern and postcolonial . . . American Catholic theologian” Peter Admirand was not very impressed with Smith’s book.⁴⁵ He is wary of allowing exclusivist religion into public discourse:

If religions espouse a pluralist, interreligious agenda guided by an option for the poor and marginalised, then by all means, let it shout from the rooftops and be heard in every school, boardroom, court of justice, and media outlet.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ R. J. Snell, “The Contraception Mandate and Secular Discourse,” *Anamnesis Journal*, n.d.
<http://anamnesisjournal.com/2012/05/r-j-snell/#more-51>

⁴¹ Jeffrey A. Pojanowski, “Legal Thought in Enlightenment’s Wake,” *Jurisprudence* 4, no. 1 (June 2013): 158–72.

⁴² MacIntyre famously imagined a distant future day after nuclear apocalypse had destroyed science but somehow left its terminology intact. Scientists would talk about “mass” and “neutrons” but without any understanding of the broader context in which those words make sense. MacIntyre suggests that this is the situation the West is now in with morality; we retain its vocabulary but have little idea what we mean. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 1–2.

⁴³ Michael P. Moreland, “Out of the Shallows,” *Commonweal* 138, no. 6 (2011): 28–29.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁵ Peter Admirand. “Review of *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse*,” *Heythrop Journal* 53, no. 3 (2012): 520–22.

Otherwise, religion in public discourse tends to cause more trouble than it is worth, Admirand says—unless its concerns are translated for public consumption. He summarizes Rawls:

Comprehensive doctrine can be uttered [in the public square] but . . . such motivations and themes still need to be remolded (as it were) for those who do not share such religious or philosophical orientations.⁴⁷

Admirand also criticizes Smith for wanting secularists to open up their cage without religionists (like Smith) being willing to open up theirs. Admirand's criticisms suggest that he has missed Smith's whole point: secularists purport to be operating a public cage for everyone when in actuality they have set up their cage to exclude those whose views they do not like. And Smith demonstrates that the remolding process still ends up smuggling religion into the cage after all.⁴⁸

Mainline: Martin Marty in The Christian Century

Martin Marty reviewed Smith's book for the *Christian Century* in the year of its publication.⁴⁹ Marty was very positive toward the book—in part because Marty detected “no hidden Christendom lurking behind Smith's analyses and suggestions.” Smith, Marty says, “is not asking for a reenchantment of the world”; he “doesn't yield the game to aggressive religionists who seek legal privileges or make arrogant claims for what they find in Revelation.”⁵⁰

I disagree. I suspect Marty is reading his own position into Smith's. Marty himself is religious, of course. He is a mainline Lutheran. So puncturing the pretensions to neutrality among the secular elite holds some attraction for him. But he wants the air to be let out of the balloon slowly, it seems, so that the balloon can stay afloat and be brought to appropriate size. He does not, I think (based on my years of reading Marty's *Context* newsletter), want it completely popped. Does Marty, perhaps, wish for a return to the 1950s, a time in which mainline Protestant liberals (including a young Martin Marty) were a recognized part of the establishment?⁵¹

⁴⁶ Ibid., 521.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Smith's book also received a positive review in Italian from (presumably Catholic) Luis Oviedo in *Antoniano* 87, no. 3 (2012): 623–26. And two more positive reviews from apparent Catholics: Timothy Fuller, a member of the *First Things* editorial board, wrote a uniformly positive review of Smith's book in *Review Of Metaphysics* 66, no. 3 (2013): 602–4. Catholic Harvard Law student Anna Su wrote a similarly positive review in the *Journal of Church & State* 52, no. 4 (2010): 732–34.

⁴⁹ Review of *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse* by Steven D. Smith, *The Christian Century* 127, no. 20 (October 5, 2010). See <http://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2010-09/review-disenchantment-secular-discourse>.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ George Marsden discusses explicitly Marty's splash as a young scholar into the 1950s intellectual scene in *The Twilight of the American Enlightenment: The 1950s and the Crisis of Liberal Belief*, pp. 110ff.

Smith thinks too clearly and has been writing in this vein for too long; I find it unlikely that he has no religion-based preferences for how society ought to be run—preferences that would sound like “Christendom” (or Mormondom?) to Marty. I also find it unlikely that Smith would be willing to describe his fellow professors at a Catholic institution—especially, say, the pro-life ones—as “aggressive” and “arrogant.”⁵² That is the only category of religious persons Marty mentions, but surely if religious people are to be “open” about their values along with secularists, as Smith suggests, they will indeed appeal to revelation. This appeal will sound arrogant to many. And, like the Greens who run Hobby Lobby, they will seek legal privileges—the privilege, for example, not to be required to pay for abortifacient contraceptives along with everyone else.

Because Smith, somewhat ironically (and even frustratingly) does not advert to many of his own values in his book, Marty filled in the blanks with his.

Responses from Secularists

Lorne Neudorf in the Osgoode Hall Law Journal

Canadian legal scholar Lorne Neudorf (JD, University of Victoria; PhD [cand.] in Law, Cambridge) gave a thoughtfully negative response to Smith’s work in the *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* put out by the law school at Toronto’s York University.⁵³ Neudorf follows Smith’s argument well; he even expressed nostalgia for a day when people could appeal openly to theological and metaphysical value systems in the public square. But Neudorf accuses Smith of viewing that time “through rose-coloured glasses,” forgetting the persistent bloody conflicts religion (even the Christian religion) has brought to the world.⁵⁴ Secular discourse, Neudorf says, needs more time to come into its own, to weed out logical inconsistencies—but the iron cage is clearly better at keeping the peace than religion is. Neudorf brings up the case of Servetus in Geneva, and he points out that

prior to the development of secular discourse, any view that was seen to oppose or undermine religious dogma was rejected as heretical and swiftly condemned through institutions that would not hesitate to impose physical punishment or worse. In fact, so-called heretics were singled out for the most severe punishments because they not only risked their own souls but also those of innocent people who adopted their teachings.⁵⁵

⁵² Marty is pro-abortion. See <http://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/garry-wills-abortion-question>.

⁵³ Lorne Neudorf, “Book Review: *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse*, by Steven D. Smith,” *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 48, nos. 3/4 (2010): 681–89. <http://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/ohlj/vol48/iss3/10>

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 685.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Neudorf admits that Smith has exposed “a number of logical weaknesses” in the equality and harm principles.⁵⁶ But, he says,

while Smith’s criticisms have merit, his conclusion that these principles are rendered meaningless simply because they are not perfectly formulated to avoid disputes over their interpretation does not follow. . . . That secular principles cannot provide immediately clear solutions to nuanced moral questions is not fatal to the process of rational thinking.⁵⁷

Neudorf then turns the tables, pointing out that “revealed wisdom and its teachings may be equally abstract and often fail to provide precise directions when faced with complex questions.”⁵⁸

The meaning of all principles, whether secular or religious, must be interpreted when applied to a concrete problem. This process involves a hermeneutical approach and requires the interpreter to prioritize some values over others.⁵⁹

Neudorf makes the most telling empirical point against Smith’s view—or any view which would seek to enfranchise religion in public discourse: intense, even violent, conflict seems unavoidable when people believe God is on their side. Yahweh and Zeus could never brook a *détente* or approve some arrangement of non-overlapping magisteria.

Neudorf writes,

As the first step toward speaking a common language in a pluralist society, it is hardly surprising that persons impress secular principles such as equality, harm, or justice with ideologically similar religious or traditional standards. This act of interpretation keeps faith with pre-existing values and provides a necessary starting point for subsequent discussion and debate from a variety of perspectives. It also allows ideas to be challenged and discussed in a rational environment that need not fear treading on faith-based moral views. In such a way, secular discourse opens a channel that facilitates the discovery of shared human values.⁶⁰

It is astonishing that a careful reader of Smith such as Neudorf could express so much personal trust, even eschatological hope, in secular discourse:

While people can disagree as to what human dignity means and how it is best achieved, such debate is encouraged by secular discourse as the means to further refinement of views and, ultimately, the best possible interpretation.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Ibid., 687.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 688.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Neudorf seems to adopt the common notion that the best way to evaluate an idea in a democratic society is to give it some air. Bad values will, he trusts, be winnowed away; they will evaporate in the sun eternally shining on the public square. But without a value system that exists prior to and above the winnowing and evaporating, how can we know when we have chaff instead of wheat kernels? How is it possible to find any stable method of “prioritiz[ing] some values over others”? Surely we cannot say that everything the majority votes for is good.⁶² And how will we know when we have finally arrived at the “shared human values” we *ought* to share?

One thinks of C.S. Lewis’ evolutionary hymn:

Never knowing where we’re going, / We can never go astray.

Neudorf does make one more telling criticism of Smith: he notes that the concluding diagnosis of the book, the opening of the bars—openness—is just another neutral and empty principle. But it is difficult for me to see how keeping the bars closed and sticking with *secular* empty principles is any better. It just privileges people with the system of values Neudorf likes.

In the end, the most substantive point Neudorf can make is the empirical one: encouraging people in the public square to advertise their values has historically brought (bloody) conflict. But I suggest using Neudorf’s own advice: give secularism time. The jury is still out as to whether political systems completely unmoored from religion are truly the best hope for avoiding conflict in North America (their record in other nations—Russia, China—is not quite so positive).

Sebastián Rudas Neyra on Plurilogue

Sebastián Rudas Neyra of Guido Carli Free International University for Social Studies in Rome reviewed Smith’s book for Plurilogue, a website dedicated to “politics and philosophy reviews.”⁶³

Neyra offers two counterarguments to Smith’s book. First, he says, well-regarded thinkers such as Jonathan Haidt and Peter Singer are “fully aware of the difficulties in explaining morality within a naturalistic understanding of the world, and yet provide plausible explanations of it.”⁶⁴ For specifics Neyra mentions only that homo sapiens may have been “conditioned [by evolution] to be dualistically minded”; that is, brains are meat machines capable somehow of regarding themselves as such. Neyra’s second counterargument is that “it is not clear why including non-secular discourse in discussing the most difficult questions of public life would be helpful. Are theological accounts of morality not as disputed as secular accounts of it?” In other words, why invite more dispute?

⁶² This is the appropriate point, I think, to bring in Godwin’s Law of Nazi Analogies.

⁶³ <http://www.plurilogue.com/>

⁶⁴ Neyra also mentions Shaun Nichols, Jesse Prinz, and Christine Korsgaard.

Neyra provides little material to critique; within the limited context of his piece, it does seem that his answer to the problem of the existence of minds in a naturalistic world is bald assertion: *we know that products of naturalistic processes can have self-consciousness because they do in fact have it*. And as to his wariness about allowing non-secular discourse into the cage, he seems to have missed Smith's point: that is already what has happened. There really is no such thing as truly secular discourse.

Harvard Law Review

A brief piece in the Harvard Law Review summarized Smith's work and made one interesting comment: "Steven D. Smith . . . argues that overzealous secularism and the avoidance of religious values in social, political, and legal discourse are at fault for the superficiality of [American public discourse]." ⁶⁵

I offer an equally brief critique: the iron cage cannot be "overzealous." It either disallows religious and metaphysical beliefs or it ceases to exist.

Kristy Maddux in Rhetoric & Public Affairs

Kristy Maddux felt that Smith's book was trenchant and basically accurate—but only within the fairly narrow legal sphere on which Smith focuses. ⁶⁶ Public discourse and legal discourse, she says, are not the same thing—the latter is only a subset of the former, and Smith never demonstrates that it is a representative one. But she still felt that Smith's book carried an important message; she even worried that people outside the sphere of academic study of law would not be able to access it. Maddux has spent significant scholarly energy on the role of Christianity in American public life, and she feels that Smith is right: religious voices should be allowed in public spaces. ⁶⁷

Maddux did offer, however, a very perceptive counterargument, a question inviting further analysis:

If Smith's thesis holds up, we might expect to find more robust public discourse in the arenas that allow religious language than in the ones that limit it. Anecdotal evidence suggests that such a conclusion is unlikely, but those discursive spheres deserve the sort of careful analysis that Smith's book devotes to legal discourse.

⁶⁵ *Harvard Law Review* 124, no. 7 (2011): 1840.

⁶⁶ *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 15, no. 4 (2012): 737–40.

⁶⁷ See Kristy Maddux, *The Faithful Citizen: Popular Christian Media and Gendered Civic Identities* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010). In a video interview about the book, she speaks with sincerity about the need for all people, religious and irreligious, to recognize their differing motivations and still get along in the public sphere. See <http://www.kristymaddux.com/video/faithfulCitizenInterview.mov>.

Stanley Fish's Readers in the New York Times

Steven D. Smith's book *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse* is very similar in substance to much of the work of Stanley Fish,⁶⁸ who has also taught law and uses it as a foil for discussions of morality in all of public life. Fish, too, has an incisive ability to find human value systems underneath layers of obfuscation.

Fish was wholly sympathetic to Smith's book; what is most interesting for the purposes of this paper is the set of responses (431 of them) Fish received when he summarized the book in his regular *New York Times* "Opinionator" column. He titled his piece, provocatively, "Are There Secular Reasons?"⁶⁹ (His answer was no.)

There were a number of commenters who followed Fish's reasoning and, therefore, Smith's (one even congratulated Fish for "presenting a case for presuppositionalism a la Cornelius Van Til").⁷⁰ Many of the comments, however, were indignant. "Jeff" from Colorado wrote,

Mr. Smith needs to acknowledge that in fact "religious reasons" are nothing more than secular reasons, most of which were just thought up hundreds or thousands of years ago in different cultural contexts, by less informed people.

"Miche" from California:

How ridiculous to posit there can be no ethics, values or judgment without religion.

⁶⁸ I was very surprised to see no references to Stanley Fish in the index to Smith's book, especially to Fish's book *The Trouble with Principle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). I also detect similarities in Smith to Harvard's Michael Sandel, who argued in *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009) that "justice is inescapably judgmental." One cannot have a neutral position on significant questions. Everyone uses his or her value system even though this fact remains unacknowledged.

⁶⁹ Feb. 22, 2010, <http://nyti.ms/19MaHhu>. Fish opens his piece with an excellent summary of the classical liberal iron cage: "In the always-ongoing debate about the role of religion in public life, the argument most often made on the liberal side (by which I mean the side of Classical Liberalism, not the side of left politics) is that policy decisions should be made on the basis of secular reasons, reasons that, because they do not reflect the commitments or agendas of any religion, morality or ideology, can be accepted as reasons by all citizens no matter what their individual beliefs and affiliations. So it's O.K. to argue that a proposed piece of legislation will benefit the economy, or improve the nation's health, or strengthen national security; but it's not O.K. to argue that a proposed piece of legislation should be passed because it comports with a verse from the book of Genesis or corresponds to the will of God."

⁷⁰ "Patrick McWilliams" from Savannah, Georgia. Another who understood Fish and Smith—"Tom D" from San Antonio, Texas—wrote, "Seems that the answer should be pluralism, in which secularism would be one of the contenders for our attention in the public square. Many religious perspectives should contend there also. Few religious folks advocate or would ever support theocracy. The persistently high prevalence of religious views across this country may suggest that secularization is not a natural trend but rather an interest group's agenda. Let it be a strong and vigorous player on the field. But not the field itself."

“Erica” from Washington, D.C.:

As an atheist, I read this whole piece waiting for the part where Mr. Fish would explain how, without invoking a secular/religious distinction, a society can prevent the majority religion from imposing its creed on everyone else. However metaphysically unfulfilling it may be, “smuggling” sounds a lot better than “theocracy.”

But many commenters were sure that secularism did have sufficient justification for its values. Secularist “moral philosophers,” they said, had it all worked out. But only one commenter—C. McCabe from Houston—addressed the *is/ought* fallacy central to Fish’s argument.

LESSONS LEARNED

This study has not canvassed the whole field of discussion about secularism. It has asked a narrow question: what response did one fairly prominent, well-written, incisive critique of American secularism yield from its proponents?

I will conclude by offering personal reflections on the overall picture created in my mind as I sought to answer this question.

First, those in cultural ascendancy in the West (or at least America) have little reason right now to allow their applecarts to be upset; secularists do not mind ideological inconsistency if it more or less brings peace. Lorne Neudorf, for example, seemed to greet Smith’s work with a shrug, saying in effect, “We’ve lasted this long without a stable secular basis for morality; we’ll do fine. Plus, we’re getting there—trust me.”

Second, secularists are impatient with suggestions that the public discourse emperor is clothesless because he hired a tailor from a mafia family. As I have long witnessed with responses to Stanley Fish, American secularist liberals are still accustomed to thinking of themselves as the Reasonable and Neutral party in the public square. Among the relatively few secularist reviews of Smith’s book I found, only one—that of Kristy Maddux—took the classically “liberal” position that all voices, even religious ones, should be heard.⁷¹

Third, then, Smith’s title is wrong as a description, in my humble estimation. Secularism is not currently being disenchanted; the “Nones” are rising, not shrinking.⁷² As Timothy Keller argues in the opening paragraphs of *The Reason for God*, “robust, orthodox belief” and “skepticism, fear, and anger toward traditional religion” are *both* growing in power and influence in America.⁷³

⁷¹ See the quotation from Damon Linker above, note 28.

⁷² See “Nones on the Rise,” Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project, October 9, 2012. <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

⁷³ Keller, *The Reason for God*, 9.

Conflict is to be expected. I love the title of this book, but I regard it as a wish unlikely to be fulfilled without cataclysm. Perhaps the bluster of Internet comments is covering up an inner disillusionment with the secular worldview—but the undeniable prosperity of an America long run by secularized elites, the public rise of the “nones,” and the flush of self-righteousness now apparent among proponents of gay marriage all suggest to me that secularism is not on the wane. Few who are happy inside the iron cage care to leave it.

Fourth, a reflection on Smith’s book that seems borne out by secularists’ response to it: Smith’s point that the *saeculum* has gone from being part of a (Christian) worldview to becoming itself a worldview explains much. And this yields an important point for Christian strategizing: pleas for religious liberty make sense to Christians accustomed to being dual citizens of the City of Man and the (more ultimate) City of God, but secularists cannot understand such pleas as anything but a violation of justice, a bid for “religious exceptionalism.”

Fifth, another strategy point: if even a dedicated Catholic proponent of natural law such as R. J. Snell—who has written a book urging Protestants to adopt natural law as a strategy in the public square—opts for a presuppositionalist critique, perhaps Protestants’ unease about natural law is justified, after all.⁷⁴ I believe that the triumph of same-sex marriage, in particular, should shake Christians’ faith in the utility (not at all the ultimate validity) of natural law arguments. If people cannot be brought to see from the shape of their own bodies that heterosexuality is natural and homosexuality unnatural (Romans 1:26–27), what hope do more subtle natural law arguments about gender have? In addition, the iron cage of secular discourse—and the philosophical/scientific naturalism so often paired with it—make denial of natural law a fundamental element of their worldviews (even if they still smuggle in a normative natural order whenever it is convenient). How can a natural law argument work with someone who denies, fundamentally, that there is any personal and purposeful design in nature?⁷⁵ As Smith noted in his book, just as science could not

⁷⁴ Carl Trueman comments, “Reformed theology [has] a . . . realistic understanding of Christian life in the public square and thus of the limits to what we might expect to achieve. People do not call evil good and good evil primarily because they are confused or not thinking clearly. They do so because they are in basic rebellion against God. It sounds a tad paradoxical: The Reformed use natural law for public engagement but expect little or no success. We believe that the world was created with a particular moral structure. Yet we also believe that fallen humanity has a fundamental antipathy toward acknowledging any form of external authority that threatens our own ultimate autonomy. This injects a basic irrationality and emotional passion into moral debates. This distortion of conscience and reason explains the apparent impotence of otherwise compelling arguments. And it surely reflects our actual experience as Christians in exile in twenty-first-century America.” “A Church for Exiles: Why Reformed Christianity Provides the Best Basis for Faith Today,” *First Things*, August–September 2014.

⁷⁵ The current natural law gold standard on this issue is definitely Sherif Girgis, Ryan T. Anderson, and Robert P. George, *What Is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense* (New York: Encounter Books, 2012). There was an interesting exchange between Ryan T. Anderson and a homosexual man in a Q&A session at the Stanford Anscombe Society. The man held tightly to the equality-fairness-reciprocity family of

function if it were somehow untethered from the physical world, so moral reasoning cannot hope to function if it has been untethered from the moral order (62–63).

Sixth, consequent upon the previous point, Christians could perhaps glean some wisdom from a comment by Anabaptist theologian Stanley Hauerwas, who (in the words of Richard Mouw) “worries that Christian presumptions of an available common discourse signal that we have negotiated an unfaithful compromise with the fallen order.”⁷⁶ Christians need not cite Bible verses for every policy proposal, of course. It is acceptable for a regenerated politician to say at a city council meeting, “I personally value the old municipal gardens more than I would value this proposed new dog park, and if you’re asking me to vote I’m going to go with the gardens.” In this case, a Christian’s values may clash with someone else’s, but they clash at such a frivolous level that neither of them need invoke his ultimate authority, whatever or whoever that may be. But on the truly controversial topics in our national discourse, notably same-sex marriage and abortion, two conflicts that do not seem to be going away any time soon, values clash at deeper levels. With regard to same-sex marriage in particular, I concur with Peter Leithart’s comments on the *First Things* blog after Christian apologist Doug Wilson debated prominent gay blogger Andrew Sullivan at the University of Idaho:

Perhaps Christians are called to do no more than speak the truth without worrying about persuasiveness. Perhaps we have entered a phase in which God has closed [people’s] ears, so that whatever we say sounds like so much gibberish. We can depend on the Spirit to give ears as He pleases.

Whatever the political needs of the moment, the longer-term response to gay marriage requires a renaissance of Christian imagination. Because the only arguments we have are theological ones, and only people whose imaginations are formed by Scripture will find them cogent.⁷⁷

The call to witness has superseded the call to persuasion because the choir is the only group who, finally, will listen—or even can listen. I am opposed to homosexual practice because God as revealed in the Bible is. I value what he says; my opponents do not. If I try to play by their rules, trotting out arguments about SAT scores among children of gay couples, I may be implicitly affirming the thesis of secularism, that religion should remain private and has no public purchase. Plus, same-sex marriage proponents will likely see through my “secular” arguments to my value system anyway. So, Leithart says, I might as well just quote God instead.

rhethoric, repeatedly and confusedly asking how Anderson’s stance against gay marriage was not guilty of “discrimination.” The man simply did not understand Anderson’s (excellent) natural law arguments. See <http://youtu.be/VEsHpmQBfvo?t=24m38s>.

⁷⁶ Richard Mouw, *He Shines In All That’s Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 84–85.

⁷⁷ <http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/leithart/2013/02/gay-marriage-and-christian-imagination/>

Lastly, we could do little better than heed the wisdom of a Christian writer who was opposing naturalism before most of us were born: C. S. Lewis. Like Leithart, his proposed solution to the problem of a world enchanted by an idol like secularism was basically evangelism. People need to be brought to see the beauty of God. The beauties we see in nature, says Lewis,

are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited. . . . Do you think I am trying to weave a spell? Perhaps I am; but remember your fairy tales. Spells are used for breaking enchantments as well as for inducing them.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Harper Collins, 1949/2001), 30–31.