

# **LIFE IN THE NEGATIVE WORLD: CONFRONTING CHALLENGES IN AN ANTI-CHRISTIAN CULTURE**

(AARON M. RENN)

February 16, 2024

Christians in America are today under continuous attack, both by the government and by those who, for now, rule our culture. This is strange for many Christians, because broad anti-Christian animus among elites is a very recent phenomenon, although one inevitable as the Left has consolidated power. Aaron Renn, the originator of the seminal “three worlds” analysis of the modern American Christian cultural position, here offers intelligent, measured thoughts on how Christians should respond. The result is an insightful and, relatively speaking, upbeat book. Renn most definitely offers wise counsel, even if events may, as I hope, ultimately supersede its applicability.

The author has had an interesting career path. Today he works at the crucial organization American Reformer, which he co-founded, and he writes on various topics. His background is not as an academic or journalist; rather, for several years he worked as a management consultant for Accenture, one of the largest management consulting firms in the world. My personal opinion of management consulting is very low, but there is no doubt that many smart people work in the space (my main beef with it is that no well-run company should have need of anything but technical consultants; managers are paid to manage, not to hire other people to manage, and if they cannot, they should be fired). His background shows through in much of Renn’s writing, which is precise, framework-oriented, and, most importantly, goal-oriented. Not for him mere wailing about how bad something is; he’s here to offer solutions.

His second career, also answers-focused, was as an expert on urban policy, working in New York City for the Manhattan Institute and writing about urban matters all over the country, about cities and towns from giant to mid-sized. (I first heard of Renn not in connection with Christian matters, or even with respect to political matters, but when he was a guest on the *Strong Towns* podcast, analyzing Carmel, Indiana, very close to where I live.) This background makes what Renn has to say about Christianity of particular interest, because although he is a

devout Christian, he brings a broader, and more real world-informed, perspective to the topic than most Christian writers.

A few years back, Renn developed his framework of “positive world,” “neutral world,” and “negative world,” which has gained much currency in discussions about Christians in America. For most of American history, being Christian (especially Protestant) was regarded as a social benefit. Church attendance peaked in the 1950s, and the ruling class was Christian, in name if not always in practice—the “midcentury consensus.” But in the early 1960s, this system entered a period of flux, then radical change, leading to the three successive periods Renn identifies, although he agrees the dates could shift a few years in any direction. First, positive world, from the early 1960s until 1994. Second, neutral world, 1994 to 2014. Finally, negative world, 2014 to the present.

The modifying terms refer to the view of society, largely meaning elite society, towards Christianity. Positive world was a continuation of the past, where “society at large retain[ed] a mostly positive view of Christianity,” even if in a variety of ways the Christian position was eroding. Neutral world viewed Christianity as just another choice in a pluralistic society, neither good nor bad. And today, in the negative world, “Being known as a Christian is a social negative, particularly in the higher status domains of society. Christian morality is expressly repudiated and now seen as a threat to the public good and the new public moral order.” The advent of negative world coincided with the “Great Awakening,” and Renn ascribes it to a variety of causes, including the secularization that has overtaken the West for far longer than the past fifty years. I think it better seen simply as the near-total ascendancy of the Left, but in any case the effect on Christianity’s social position is undeniable. (It is beyond both the scope of Renn’s book, which does not talk about Right and Left, and beyond the scope of my discussion today, but the Left can never coexist with any brand of actual Christianity, because Christianity rejects all the fundamental premises of the Left.)

The simpleton’s response to this is “Whaaaaaat??? Christianity is not viewed negatively. Why, Joe Biden is a Christian!” Renn, of course, is referring to genuine Christians, not nominal Christians whose behavior is indistinguishable from non-believers. Even a nominal Christian is viewed with suspicion by society today, until he presents proof that he doesn’t really believe any part of Christianity that runs counter in any

way to whatever the anti-Christian demands of the moment are. And being a real Christian is a massive career liability in any professional career; you may be able to get away with it in a blue-collar job, but even there, you had best keep your mouth shut if your employer has a human resources department, a main purpose of which today is, almost always, to root out any expression of Christian belief by employees.

Renn's main target audience is evangelical Christians, though certainly for his purposes, any believing Christian can be lumped together with all others in how they are perceived. Renn broadly defines evangelical using a "sociological rather than a theological approach," namely "any Protestant who is not mainline or from the black church tradition." The 1940s onward were the rise of evangelical Christianity to national prominence and power, and in the 1970s, as mainline denominations declined rapidly, evangelicalism rose further. Those of us who are not Boomers often think of evangelicals as the default state of American Protestantism, but that is historically incorrect. Prior to the 1970s, evangelicals were generally those who were called fundamentalists, and they were mostly not part of the ruling class and unimportant in the larger scheme of American life, or as Renn says, they were "lower status." To show this, he offers a detailed history, citing the midcentury sociologist E. Digby Baltzell, among other things of how as people rose in the social hierarchy, they adopted other, prestige brands of Christianity.

But what to do, given we are now living in the negative world? Renn's framework isn't meant to magically give us all the answers; it's a tool for helping us understand, and then to take action. He discusses the strategies evangelicals used in the now-gone positive and neutral worlds, when Christianity was in decline, but the decline did not appear as total as it now obviously is. One strategy was the "culture war" strategy, associated with the so-called Religious Right. A second was "seeker sensitivity," the strategy of most suburban megachurches—"to reposition the church to be more relevant to changing consumer tastes in order to increase their market uptake." And third, "cultural engagement," similar to seeker sensitivity, but focused on urban centers—usually by inevitably watering down any controversial doctrine, even if that was not the initial intent. Renn points out that "Cultural engagement was a higher-status movement than seeker sensitivity, because in America,

the city, with which this movement is associated, is higher status than the suburbs.”

When the negative world dawned, not that long ago, evangelicals totally failed to respond adequately. Renn reiterates that the pressures of negative world affect those of higher social status much more than those of lower social status. Therefore, the cultural engagers promptly folded, dropping any element of Christianity that might threaten their social status. (That’s not how Renn puts it, because he’s too polite, but that’s nonetheless what happened. He says they “had to shift to try to remain relevant” and “came to see secular movements such as the present emphasis on racial justice as vehicles for cultural transformation.” As I say, folded.) Seeker sensitives did the same, but to a lesser extent. The culture warriors, still around, didn’t fold, but they often mutated, importing overt politics into their religious activities, and dropping their requirement for moral purity for their preferred politicians.

So far, so analytical. But Renn aims to offer, if not complete solutions, strategies. He’s evangelical himself, and both his analysis and his prescriptions are explicitly informed by Scripture, and its commands. He proposes a new model, based on that evangelicals are journeying into the unknown, a secularized world hostile to Christians. Not a detailed model, or a “50-point master plan,” but three “starter ideas” in each of three “key domains”—the personal, institutional, and missional, or, rather, “living personally,” “leading institutionally,” and “engaging missionally.” This is the meat of the book.

He begins with what makes core sense for any Christian, but is often forgotten—obedience to God, to (citing Matthew 7), “hear [His] words and . . . put them into practice.” That means all His words, not just some. Renn is, mostly implicitly, criticizing past evangelical practice, which was conducted during “sunny weather,” and allowed, in essence, laxity. “Today’s world allows people to be accepted while identifying as Christian if they bring their doctrine into alignment with the world’s standards. This pull toward compromise to be culturally accepted creates a fertile environment for the abandonment of orthodoxy.” Instead, we must take up our cross and follow Christ. That this has to be said at all is sad, but it is indeed the key point, and the one Renn places first.

We then, however, get to two points that are less theological and more practical, and which resonate with my own advice to all people,

Christian and non-Christian, in these troubled times—become excellent, and become resilient. By excellence, Renn means both intellectual and non-intellectual excellence, in all walks of life, informed by Christian belief. The hidden knife, though, is Renn's criticism that evangelicals have failed to do this for a long time—among other things, as shown by their lack of representation in leadership positions, even in friendly areas, such as conservative think tanks and publications, or areas where they are heavily represented, such as conservative politics. Evangelicals could perhaps get away with that in the positive and neutral worlds; now they cannot. To have any hope of maintaining, or regaining, status in society, and to proselytize the ruling class, excellence is required. And to achieve that, evangelicals need to adopt a more elite attitude (Renn says "overcome socioeconomic stratification," but he means become elite), and most of all demand excellence of themselves in all areas of daily life.

As to resiliency, we may not be beaten with rods like Saint Paul (though I think Renn underrates this possibility), but nobody ever tried to prevent him from making a living as a tentmaker. Christians, or real Christians, are targets. Thus, we need to be (citing Nassim Taleb), antifragile. We need to be financially prudent, seek redundancy in everything from skills to church leadership, and choose flexible and resilient careers and jobs. Again, I think this is critical advice for any person on the Right, Christian or not.

As far as leading institutionally, Renn starts with institutional integrity. Nearly all, or perhaps all, institutions are today perceived as having extremely low integrity, and with good reason. It's not hard, or shouldn't be—you just have to be trustworthy and competent. Moreover, institutions can be reinforced by community strength; these things go hand in hand. He offers the example of twentieth-century American Catholics, who were excluded from prestige positions, but built the necessary institutions to sustain their communities. For example, modern Christians can take control of the education of their children—although Renn opposes "insulation" to a degree I think incorrect. He similarly objects to parents who "boast about how their children are ignorant of the basics of popular culture." But it is not true that "at some point children need to be equipped responsibly to use smartphones and social media." I, for example, would never consider such a thing. If and when our children leave the house permanently, as adults, they can do that. Not before, and

they will have a very negative view of such things inculcated in them. And when my children ask what the pervert flag which besmirches the rainbow is, if they happen to see it in the wild (though around here it is fortunately rare), I say it is a filthy leftist symbol that should be used as toilet paper and then thrown in the sewer, which is all they need to know (and I encourage them to share this fact with everyone they meet, if the topic arises). I suspect Renn's angle on this matter is tied to his core desire for Christians to be able to regain elite status, a topic to which we will return.

Renn also talks about another important matter that is also his expertise (for some years, his weekly newsletter was focused on Christian men and called "The Masculinist")—what he names "repairing our sexual economy." He criticizes, for example, the institutional evangelical turn toward talking about the "gift of singleness" in response to the church's failure to help men and women pair off, when singleness is, for the vast majority of people, a curse. (Renn's actual words are that this "rationalizes our declining levels of family formation as theologically valid.") He complains about falsehoods spread by evangelical preachers, such as that "Godliness is sexy to godly people," when the reality is, as Jordan Peterson points out, that what is sexy to women is men who win status contests. He rejects how most evangelical pastors define masculinity purely by how men should relate to women, and then demand that men be "servant leaders," meaning servants, because (although Renn does not use this phrase), responsibility without authority is slavery. He also discusses the split between egalitarians and complementarians—that is, the split between those on the political and theological Left who reject sex role realism, as well as demand behavior changes from men but never from women, even though women behave just as badly as men, if not worse, and those, mostly on the Right, who grasp that men and women are different on many levels, and each is called to improve behavior.

In this context, Renn discusses neopatriarchy, endorsed by some Christians, but says it's just fake roleplay, because our culture is "legally and culturally egalitarian." Yes, true enough, but our culture is also legally and culturally anti-Christian, fighting back against which is the entire point of this book, and that suggests at least pushing toward patriarchy is a good idea, rather than just declaring defeat. There is, in

fact, probably much more room than Renn admits for patriarchy—not the caricature of it so-called feminists offer, but real patriarchy, which has characterized every single successful society in the entire history of mankind. For example, echoing Mary Harrington, Renn himself endorses the “productive household,” a cooperative enterprise between husband and wife. This is, while a partnership, a form of patriarchy, in that the husband has, and should have, the public-facing role in the family. The reader feels like Renn is trying a little too hard to make sure Christians can regain elite status, within the framework of what is today elite, not what should be elite.

Renn recommends being “prudentially engaged,” meaning not wholly disengaged from the world as it is, hostile to Christians. He is generally favorable toward Rod Dreher and his Benedict Option, but unlike Dreher, Renn understands that Christians will never be just left alone if they successfully form alternate models of social life. Evangelicals must therefore be politically engaged, at the same time understanding that the old culture war model, which presumed broad, if often silent, support for Christian morals, is completely gone. Therefore, evangelicals should pursue ownership, meaning owned space (here the reader hears echoes of, although Renn most definitely does not cite him, Bronze Age Pervert). Ownership is everything from email lists to real estate to small- and medium-sized businesses which can avoid the Eye of Sauron, and assist in successful engagement, while protecting Christians from economic attacks.

Finally, as far as “engaging missionally,” Renn notes that “conveying the truths of Christianity today . . . is more akin to the work of a cross-cultural missionary introducing the gospel for the first time to a foreign culture.” Past strategies, such as seeker sensitivity, assumed that an interlocutor knew the basics of Christianity, and merely had to be persuaded to adopt them, or adopt them more fully. Now, many “targets” find Christianity completely alien, making “pre-evangelism” such as helping the poor, or ensuring Christian institutions have the highest reputation for integrity, important as an evangelical technique. We should never compromise the truth, however—both on principle, and because such compromise doesn’t work, as the success of secular truth-tellers such as Peterson shows.

All this is excellent advice, smoothly and compellingly written, and we can all agree the position of Christians would be much improved by following it. Renn does not spend much time on hard persecution, by the state or by private actors in coordination with the state, which is widespread today in America, and not confined to simple denial of elite status. He refers in passing to cancellations in other countries, but does not mention how, for example, Christian public speech is now effectively criminalized in Britain if it touches on any topic of crucial importance to the Left. Nor does he mention how civil disobedience, of the type celebrated during the so-called civil rights era in America, now is viciously persecuted by the Department of "Justice," with multi-year sentences being meted out for non-violent protests at abortion mills. I think Renn understates (or perhaps just chooses to ignore for purposes of this book) the risk for Christians of such persecution getting much worse (along with more privatized, state-encouraged violence against Christians, which already exists, as more than one tranny shooter has shown). It is certainly, for example, already worse in America today for Christians than it was under late-stage Communism in Eastern Europe, and it seems likely to get much worse before it gets better.

Continuing his upbeat emphasis, however, Renn believes, despite the challenges, that elite status is something achievable for Christians in America. In fact, his Substack this week focused on this very topic—not on seizing status back by taking over Harvard, but on building alternate sources of elite status, such as Peter Thiel's fellowship program. On the other hand, Renn's analysis seems to assume that nothing much will change in America, that there will be no massive alteration in American structures or culture. The existing ruling classes will continue to rule indefinitely, and even more importantly, most markers of status will not change. New York will still be the highest status city, people who live there will accrue status by virtue of living there, and the *New York Times* will still be the highest status newspaper, reflecting its status onto those who read and cite it. Christians may find alternate ways of achieving status, and forming parallel hierarchies, and they should, but they will still live in the negative world. Renn makes no claim the negative world might be turned once again positive.

The problem is that any parallel elite status hierarchy which admits Christians will be attacked and destroyed, even if it does not threaten to



turn negative world positive. Renn is not wrong, however, that the goal for Christians should be to constitute the elite, not merely an oppressed minority. (He nowhere seems to consider whether it might be acceptable for Christians to be permanently wholly excluded from all elite status, apparently assuming that is self-evidently unacceptable.) But if Christianity is to become possible for those in the ruling class again, it will be because the existing ruling class has been totally destroyed, either peacefully (Renn discusses such a process in the context of Edward Watts's *The Final Pagan Generation*, meaning that of Rome, where young men abandoned paganism for the new status hierarchy of the Church), or not so peacefully.

If you are, like me, an accelerationist catastrophist, you certainly agree with all of Renn's prescriptions, but you think they should be done not with an eye to keeping the Christian flame alive in New York, but with an eye to cleansing New York of the scum that now occupies it, from top to bottom. Cultural engagement didn't work, and it's not going to work, so Christians should shake the dust of such places off their feet, and return when they have the power to enforce their will. In the meantime, however, no Christian will fail to benefit from following Renn's prescriptions, which will reward Christians now, and in any possible future. We can, therefore, have it both ways!