

Embracing Obscurity
Becoming Nothing in Light of God's Everything
Author: Anonymous

Book Review & Critique
Barbara Buzzard

I shall begin with this quotation from another reviewer to give you the flavor of this most remarkable book: “It is a paradoxical sign of the times that a book advocating the virtues of anonymity yet requires named endorsements in order to be properly marketable. Thus, it is with some sense of irony, if not incoherence, that I commend this work. We live in an age where self-promotion is the norm and where even many sincere Christians have bought into this culture with enthusiasm. Yet the message of this important book is that such self-promotion is not simply a neutral cultural tool but is in fact antithetical to biblical Christianity. This is a timely call in modesty, privacy, and humility. It is painful but necessary reading that is likely to be hated, disparaged, or simply ignored by the very people who most need to heed its message.”¹

Another reviewer had this to say: “It hits hard. There were sentences in this book that stopped me cold. Conclusions from its provocative critique will vary, but the book is prophetic and needed.”²

Intoxicated with Ourselves

And finally this which I think encapsulates the author’s whole point: “Many of us are drunk right now, intoxicated with a desire to be respected, honored, and widely known. And yet this intoxication derails our ability to give God the respect, honor, and renown that He so rightly deserves.”³

The Lie That Sells Best

And from the author: “We live in a culture that bases significance on how celebrated, or common, we are. And now the church seems to have followed suit. This is serious stuff. It’s serious because of its source. It’s just the sort of lie that Satan – the father of lies – manufactures and sells best. It’s not too shocking. It can be justified and religious-sized and explained away easily enough. But it kills with the same force as the ‘big sins’ from which we distance ourselves.”⁴

The Message translates John 17:15-16 in this telling way: “I’m not asking that you take (my people) out of the world, but that you guard them from the Evil One. They are no more defined by the world than I am defined by the world.” But the author’s point is that we *have* allowed ourselves to be defined by the world, on its terms, and following its example, to our peril.

Our anonymous author gives a most humorous account of “giving up” Facebook and describes it as being similar to the Wizard of Oz’s Dorothy who discovered that it was all smoke and mirrors, but dangerously so, as it can feed our ego and give us a blinding idea of self-importance. He even refers to his time spent there as “web sin,” allowing triple digit “friends” to become a status symbol. “Once again I saw that the depth of my pride knows no bounds. And in the months since that experience, I’ve been chewing on this question: *What else do we allow to define us?*”⁵ There are many sobering Scriptures which validate his point: “Everyone with a proud heart is detestable to the LORD; be assured, he will not go unpunished” (Prov. 16:5). And “Pride comes before destruction,

¹ Carl R. Trueman, Westminster Theological Seminary

² Owen Strachan, Assistant Prof. of Christian Theology and Church History

³ Bruce Riley Ashford, Dean of the College Research Fellow, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

⁴ *Embracing Obscurity*, Author: Anonymous, p. 2

⁵ Ibid., p. 19

and an arrogant spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18). “His ego is inflated; he is without integrity. But the righteous one will live by his faith...An arrogant man is never at rest” (Hab. 2:4-5). This is not in the book but came to mind as pertinent to the subject; the historian, Zweig said of Calvin that he was “intoxicated” with himself. Dangerous.

Significance

Each chapter is followed by discussion questions and would therefore be great for a class or a book club. An example: “We spend most of our lives trying to prove how valuable we are – to our friends, our coworkers and families, and even to our God. How might God’s offer of ‘significance without strings’ revolutionize your life?” The author maintains that “The world is in a frenzy trying to find lasting, eternal significance. But their efforts are in vain. Only God has ultimate, eternal significance, and the only way we mortals get it is by joining our lives to His. Instead of spending our days struggling for significance, living under the shame of failure, and watching what temporary significance we do achieve fade away, Christ offers His significant life to us all. We cannot earn it; we simply receive it by faith. He is our significance.”⁶

The New Living Translation offers a stark rendering of 1 John 2:16: “The world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world.” To verify this as the current state of affairs, our author states that: “Thirty-five percent of ‘born-again Christians’ think having a sexual relationship with someone of the opposite sex to whom they are not married is ‘morally acceptable.’”⁷

“A lot of us are caught up in this *religious version of the American dream*, even in the church” (emphasis mine). “The committed Christian’s unhealthy ambitions may take different forms than you’d expect from general society, but unless our pride is intentionally and ruthlessly cut out of our lives, it can be just as dangerous — maybe even more so. That’s why God gave us an entirely different business model to emulate. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus boldly charged us to replace the world’s view of success with His when He said...”⁸ Of course what he said or charged us with is recorded in Matthew 5:3-12, but these are qualities not highly respected by our world’s system, nor are they widely sought after.

Another Powerful Lie

The writer notes that suffering changes us; how right he is. He then offers this insight: “There’s a startling trend in Christian thinking about suffering. Though subtle, this misconception is no less dangerous than many other of Satan’s lies. I call it the ‘Joseph Principle,’ and it goes like this: If I am suffering in obscurity today, God must be preparing me for something greater, better, or more prominent later in life.”⁹ He finds this thinking faulty and notes that this is not an easy pill to swallow. He maintains that we *like* to view setbacks as having inevitable success at the end. He quotes a blogger who feels that his time in the waiting room of life is just a season of growth and development, getting him ready for his moment on stage. The idea of always remaining in obscurity or indeed suffering for *God’s glory* is not comforting. He then stresses that the “all things working together for good” Scriptural principle, while ultimately true, is misunderstood because we have catered to the world’s definition of *good* and thereby swallowed a “gross misinterpretation” — i.e. the end of the story may look quite different than what we had hoped.

Author Anonymous offers a final caveat in the nature of full disclosure: “If we obey God it is going to cost other people more than it costs us, and that is where the sting comes in. If we are in

⁶ Ibid., p. 59

⁷ Ibid., p. 77

⁸ Ibid., p. 83

⁹ Ibid., p. 116

love with our Lord, obedience does not cost us anything, it is a delight, but it costs those who do not love Him a good deal. If we obey God it will mean that other people's plans are upset, and they will gibe us with it – 'You call this Christianity?' We can prevent the suffering; but if we are going to obey God, we must not prevent it, we must let the cost be paid."¹⁰ This certainly adds a further "ouch" to his message. He asks if we can deal with driving uglier cars, wearing older clothes, losing a well-loved circle of acquaintances, to use Chambers' phrase, "consequences of obedience."

In Matthew 18:1-5 Jesus gives an *active command*. Notes our author: we are to humble *ourselves*; this is not something done *to us*. Excellent point, and I would think that this would also include the passage which states that every knee shall bow; opportunity is given to us to act as we should; failing to strive for humility will mean failure. I very much like the author's intent, *not of making peace – but of making war with his own sin*. We must be ruthless in this.

Critique

Now my reservations and reasons for giving this book a mixed review. I would not wish to take anything away from the author's purpose in his book. I agree with so many readers that it is absolutely necessary for self-examination, perhaps even a Godsend, certainly a wake-up call.

I feel that one of the greatest gifts we could ever receive is to see ourselves as God sees us and this goes hand in hand with what the author is attempting to point out.

Having said that, I think that we must ask not only "Where do we go from here?" but "Where did we go wrong?" Not only have we inherited (and added to) a culture of deceit, but even more importantly, we have followed a broken model. As has been eloquently said: "It is not that Christianity has failed; it is that it is never been tried." I think that the whole system that is the backbone of our religious orthodoxy is seriously flawed. It is a system which *enforces obscurity* upon all those who do not give their assent to manmade religious doctrines. One has only to read the history of orthodoxy to see that it is filled with thuggery of the worst kind. Much can be learned just from the *titles* of books attempting to give the history, e.g. *When Jesus Became God*,¹¹ *The Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years*.¹² See also *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*.¹³

The history of both our Protestant and Catholic churches is riddled with violence, brutality, and tyrannical force. It is a system which has played fast and loose with truth. It is a system which uses thought police to guard against inquiry; it bullies and persecutes and tyrannizes and silences. The culture of deceit which the author recognizes so clearly in his dealings with the world is, I am sorry to say, also true of the church and its powerful determinations and hallowed traditions. It has not allowed certain very important fundamentals of truth to be known, but suppresses them by clever tactics, illusions, masking, and avoidance. I wish there was a kinder way to say this. This insight says it well (the author is speaking of the loss of Jewish core beliefs): "That was a disaster to the Church itself. It meant that the Church as a whole failed to understand the Old Testament, and that the Greek mind and the Roman mind in turn, instead of the Hebrew mind, came to dominate its outlook; from that disaster the Church has never recovered, either in doctrine or in practice."¹⁴

I have another criticism of *Embracing Obscurity*. The word "obscure" according to Webster's means "dim or dark, hidden, or shrouded, unknown." Should that really be our aim and ambition? I thought we were meant to shine like stars, and *not* hide (our light) under a bushel. We surely do not want to aim for the nirvana of Buddhism where one just becomes a part of a great mass. In this age

¹⁰ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, p. 11

¹¹ Richard Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God*.

¹² Philip Jenkins, *The Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years*.

¹³ Mark Knoll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*.

¹⁴ Canon H.L. Goudge, *The Calling of the Jews, Judaism and Christianity*

of information through media, how could a seeker find truth if truth were not advertised, and I don't think truth can be offered in an obscure way. It has to have a presence and be accessible. Could an organization offering truth be obscure? True believers will not be obscure in any way once Jesus returns. Indeed, they will be looked up to as great models and examples for those who repent at that time. If that "shining, wining, and dining" in the future Kingdom is of the Lord's doing — so be it. I don't think I would be saying "No, thank you!" Is it not ironic that the Church uses *enforced obscurity as punishment*? Since it is no longer kosher to persecute by way of torture, drowning, and the like, it simply ignores the dissident and pretends he has no case, hushing up his protests, and squelching uncomfortable truths. So to actually *strive* for obscurity seems strange. Would that the same examination/introspection be requested of the church — it would be a healthy thing. As Mark Twain said: "The Church is always trying to get other people to reform; it might not be a bad idea to reform itself a little, by way of example."

Reason and Intellect

"The Supreme Being...became a roughly eight-pound mass of created cells...He became human. The weakest form of human at that" says the author of this book. It sounds like he not only did the creating but was the one created as well! He would have us believe that we have Deity in diapers. I recall Galileo's "*I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use.*"

This book's author does understand that it is not wrong to be aware of the rewards which Jesus will bring with him. In fact, he says: "In this journey of learning to embrace obscurity, I've become somewhat of a reward-monger. And why not? If God didn't mean for us to calculate future reward into our present decisions, He wouldn't have told us what we have to look forward to."¹⁵ I would differ with the author in what precisely that is that we have to look forward to and point out to readers that Jesus *always* spoke of the Kingdom as our inheritance and our hope. (Someone has said that Jesus couldn't open his mouth without speaking about the Kingdom. The Church has changed that and offers something different.) Jesus did not correct the disciples when they asked what they might receive for their efforts. The parable of the talents and many other of Jesus' sayings encourage the striving for excellence in doing good and thereby gaining a greater reward.

I think that whoever this writer is, he might have done his readers a greater service by urging them to *embrace truth*. This seems to be a virtue we have all but done away with. It might even be foreign sounding. It is certainly not high on the lists of those shopping for a church, nor for many ensconced there. In *No Place for Truth* we find this: "It may be the case that Christian faith, which has made many easy alliances with modern culture in the past few decades, is also living in a fool's paradise, comforting itself about all of the things that God is doing in society...while it is losing its character, if not its soul."¹⁶ *Embracing Obscurity* should cause one to stop and reflect on what we should regard as the chief virtue. No doubt, most would answer "love," but have we not been warned that whoever does not *love the truth* is not worthy of the Kingdom? And when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, the first verb in his answer was to *listen* — i.e. to Deuteronomy 6:4-5. I fear that we have *not listened well* and we have created our own system of beliefs as well as dishing out some pretty rough "justice" to those who don't go along with that man-made "system."

¹⁵ *Embracing Obscurity*, p. 172

¹⁶ David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth*, p. 68