



# MINORITY REPORT

UNPOPULAR THOUGHTS ON EVERYTHING  
FROM ANCIENT CHRISTIANITY  
TO ZEN-CALVINISM







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**MENTOR**





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For John and Peter





## INTRODUCTION

The following collection of writings is presented as a companion volume to my earlier book for Christian Focus Publications, *The Wages of Spin*. It is a companion in the sense that, just as a member of Christian Focus's management team described the earlier volume as a book without a theme and with no obvious market, so this fulfills the same nightmare criteria for the marketing department.

Flippancy aside, this collection does represent a continuation of the project I started in the first book: it is a collection of essays and shorter writings, drawn mainly from my monthly *Wages of Spin* column for the e-zine, *Reformation 21* ([www.reformation21.org](http://www.reformation21.org)), whose overall agenda is to provoke the readers to think more critically about their faith and the world around them. My purpose is, first and foremost, to make people sit up and think; whether they agree or disagree with me is of only secondary importance. I also hope that they demonstrate that the old orthodoxies of the Christian faith do not need to be stuffy, pompous, out-of-date, or allied to a dusty, unattractive, and cadaverous piety.

The first part of the book consists of four longer essays which perhaps require some comment by way of introduction in order to set them in context. Chapter One is a revised version of my inaugural lecture as Professor of Historical Theology and Church History at Westminster Theological Seminary, Pennsylvania in 2005. By the very nature of the genre it is a broad manifesto for the practice of the discipline





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of church history within a seminary setting. In setting out my philosophical and methodological agenda for church history at Westminster, I focus on the faulty historiography underlying some post-conservative approaches to the Reformed tradition, not because I do not think that the kind of questions being asked by some post-conservatives are not important but because I believe that accurate historical understanding of the Christian tradition is essential for a truly critical approach to the present, and a fruitful articulation of the faith once for all delivered in the contemporary context.

Chapter Two first appeared in *Themelios*, the evangelical theological journal which I edited from 1998 to 2007. In it I draw together the thoughts of two men who both died in 2003: Carl Henry, the American evangelical leader and thinker, and Edward Said, the Palestinian intellectual, literary critic, and political activist. I had profited from them both: as a young Christian, Henry's writings had offered me a model of thoughtful evangelical writing; then, I had developed a love for Said's work both because we shared a mutual passion for the novels of Joseph Conrad, an interest in the political readings of literary texts, and an appreciation for the better aspects of postmodern critical theory as well as a deep suspicion of the disempowering impact that postmodernism, at its most arcane and trivial, could have.

Chapter Three is published here for the first time. In late 2006, I found myself embroiled in an internet debate about the undeniable Holocaust Denial of the perplexingly popular (in some circles) Rousas J. Rushdoony, with some of his more distasteful followers. At about the same time, I was invited by the Veritas Forum at Bryn Mawr College to deliver a lecture in the spring of 2007. Hannah Arendt's study of Adolf Eichmann, a classic of twentieth-century journalism and cultural analysis, seemed the obvious choice. The lecture went as well as anything I have ever done; but the discussion afterwards was a disaster. I was badly beaten up (intellectually speaking) by a self-described "secular postmodern Jewish philosopher." He proved a very different and far more formidable opponent than the various middle-





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aged evangelical faux-postmodernists of the kind whose theology so often seems little more than an attempt to cope with their midlife crises and generational disconnect with youth culture. The Bryn Mawr experience was sobering and humbling, far less pleasant but far more instructive than mere preaching to the gallery; and, as Nietzsche says, “That which does not destroy me makes me stronger.” It was also a salutary lesson that apologetics is about more than demonstrating the inconsistent presuppositions of an opponent’s position; my opponent that night did not care about such. Refuting a book or an abstract idea is one thing; refuting a flesh-and-blood opponent is quite another.

Chapter Four was a tough piece to write. It is a critical review of *Is the Reformation Over?*, a book by Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom. I have been the recipient of numerous acts of personal kindness and encouragement from Mark Noll over the years, and to criticize with respect and charity someone who is such a well-respected and distinguished figure, as well as one for whom I have great affection and respect, is no easy task. A letter from Mark in response to the review indicated that he neither took offense at what I said, nor was persuaded by it! Yet I continue to believe that the Reformation is **not** over and that we lose central elements of the gospel and of the Christian life if we think that it is.

The pieces in Part Two are all shorter and speak for themselves. They deal with themes as disparate as the purpose of history, blogging, pop culture, psalm singing, *American Idol*, ancient church “holy man” narratives, and Zen-Calvinism. I hope that they offer models of what a critical approach to Christianity and culture might look like and help the reader to think more deeply about these and other issues. As with *The Wages of Spin*, I end with an attempt at pastiche, this time of a Sherlock Holmes story, which first appeared in *Themelios*.

As always, it is necessary to thank all those who have helped to make the book possible. At Christian Focus, Willie Mackenzie helped to see the project through from beginning to end, with limitless patience, good humor, and near total disbelief when I finally submitted the manuscript.





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Others to thank include Derek Thomas and Jeremy Smith at Reformation 21. I am, at the time of writing, the most complained-about contributor to the e-zine and am most grateful to both of these gentlemen for encouragement and for filtering the nastier correspondence. Christians do write the most spectacularly humorless hate-mail; what motivates people to waste their time in this way is a mystery to me, but such letters and e-mails do perversely encourage me to continue rattling cages; and they also provide some of the best satirical material for the likes of Rodney Trotter, Tony "the Gent" Pinnochio, the Rev. Sanc T. Monious, and my other friends on the Ref21 blog. Thankfully, there are also those who take a more positive view of my writing and I am extremely grateful to those more generous-spirited readers who have taken the time to write to encourage me over the years, and who have also stimulated my thinking on numerous matters through their thoughtful comments and questions. Such kind notes are worth more than gold.

Thanks are also due to various other people for less direct help. To Ligon Duncan and C. J. Mahaney for constant prayerful support, kind words, and sound wisdom. To Dave Strain and Paul Levy for their fellowship in the Lord and their entertaining hospitality whenever I pass through London. To Sandy Finlayson for keeping me sane (relatively speaking) at Westminster Theological Seminary. To Bill Edgar for constantly encouraging me to write. To Hunter Powell, my star Westminster student, now a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge, for his enthusiastic encouragement over the last few years. To Jen Troutman and Martha Dunson for running Academic Affairs so efficiently that the Dean still had time to write. To Pete Lillback and Dick Dabney for solid support and friendship during interesting times at the Seminary.

And, of course, my greatest debt, humanly speaking, is to my wife, Catriona, for her love and constant friendship. Finally, I must not forget my two sons, John and Peter. At last dad's managed to dedicate a book to you.





# PART ONE







## 1.1

# RAGE, RAGE AGAINST THE DYING OF THE LIGHT<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

Having been unable to find a suitable quotation from Bob Dylan as a title for my inaugural lecture, I have chosen instead a line from a famous poem by his partial namesake, Dylan Thomas. The whole stanza reads as follows:

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

My reason for choosing as my opening shot Dylan Thomas's rant against the passive resignation of old age in the face of death is simply this: today, both old age and church history are generally regarded as irrelevant. In a culture obsessed with youth and driven by consumption, old age is something of an embarrassment. It is an unproductive, unmarketable concept; and, in a church which so often apes the larger culture, church

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revision of Carl R. Trueman's inaugural lecture as Professor of Historical Theology and Church History at Westminster Theological Seminary on November 16, 2005.





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history is usually regarded as having little or nothing of use to say. My purpose, therefore, is to cast a critical eye on this assumption, and to indicate that Westminster Seminary church historians are not simply going to acquiesce in the consensus concerning their irrelevance, but that they fully intend to rage, rage against the dying of the historical light.<sup>2</sup>

A variety of factors contribute to the anti-historical thrust of the modern age, as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Suffice it to say today, however, that I believe that in a society dominated by ideologies of novelty and innovation—ideologies driven by the agendas of science, of capital, and of consumerism—the past will always be cast in terms which put it at a disadvantage in relation to present and future. In fact, it is vitally necessary in such societies for the past to be inferior; this is one important means of validating the present and justifying the future. Dare one say it, in America, a nation built on notions of an expanding frontier and of manifest destiny, a nation whose self-actualization is always seen as being just over the next horizon, such present-future orientation is particularly strong. But it is not just in America that such a viewpoint exerts its grip; it is a Western phenomenon as a whole, with even our language indicating this underlying value scheme: *innovative, original, ground-breaking* have, on the whole, positive connotations; *traditional, conservative, old-fashioned* have, on the contrary, negative ones. Within such a cultural framework, can history really serve any function other than that of a traveling freak show which parades the grotesques, the monsters, and the mediocrities of the past in order to allow the modern world to feel good about itself and its future?

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that Westminster embodies this counter-cultural trend in the emphasis it gives to church history in the curriculum, with full courses being taught on Ancient Church, Medieval Church, The Reformation, and Modern Age. Most seminaries now compress church history into two courses, covering early church to medieval, and then Reformation to modern.

<sup>3</sup> See “Reckoning with the Past in an Anti-Historical Age” in Carl R. Trueman, *The Wages of Spin* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2004), 15–38.

