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“*The Pastor and the Modern World: Reformed Ministry and Secular Culture* is a rare gem. Three faithful pastor-scholars, each one writing from his own perspective, offer us instruction and inspiration for fruitful ministry. Here we gain insight into our cultural moment, wisdom for our weekly preaching, and humility from our distant history. I feel privileged to recommend this captivating book.”

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Nashville




“In these lectures, seasoned pastor-theologians equip us to proclaim the epoch-transcending gospel of Christ into a cultural milieu that imagines that it has outgrown such good news. Dr. Edgar insightfully profiles that secular milieu by engaging trends in philosophy, social sciences, and the arts. Dr. Hughes invites us into his pastoral study, showing us how to hear (humbly) and herald (boldly!) God’s good message, which stirs affections and transforms hearts. Dr. Poirier challenges us to become men so overwhelmed by our calling to be spiritual physicians that we cast ourselves, in desperation, on the Savior who came to heal sin-sick folk like us. Together, these fathers in the faith—and the forefathers whose wisdom they refresh to our ears—summon us to strenuous faithfulness as stewards of God’s mysteries, men shaped by Christ and his cross, bringing God’s message of astonishing grace, into a milieu in need of the hope that only the Sovereign Creator-Redeemer can give.”




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“These three essays by esteemed pastor-theologians give us much food for thought concerning a mind that discerns the secularizing trends of our culture, a heart inflamed with love for God and people, and a life of caring sacrificially for Christ’s flock. A much-needed book abounding with valuable insights for pastors and ministry for a very needy day and a very secular world!”


—JOEL R. BEEKE, President, Puritan Reformed  
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“In 1969, Martyn Lloyd-Jones gave a series of lectures on preaching at WTS in which he answered the question, ‘What is preaching?’ with the now iconic answer: ‘Logic on fire.’ He taught, ‘Light without heat never affected anybody. Heat without light is no good. You must have light and heat.’ The Boyer Lectures from William Edgar, Kent Hughes, and Alfred Poirier provide the preacher plenty of light and heat! Edgar’s ‘Are We Really Secular?’ masterfully explores—in the Bible and throughout culture—that question and offers a Scriptural solution to secularization. Hughes’s ‘The Heart of the Pastor and the Pulpit’ offers insights and inspired reflections on preaching Christ from our hearts to the hearts of our people. Poirier’s ‘Gregory of Nazianzus and the Pastor as the Physician of Souls’ looks back in history to Gregory’s struggles and offers lessons learned that will lift our eyes to Christ and encourage us to put our hands to the plow of pastoral ministry. So, sit down. Read through. See the light. Feel the heat. And enjoy!”





—DOUGLAS SEAN O’DONNELL, Senior Vice President  
of Bible Editorial, Crossway Books



“As Christians, we would never want our society to be more secular, but as Reformed Christians, we need not circle the wagons. Reformed theology has the backbone and biblical moorings for real hope, and resilient joy, in times we would not otherwise choose — even in days such as ours. These Boyer chair lectures are teeming with time-tested gold for the pastor calling to be wise as serpents with respect to our age, and innocent as doves in caring for Christ’s bride. After all, it will be the ‘physicians of souls’ and catalysts of Christian ‘affections’ who, while overlooked for now, will do more to undermine Satan’s schemes of inculturated unbelief. And one day soon they will be vindicated, and cherished.”

—DAVID MATHIS, Senior Teacher and Executive Editor,  
desiringGod.org; Pastor, Cities Church, Saint Paul,  
Minnesota



# The Pastor *and* the Modern World

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REFORMED MINISTRY AND SECULAR CULTURE

**WSP** WESTMINSTER  
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*The Pastor and the Modern World:  
Reformed Ministry and Secular Culture*

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The Pastor as a Physician of Souls

*Alfred J. Poirier*



## Foreword

It is my joy to introduce these lectures named for the late John Boyer—lectures which are the fruit of a very generous gift by the late Dr. John Templeton, Jr. in honor of his longtime friend and fellow elder at Proclamation Presbyterian Church, Bryn Mawr, PA.

Dr. Templeton's intent was to establish a permanent heritage to honor John Boyer's evangelistic concern and Christian leadership. And so, a thoroughly unique academic chair was established at Westminster, one with an explicit emphasis on personal, relevant, transformative evangelism, and its impact upon culture. Within this framework, occupants are invited to address Ethics and Apologetics, Methods of Applied Evangelism and Missions, Scholarship, and Research.

The occupant of the chair (a Westminster faculty member, visiting scholar, missionary, or evangelist) is called to aid sound, reliable, moral, and personal resilience in Christians by teaching gospel-centered biblical ethics for the Christian life. The book you hold in your hands is the culmination of those labors, a thoughtful, compelling lecture series with the purpose of evangelistic encouragement and collaboration.

I am truly grateful for these scholars' labors and for the assistance of Westminster Seminary Press in making these lovely lectures available for the first time to the public. May the passion for personal evangelism so well reflected by Mr. John Boyer's service as an elder in the church of our Lord Jesus

Christ be kindled in the hearts of many around the globe through this publication. And as Dr. Templeton intended, may our Lord be pleased to bless their message with the strengthening of his church and the advance of the gospel. Indeed, Dr. Templeton hoped that this emphasis at the seminary would motivate many to present the good news of Christ by asking, “Can I tell you what is on my heart for you?”

It was my privilege to know and to serve Christ’s church with Dr. Templeton and Mr. Boyer. I am thankful that the gospel they believed and loved has now brought them to what Dr. Templeton described as “an eternity of joy” in Christ.

I would conclude with a question to the reader: “Can I tell you what is on my heart for you?” It is this:

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10:9–13).

Sincerely in Christ’s service,

Peter A. Lillback  
President, Westminster Theological Seminary  
Winter 2020



*Peter A. Lillback (left) with the first three occupants of the Boyer Chair: William Edgar (center left), R. Kent Hughes (center right), and Alfred Poirier (right)*

## A Note on the Text and Acknowledgments

The lectures included in this book were delivered in the order they are presented here, in 2016, 2019, and 2021, in Rust Auditorium of Van Til Hall on the Westminster campus in Glenside, Pennsylvania. Each has been tailored from its original oral presentation to better suit book form, but their substance has not been significantly altered.

The original intent was to publish each lecture on its own as a pamphlet. Providentially, however, the lectures only became ready for publication after the delivery of the third lecture in 2021. With all three in hand, their thematic sequence presented a cohesive collection that could serve the church, and especially the ministers of the church, with illuminating insight into the relationship of the pastor to the world that could be digested in a weekend's reading. In light of this, it seemed more than natural that William Edgar's brilliant modern cultural analysis should be paired with R. Kent Hughes's loupe-like study of the timeless essentials of pastoral ministry, and that the conclusion should be a vision for ministry that Alfred Poirier mined from the ancient life of Gregory of Nazianzus. Although each author wrote in his own distinct style—Edgar in sophisticated prose, Hughes methodical and precise, and Poirier in warm, conversational tones—it seemed best that the three be made available as one, so as not to deprive the benefit of one from the other.

Thanks are due to Randall Pederson, Pierce T. Hibbs, and Rachel Stout for their excellent editorial work in helping to gently shape these lectures into book form. Josiah Pettit, Director of Publishing at WSP, and Kyle Whitgrove, Operations Manager, both contributed to the shape of the book. Victor Kim took the photograph on page xiii.

This project would not have been possible without the leadership of WSP's board of managers: Peter A. Lillback, David B. Garner, Chun Lai, Lee Augsburger, and Jim Sweet. K. Scott Oliphint, John Currie, and Todd M. Rester all very generously contributed thoughtful introductions to the lectures. Finally, we wish to thank the authors of this book—William Edgar, R. Kent Hughes, and Alfred Poirier—for their patience, and especially for their living practice of wholehearted commitment to the Savior they preach.

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# The Pastor *and* the Modern World

# Are We Really Secular?

William Edgar

## Introduction

It is an honor to have the opportunity to introduce my mentor and colleague, Dr. William Edgar, to the readers of this lecture. One often hears that “this man needs no introduction.” Dr. Edgar is the only person I’ve ever met of whom, no matter the venue, it can accurately be said that “this man needs no introduction.” His influence and reputation extend, literally, around the world. There is hardly a place on the globe where Dr. Edgar and his wife, Barbara, are strangers.

Readers of this penetrating lecture have the opportunity to witness the work of a theologian who possesses the unique ability to understand a wide range of disciplines, and to interact with them in a way that glorifies our Savior. In this sense, Dr. Edgar is one of very few Renaissance men left.

For example, I know of no biblically and theologically grounded apologists who deal with topics such as beauty in the way that Dr. Edgar does. In his article, “Beauty Avenged, Apologetics Enriched,” he says:

There is a reality to beauty because there is a transcendental ground which gives everything, including the aesthetic, meaning. The Creator, redeemer God, the covenant Lord who makes and remakes a world of meaning, is the all-sufficient warrant for truth. The artistic endeavor is one of many proofs for the



wisdom of God. What could be more appropriate to persuade a lost generation about the love and justice of God than the wise appropriation of artistic examples and gifts that articulate the true story of the gospel in a way that speaks to the soul? What could be more apt to denounce idols, which always distort beauty by either degrading it or deifying it, than an apologetic enriched by a biblically-based aesthetic? What more important approach to the transformation of culture could there be than articulating a Christian worldview in which aesthetics occupies its rightful place?<sup>1</sup>

It would be difficult to find another Reformed apologist who is able to synthesize these ideas into such a singular contribution to the discipline of apologetics and to the church. Because of his gifts and background, Dr. Edgar is uniquely qualified to help us navigate the differences and affinities between two of his revered mentors, Francis Schaeffer and Cornelius Van Til. His assessment of both men, in his 1995 article on “Two Christian Warriors: Cornelius Van Til and Francis A. Schaeffer Compared,”<sup>2</sup> is the definitive statement, even beyond what Van Til himself wrote, on how best to understand the respective strengths and weaknesses of these two devoted apologists.

More than twenty years ago, in his prescient and penetrating article on postmodernism, Dr. Edgar was able to see and dig up the roots of the problem of the postmodern, while

1. William Edgar, “Beauty Avenged, Apologetics Enriched.” *Westminster Theological Journal* 63, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 107–22.

2. William Edgar, “Two Christian Warriors: Cornelius Van Til and Francis A. Schaeffer Compared,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 57–80.

others were either adopting it or simply skimming the surface. In “No News is Good News: Modernity, The Postmodern, and Apologetics,” he says:

Even the most radical and skeptical postmodernists find themselves un-consciously appealing to the very standards they reject. Christopher Norris has shown how a scholar like Stanley Fish, in his vehement attacks on theory as a mere justification of personal preference, perpetuates the illusion that he is somehow outside of the confines of that personal preference. The reason-freedom dialectic cannot be left off unless a deeper challenge is made. Again, this is where a transcendental approach is able to clear away the underbrush. Because God is fully rational, and because human knowledge is revelatory of that God, dependent rather than independent, our knowledge has meaning, and we can properly understand the world without falling into a dialectical labyrinth.<sup>3</sup>

Here Dr. Edgar sifts through the clouds of confusion to affirm that our grasp of God’s world is possible only because of who God is. This truth dissolves the challenges of postmodern relativism, and of any other view that tries to suppress the reality of God’s existence and presence.

But Dr. Edgar does not confine himself to the classroom. He has the enviable ability to move from the classroom to the living room, from the academy to the couch. In his

3. William Edgar, “No News is Good News: Modernity, The Postmodern, and Apologetics,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 359–82.

profound book, *The Face of Truth*,<sup>4</sup> he shows, at a popular level, how skepticism and so many other attempts to avoid God are rooted in decisions to avoid reality as it is given by God in his world. Not only this, but in his book for young adults, *You Asked*,<sup>5</sup> he even bothers to answer a question readers will be hard pressed to find in any other book on apologetics: “Are there Vampires?”

Dr. Edgar was kind enough, at its release, to give me a signed copy of what is now my favorite of his books, *Schaeffer on the Christian Life*.<sup>6</sup> I read most of the book in one sitting. In it, Dr. Edgar reminded me of what Schaeffer called “The Final Apologetic.” For Schaeffer, the final apologetic, the climactic defense of Christianity, was to be found in the love that true Christians show toward one another. Dr. Edgar has, as an example to so many of us, lived that final apologetic in a way that few have done.

After this lecture is read, it would benefit the reader to take advantage of the other writings of Dr. Edgar. Whether your interest is in theology, apologetics, art, music, jazz, or medical ethics, you will find insights that I have found nowhere else. So, *tolle lege*—take and read—enjoy, and then pick up another work from Dr. Edgar and continue to read.

K. Scott Oliphint  
Fall 2019

4. William Edgar, *The Face of Truth: Lifting the Veil* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001).

5. William Edgar, *You Asked: Your Questions. God's Answers* (Geanies House: Christian Focus Publications, 2013).

6. William Edgar, *Schaeffer on the Christian Life: Countercultural Spirituality* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).



## I

# Are We Really Secular?

In 2014, Alain de Botton, along with John Armstrong, sponsored an important art exhibit at Amsterdam's museum of modern art, the Rijksmuseum. The title of the exhibit was *Art Is Therapy*. Their book, *Art as Therapy*, makes the argument for the show, and for their overall philosophy that the museum has replaced the church in today's culture.<sup>1</sup>

In times past, one would have entered a church to confess sins and find absolution. But today the church is gone, and standing in its place is the art museum, where viewers can happily attend, and find the same kind of spiritual help they used to find in the church. Viewers may find in the exhibit themes such as “love & relationships, work, status, memory and mortality.” Consequently, prints on the themes of “Fortune, Politics, Sex and Money” were featured, using the extensive Rijksmuseum's collection from the period 1485–1800.

It would be hard to find a more apt metaphor to describe the titanic shift in the history of ideas labeled “secularization.” What stands out is the way the big questions, such as love, God, and forgiveness, have not been so much marginalized,

1. See Alain de Botton and John Armstrong, *Art as Therapy* (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2013). I am grateful to Robb Ludwick at Dutch l'Abri for introducing me to these theories.



let alone disparaged, as they have been recast and redefined. Traditional secularization theory once predicted the demise of religion. We now realize that is an impossibility.

Terry Eagleton described the phenomenon this way: “Not believing in God is a far more arduous affair than is generally imagined. Whenever the Almighty seems safely dispatched, he is always liable to stage a reappearance in one disguise or another.”<sup>2</sup>

The quote lacks reverence. But Eagleton has captured something of crucial importance for evangelism and culture. In these few pages, I would like to explore the way historians and sociologists have predicted God’s disappearance, and how they have got it wrong; at least we thought they did.

## The Journey toward the Self

What exactly is secularization? It is not an abstract concept. In fact, it can be measured, and even felt. Think along the lines of De Botton’s and Armstrong’s assumption: church attendance in the West is in a free fall, God is increasingly absent in cultural documents and instruments, and our laws are less and less informed by theological principles.

Michel Vovelle’s study of the shift in the language of last wills and testaments over the centuries is revealing. Whereas in premodern times people were likely to require a priest by their deathbeds and to leave money to the church, Vovelle discovered that, as modernity advanced, this language was increasingly modified so as to leave out the rite of Extreme

2. Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 119.

Unction, and to bequeath assets to the family and perhaps secular charities rather than the church.<sup>3</sup>

Secularization can also be felt in daily life. A strong push for self-reliance has replaced trusting in God. Consider a television commercial for the drug dulaglutide (Trulicity). It's a drug meant to combat diabetes. This ad, along with others related to health products, tends to appear on programs watched by older persons. What is striking about this particular ad is its perfect accord with modern individualism. An attractive, well-preserved older person is pictured along with the caption: "By activating what's within me."

Then come the requisite two minutes of disclaimers. The warnings go something like this: "Don't use it if you have multiple endocrine neoplasia syndrome type 2 (MEN 2), or a personal or family history of medullary thyroid carcinoma (a type of thyroid cancer). Do not use Trulicity if you are in a state of diabetic ketoacidosis." Perhaps the most (unintentionally) amusing is, "Don't use dulaglutide if you're allergic to dulaglutide." Such warnings are extensive, often recycling language such as "Tell your doctor if..." Presumably this is to avoid lawsuits. The Trulicity ad goes on to tell you the answers for your problem are *within you*. Taking the drug is to "Click to Activate Your Within."

But aren't medicines meant to *combat* something wrong inside you? Of course, but that isn't the message of this commercial. It may be true that good medicines work with your body, but the suggestion here is that all the good stuff is already there inside you. You already have what it takes. You're just a click away from releasing the goodness. In this pharmaceutical

3. Michel Vovelle, *Piété baroque et déchristianisation en Provence au xviii<sup>e</sup> siècle. Les attitudes devant la mort d'après les clauses de testaments* (Paris: Seuil, 1973).

commercial we see a vivid illustration of a major feature of secularization: the shift from the objective to the subjective.

Illustrations of this shift abound. A similar emphasis on the subjective is commonly heard in public speeches. Recently, I've attended a good many graduation ceremonies. Most of us do not pay much attention to graduation speeches. The graduates certainly don't! But lately I've tried to listen. Almost uniformly, even in the Christian school our grandchildren attend, the messages have applied a slightly more poetic rendering of "Click to Activate Your Within."

Here's a sampling from an online collection:<sup>4</sup>

"You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition. You can't get there by bus, only by hard work and risk and by not quite knowing what you're doing, but what you'll discover will be wonderful. What you'll discover will be yourself." (Alan Alda)

Notice the romantic contrast between the city and the wilderness, almost as if we are going on a holiday to get away from it all, only to arrive at...the self.

"Have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary." (Steve Jobs)

"You can Google for an answer. You can Google for a mate. You can Google for a career. But you can't Google to find what's in your heart—the passion that lifts you skyward." (Joe Plumeri)

This sort of oratory has become so familiar we hardly recognize the remarkable, though subtle, history behind it. The turn of our focus away from the transcendent and toward the immanent did not occur recently or suddenly. How did we develop such a mentality? A number of scholars propose

4. There are any number of sites carrying such quotes. These ones are from <http://www.graduationwisdom.com/quotes/01-life-rules-from-graduation-speeches-find-your-passion.html>.

understanding secularization as a shift from a world organized by a more unified, theocentric principle to one of *social differentiation*.<sup>5</sup> By this they mean that whereas the church once was the integration point for all of life, it is now only one part of many this-worldly domains. The church has been uncoupled from the state, and the family. Religion has been made into a private affair. It may still be a guiding myth for some, but it is no longer obligatory, exclusive truth.<sup>6</sup>

### The Mechanics of Secularization

The word *secularization* is a loaded term that has served many purposes, but if we follow the categories carefully set forth by scholar C. John Sommerville, we may identify at least six concrete usages: (1) It can mean social differentiation, as we have seen. (2) It can refer to the drift of institutions, such as universities, from their original religious purpose to something far broader.<sup>7</sup> (3) It can mean the transfer of certain activities from the church to the government, as seen in the shift in financial support for humanitarian relief organizations from the church to the state. (4) It can refer to this-worldly lifestyles, or

5. See, for example, José Casanova, “Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective,” *The Hedgehog Review* (Spring/Summer 2006): 7–22.

6. See Fojio Ikado, “The Search for a Definition of Secularization: Toward a General Theory,” <https://www2.kokugakuin.ac.jp/ijcc/wp/cimac/ikado.html>.

7. C. J. Sommerville, “Secular Society/Religious Population: Our Tacit Rules for Using the Term ‘Secularization,’” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 2 (June 1998): 249–53. Somerville cites Harvard University as an example. Originally founded to train ministers, its motto was *Veritas Christo et Ecclesia* (Truth for Christ and the Church). Now a highly pluralistic center of learning, Harvard’s motto has been reduced to simply *Veritas*.



a mentality that understands issues in light of the present order, rather than the life to come. (5) It generally describes the decline of religious practice in a people group or population, rather than an individual. (6) And it identifies *religion* in its broadest sense, rather than, say, the Christian faith or a particular denomination.<sup>8</sup>

In view of so many applications of the same term, some specialists abandon the word altogether. Yet I think there are compelling reasons to keep it, so long as we take care not to use it cheaply, as an indolent way to signify any social condition one isn't happy with.<sup>9</sup> As British sociologist David Lyon argues, "Contemporary cultural analysis cannot dispense with some reference to 'secularization,' any more than general historical sociology can. That—not to mention its decisive impact on Christian practice—is why it is important."<sup>10</sup> Lyon goes on to suggest that secularization is a mode, or, as he puts it, a "problematic." This may sound like academic jargon, but the term simply refers to a complex set of forces, which together make up the reality of secularization.

In order to investigate such a problematic and to arrive at an understanding of the surrounding world, let us briefly survey three crucial steps: first, a short presentation of the standard or classical secularization thesis; second, the recognition of its severe limits; third, revisiting the thesis with nuance and amplification. Then it will be possible to post some responses and suggest action points for the church.

8. Sommerville, "Secular Society/Religious Population," 249–53.

9. This is the case with expressions such as "secular humanism."

10. David Lyon, *The Steeple's Shadow: On the Myths and Realities of Secularization* (London: SPCK, 1985), 22. Karel Dobbelaere argues similarly for a multi-faceted usage. See his *Secularization: An Analysis at Three Levels* (Brussels: Presses Interuniversitaires Européennes, 2004), 25.

