

Ice Cream

I love ice cream. I mean, I really love ice cream. Chocolate, strawberry, butter pecan, rocky road, mint chocolate chip—you name it. I especially love mixing flavors. Throw in some hot fudge, a handful of nuts, perhaps a few strawberries, and now we're talking! But plain vanilla? Good grief. It's naked! It needs something. Anything! Vanilla ice cream is perfectly fine as a starting point, but left to itself, it's just so darn boring.

And then there's milk toast. Oh, dear Lord. Milk toast. Who in the world invented that culinary catastrophe? Apparently, somebody decided perfectly good toast wasn't miserable enough, so they soaked it in warm milk until it became a soggy, bland excuse for breakfast. People actually ate this stuff. Voluntarily! Historically, milk toast was served as a mild, easily digested food for people with delicate stomachs. That explains its purpose, I suppose, but hardly redeems the taste.

There is a distinction worth making. "Milk toast," two words, is the food. "Milquetoast," one word, is the much better word for what I'm worried about. In 1924, H. T. Webster introduced Caspar Milquetoast in his comic strip The Timid Soul. The name borrowed from the food and came to describe a timid person reluctant to challenge anybody about anything (Harper, n.d.).

And lately I've been thinking that an awful lot of what passes for Christianity in America has become precisely that.

Milquetoast Christianity.

Bland, timid, shallow, predictable, and so determined not to offend anyone that it has lost the willingness to stand for much at all. We've taken the most transformational message in human history and, in too many places, turned it into a self-help program with a few Bible verses sprinkled on top. Worse yet, we've turned God into a vending machine. Insert a prayer, push a button, select your blessing, and get annoyed if the Almighty doesn't deliver precisely what you ordered. Apparently, the Creator of the universe has become a celestial customer-service representative.

Good grief. Behind my irreverence is a concern that has grown for years: Christianity in America is losing ground, and too much Christianity practiced by those who still claim the name is comfortable, compromised, and nearly indistinguishable from the surrounding culture. This is not an attack on my dear Christian friends. The spanking I administer to milquetoast Christianity I administer to myself. I have lived in that comfortable world, too.

Here is where this essay is going, and I make no promise of a gentle Sunday-school outing. I see a dangerous convergence: churches trading discipleship for comfort; a psychology profession at risk of mistaking labels and symptom control for healing; political movements asking for loyalty instead of honest questions; radical Islamists exploiting religious conviction to justify intimidation and state coercion; and a screen-saturated culture cultivating reflexes faster than reflection. These are not the same problem, but they can reinforce one another. When discernment weakens, manipulation gets easier. When courage weakens, truth becomes negotiable. And when both disappear, freedom is not far behind. I intend to confront those dangers directly, drawing on Scripture, psychology, history, scholars who have challenged me, and experiences from my own life. My dear Christian friends are not targets for a theological drive-by. I am in the line of fire myself. But this is no time to whisper. The stakes include the faith and freedom we leave our children and grandchildren.

The God We Made in Our Own Image

Scripture tells us that God made mankind in His image (Genesis 1:27). Somewhere along the way, however, many of us decided to return the favor. We began making God in ours: a God who agrees with our politics, accommodates our preferences, approves of our relationships, blesses our desires, and stays out of the way when we want to do our own thing. If Scripture challenges our behavior, perhaps we have misunderstood it. Perhaps the culture has moved on. Or perhaps, and this possibility seems hardest for us to entertain, we simply don't want to obey.

A self-centered worldview makes the individual the final arbiter of truth and morality; biblical Christianity calls us to surrender to an authority beyond ourselves. These orientations are not slight variations in taste. One asks, "Lord, what would You have me do?" The other asks, "God, how can You help me do what I want?"

A God who never disagrees with us is a remarkably convenient God.

Before anybody imagines I am climbing onto a righteous soapbox, let me confess that I'm a sinner—a rather accomplished one, I'm afraid. Anyone who knows me could supply a generous inventory of my shortcomings. But I don't want my flaws baptized as virtues or my habits affirmed merely because I have become attached to them. In my later years I am discovering more deeply the importance of surrender, of allowing Christ to transform what I would rather leave untouched. I am not where I once was, but I am certainly not where I hope to be.

And once we have fashioned a God who always agrees with us, the next temptation is predictable: we want His gifts without the inconvenience of His demands.

Grace, Cost, and Peace: The Word in the Middle

In an earlier essay I reflected on grace, cost, and peace. We love grace: forgiveness, redemption, and God's unmerited favor. We love peace: the assurance that we belong to Him even when life becomes unbearable. But there is a troublesome word sitting right in the middle: cost. We want the first and the last without wrestling honestly with the one between.

Jesus did not recruit followers into a comfort club. He called them to deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow Him (Luke 9:23). Paul described pressing toward the goal and finishing the race (Philippians 3:12–14; 2 Timothy 4:7). Neither portrays salvation as a vending-machine transaction in which we retain absolute control over our lives while collecting the benefits of faith.

We want grace without repentance, peace without obedience, and blessing without surrender.

Brennan Manning's Ruthless Trust brings the question into sharp focus. "Ruthless" is a savage-sounding word. It seems almost inappropriate beside "trust," yet Manning uses it to challenge the defenses and illusions that keep us from radical dependence on God (Manning, 2000). Ruthless trust is not a sentimental slogan that guarantees life will become comfortable. It is a willingness to trust when convenience, certainty, and control are stripped away. I have only begun to appreciate how costly—and liberating—that surrender may be.

That appetite for comfort does not stop at the church doors. It has worked its way into my own profession, where we sometimes mistake a quieter symptom for a healed person. And when psychology starts selling relief without understanding, it can become another kind of vending-machine religion—with a prescription pad instead of a collection plate.

When Comfort Becomes the Enemy of Transformation

And lest anyone imagine I am criticizing only the Church, let me turn the spotlight on my own profession. After decades in clinical psychology, I have become increasingly troubled by the industrial efficiency with which we can diagnose, label, and medicate human suffering before we understand the human being who is suffering. Anxious? Here is a pill. Depressed? Another pill. Can't concentrate? Let's find a category and perhaps another prescription. We have become remarkably good at naming what hurts. But naming a wound is not the same as healing it. A diagnostic code is a map reference, not a biography. A billing category is not a theory of the soul. And a symptom checklist, however useful, is not a substitute for knowing a person.



Let me be clear about what I am challenging: not the compassionate use of medicine, but the intellectual laziness of pretending that an abbreviated biological explanation settles a complicated human story. Psychiatrist Joanna Moncrieff has argued that psychiatric drugs can be understood as producing altered mental and physiological states rather than simply correcting a known chemical deficiency (Moncrieff, 2008). An umbrella review she coauthored patently disproved the popular serotonin-deficiency explanation of depression (Moncrieff et al., 2023). Relief from a medication may be genuine and valuable; that does not retroactively validate every story told about why the suffering began. We should demand honest explanations, meaningful informed consent, careful follow-up, and clinical outcomes that matter beyond a score on a form.

When a child struggles with attention or hyperactivity, I want us asking hard questions about sleep, development, trauma, learning demands, anxiety, family life, relationships, and the school environment; not automatically treating the presenting behavior as the whole problem. Some children do meet criteria for ADHD, and some benefit from carefully selected medication and other supports. But a label identifies a pattern; it cannot tell us, by itself, what happened to this child, what this child believes about himself, or what this particular child needs to flourish. With depressed adults, I want to know about grief, shame, attachment, identity, loneliness, physical illness, faith, and those old core beliefs that can quietly govern a life. If we refuse to look beneath the symptom, we should not be surprised when the symptom changes costumes and returns for an encore.

My conviction is that therapy should aspire to transformation, not simply the maintenance of manageable misery. Of course, we relieve distress when we can. We do not romanticize pain or withhold effective care in pursuit of some heroic ordeal. But good therapy also asks people to confront destructive patterns, test the lies they believe about themselves, take responsibility where responsibility belongs, and learn how to live differently. Sometimes the most compassionate clinical question is also the least comfortable one. Do we have the courage to ask it? And do we have the patience to walk beside a person when the answer requires more than six visits and a handout?

I fear that parts of our profession have grown more proficient at administering a system than at healing a person. We measure symptoms, populate charts, assign codes, and celebrate compliance with a treatment protocol. Those tools can serve patients. But when the tools become the mission, the person disappears behind the paperwork. We have become so determined to eliminate discomfort that we sometimes eliminate the opportunity to understand it—and so enamored of measurable improvement that we neglect the harder question of whether someone's life has truly changed.

Now put that beside milquetoast Christianity and tell me they are not cousins. One offers symptom management without deep healing; the other offers reassurance without repentance. One risks reducing a human life to a diagnosis; the other reduces discipleship to a comfortable Sunday experience. Both may keep the customer satisfied while leaving the underlying problem untouched. Jesus did not come merely to improve our spiritual customer-satisfaction scores. He came to call us to a new life. That is a much bigger, and considerably more demanding, proposition.

The parallel ought to make both clinicians and pastors squirm a little. If my profession is unwilling to ask what lies beneath distress, and the Church is unwilling to ask what lies beneath comfortable religiosity, both can become agents of accommodation rather than transformation. What happens to a church that prizes a soothing experience above an encounter with the living Christ? Revelation supplies an answer that is not especially soothing.

The Church That Made Jesus Want to Spit

The church at Laodicea in Revelation 3:14–22 was not an assembly of strangers to religion. They were church people who imagined themselves secure, wealthy, and self-sufficient. Yet Christ described them as poor, blind, and naked in the very spiritual sense they could not perceive. They were lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, and He said He would spit them out of His mouth. That is hardly a vanilla-flavored rebuke.

I wonder how many contemporary churches might recognize themselves in the warning. We have inviting buildings, marvelous music, terrific coffee, comfortable seating, and sermons polished to

avoid unnecessary offense. Nothing is intrinsically wrong with those things, but where is the call to repentance? Where is moral accountability? Where is a pastor's willingness to speak truths that may cost attendance, prestige, or donations? Jay Smith's lecture on political Islam challenges Christians precisely here: he argues that churches have become reluctant to address competing theological and political claims while their own faith becomes increasingly compartmentalized (Smith, 2026, lecture transcript).

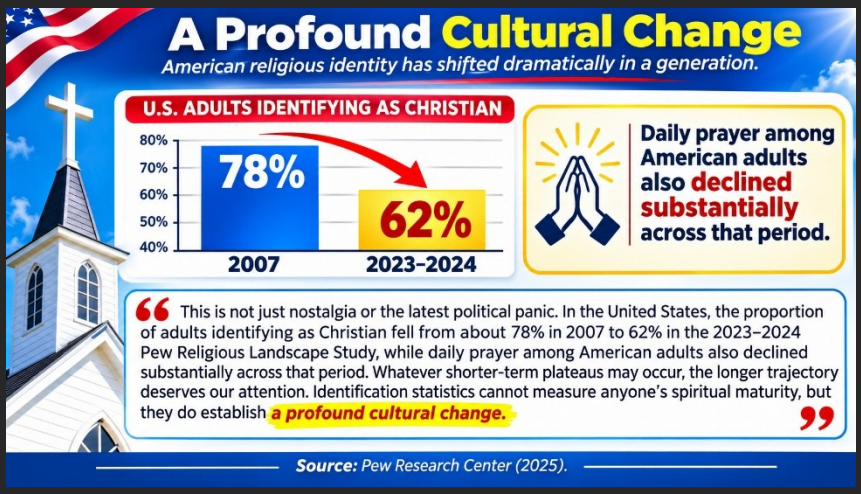
We have confused being loving with being agreeable.

I do not want to be spit out. I don't want to be lukewarm. And when I give this warning to others, I am giving it to myself first.

Before we dismiss Laodicea as somebody else's congregation, look at what is happening around us—and then ask what is happening within us.

Christianity Is Losing Ground

This is not just nostalgia or the latest political panic. In the United States, the proportion of adults identifying as Christian fell from about 78% in 2007 to 62% in the 2023–2024 Pew Religious Landscape Study, while daily prayer among American adults also declined substantially across that period (Pew Research Center, 2025). Whatever shorter-term plateaus may occur, the longer trajectory deserves our attention. Identification statistics cannot measure anyone's spiritual maturity, but they do establish a profound cultural change.



I worry less about whether someone checks the Christian box on a survey than whether Christ actually organizes his life. Does faith shape conduct on Monday or merely attendance on Sunday? Does it inform marriages, parenting, conscience, friendships, and treatment of opponents? Or does it consist of a little religious warmth with no significant cost? We are losing our Christian inheritance when we no longer understand its teachings well enough to live them.

Statistics tell one story. The personal price of refusing to go quietly along with the crowd tells another.

The Cost Has Been Personal

I know something about the cost of speaking up. Throughout my years as a psychologist, including service within hospital systems, I have challenged decisions and professional practices I believed needed scrutiny. More recently, my professional and licensing difficulties have made the stakes especially personal. I have not always been right, and I have not always been gracious. But taking positions I believed necessary has cost me, at times a great deal. It is no small thing to risk a reputation, career, friendship, or livelihood.

I have also written about the crazy left and the crazy right. Neither side owns wisdom or foolishness. I have seen enough in my lifetime to know that conservatives can become as captive to a tribe as progressives, and Christians can become as resistant to evidence as anybody else. The question is not whether everyone agrees with me. It is whether we can think, disagree, and examine ourselves without fear of being cast out.

And now I look at my grandchildren and ask what kind of country we are leaving them—and their children, and the generations to come. The concern is no longer merely about my own comfort. I believe we are facing a struggle over our souls, our children, and our civic inheritance. That does not mean I possess every answer. It means I am no longer willing to pretend the questions are unimportant.

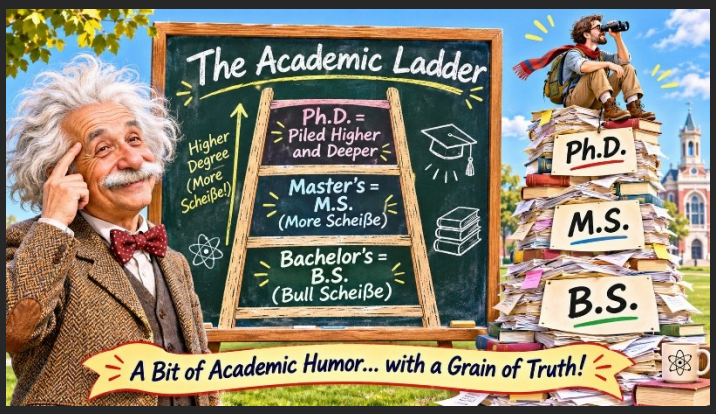


Conviction alone, however, is not a substitute for knowledge. If I am going to challenge powerful ideas, I have an obligation to study them rather than simply shout at them. My wife would probably appreciate that arrangement, too.

From Psychology to Sociology: Learning from People Who Know More

I am not an Islamic historian or an expert in Islamic theology. I am a psychologist who has spent a career examining human behavior and who has always loved sociology. I am also a systems thinker. Early in my training at UC Berkeley, Professor James C. Coyne's interactional work on depression helped me understand how individuals shape relationships and environments even as those systems shape them (Coyne, 1976). As a student and later as a clinician, I became fascinated by the movement from micro to macro: from personal psychology and family interactions to institutions, social movements, cultures, and nations.

Now I am no Albert Einstein. I have a doctorate, but academic credentials do not guarantee wisdom. There is the old joke that a bachelor's degree is B.S.—Bull Scheiße (German for you know what); a master's degree is More Scheiße; and a Ph.D. means it has been Piled Higher and Deeper. Having spent a good deal of time in academia, I suspect there is a grain of truth in there somewhere. I like to think I have occasionally climbed atop the pile to get a better look around!



I know what I know, and I am acutely aware of what I do not. So, I seek out scholars and writers whose historical and linguistic knowledge far exceeds mine. I read their work, examine their backgrounds, inspect the evidence they cite, and ask whether they have earned my trust. Learning from an authority is not surrendering to an authority; the first enlarges thought, while the second can shut it down.

There is an enormous difference between standing on the shoulders of giants and handing them your brain.

That is why I have been reading and listening to people who have spent far more time examining these histories and doctrines than I have. I do not surrender my judgment to them; I invite them to sharpen it.

Voices Sounding the Alarm

Several writers and speakers have profoundly influenced my examination of political Islam and its historical relationship with the West. I admire their willingness to challenge comfortable narratives and risk controversy. They are not interchangeable authorities, and they do not represent the entire scholarship of Islam; their interpretations can and should be examined critically. But disagreement with their conclusions is no excuse for refusing to read their evidence.

Jay Smith, a longtime Christian apologist, distinguishes the defense of Christian claims from the more direct historical and theological critique of Islamic claims. In the lecture that inspired this essay, he examines Islam as a political as well as religious tradition, focuses on the interaction between law and state power, and urges Christians to move beyond a timid, Sunday-only faith. His framework for political influence—government, judiciary, military, and education—is a thesis

worth assessing against historical evidence rather than merely cheering or rejecting on instinct (Smith, 2026, lecture transcript).

Raymond Ibrahim's *Sword and Scimitar: Fourteen Centuries of War between Islam and the West* examines major conflicts between Islamic and Christian powers, challenging readers to confront the theological motives that sometimes accompanied war and expansion (Ibrahim, 2018). The broader history also includes diplomacy, commerce, cooperation, and complex causes of religious change; still, the history of conquest and coercion cannot simply be edited out of the picture because it is unpleasant.

William J. Federer's *What Every American Needs to Know About the Qur'an: A History of Islam & the United States* brings American readers into the much longer history of encounters with Islamic powers, including the Barbary conflicts that confronted the early American republic (Federer, 2007). His work asks us to remember that religiously inflected questions of authority, commerce, and military power did not suddenly appear on September 11, 2001.

Brigitte Gabriel's *They Must Be Stopped* argues for confronting radical Islamist movements with greater clarity (Gabriel, 2008). Her childhood experience of war in Lebanon gives her writing an experiential intensity different from that of an academic historian. Her political positions are frequently contested, but her insistence that the human consequences of extremist violence be taken seriously is important to understand.

Craig Considine, a sociologist whose earlier work emphasized Christian–Muslim understanding, examines what he describes as the convergence of Marxist-influenced movements and Islamism in *When Marx Meets Islam* (Considine, 2026). I find his intellectual trajectory particularly interesting: he approaches an ideological partnership from a background of interfaith scholarship rather than from a uniformly polemical career. The coalition he critiques deserves scrutiny because groups can cooperate against common opponents even while envisioning sharply different futures.

These individuals are not infallible. Neither am I. But I admire people willing to argue in public, face counterarguments, and put their reputations on the line. That is preferable to the bland reassurance that everybody must be right as long as nobody is offended.

The writings are not merely an academic exercise. At their center lies a question of human liberty: can a person disagree, convert, criticize, or leave a religion without fear of punishment?

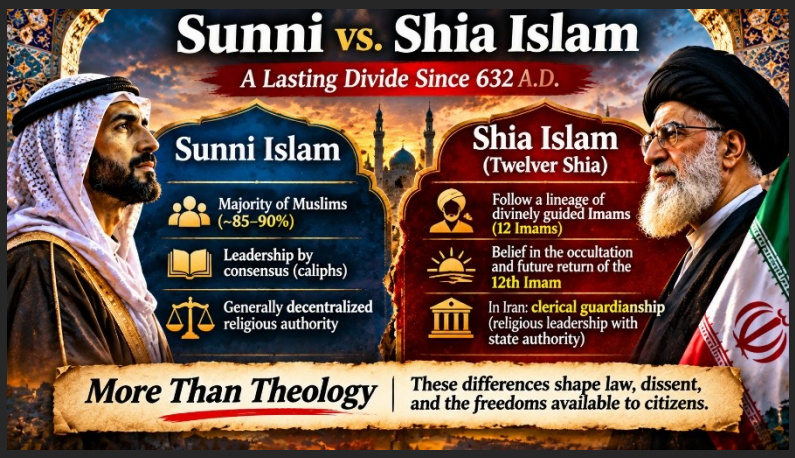
Islam, Religious Law, and the Difference Between Invitation and Coercion

My friendship with Muslim people and my opposition to religious coercion are not contradictory. I will not pretend otherwise to avoid an awkward conversation. I reject any Islamist movement that seeks to enforce religious conformity by intimidation, imprisonment, or violence. I also reject

the lazy idea that criticizing a religious doctrine or an authoritarian regime amounts to hating every person who belongs to that faith. People deserve dignity. Claims deserve examination. Governments deserve accountability. If we cannot manage all three thoughts at once, perhaps we ought to put down the phone and practice thinking again.

The term Sharia refers broadly to the divine path in Islamic thought, while fiqh refers to jurists' human interpretation of it. Different Muslim communities disagree about its applications, especially in civil and criminal law. Some people practice Islamic religious duties voluntarily; others advocate state systems in which religious law governs all citizens, including those who dissent. The distinction is consequential. Christian canon law generally functions inside a church's institutional jurisdiction; in certain states, interpretations of Sharia are embedded in public law with coercive state authority. That is an important legal distinction, not an accusation against every Muslim (Pew Research Center, 2013).

Sunni and Shia traditions also differ. The original divide centered on succession after Muhammad's death in 632, with traditions developing different accounts of legitimate leadership. The majority of Muslims are Sunni. Twelver Shia Islam, dominant in Iran, holds a distinctive doctrine of the Imams, including belief in the occultation and eventual return of the twelfth Imam. Iran's post-1979 political system also developed a doctrine of clerical guardianship in which religious leadership possesses substantial state authority. These are not merely abstract theological disagreements; in specific settings they shape law, dissent, and the freedoms available to citizens.



The Middle East once contained many flourishing Christian communities. Over many centuries, conquests, conversion, migration, demographic changes, political pressure, and at times coercion transformed that religious map. It is important to study the whole history rather than pretending every change followed one identical strategy. But it is equally important to acknowledge that some modern governments impose severe penalties for religious dissent, blasphemy, or conversion.

I know the human stakes through a friendship I have cherished for decades. One of my oldest and dearest friends came from a country in the Middle East. We attended school together in Switzerland, and we have maintained a close relationship throughout our lives. He has described

the danger that can accompany religious conversion and leaving Islam, including fears connected with family and community. I will not identify him or his country of origin. His safety matters far more than making my story more dramatic. Yet his experience has made religious freedom personal to me: these are not merely doctrines in a dusty book, but questions that touch lives and families.

I do not want a society in which the state, a cleric, or a mob can force someone to profess a faith or fear violence for changing it. Christianity has its own historical failures of persecution, and we should admit them without hesitation. But Jesus' invitation to follow Him was an invitation. Eternal life is offered as a gift, not imposed by the sword. Christians should persuade, serve, testify, and love—not compel conversion through violence.

My friend's experience makes the question personal. Iran shows how catastrophic the consequences can become when ideology acquires the machinery of the state—and when otherwise intelligent allies help it get there.

The Unholy Alliance and the Lessons of Iran

One of Jay Smith's most provocative warnings concerns the alliance of convenience between certain left-wing movements and Islamist organizations. Think about the contradiction. Some secular activists demand absolute freedom from religious authority at home while treating movements abroad that punish religious dissent as natural political partners. How does that make sense? Shared enemies can produce temporary alliances; they cannot guarantee shared values. An authoritarian movement does not become a champion of liberty because its latest slogan sounds fashionable on a university campus. (Smith, 2026).

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 ought to haunt anyone tempted by that bargain. The coalition



against Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi included Islamists, secular nationalists, Marxists, and other opponents of the monarchy. Many believed they were fighting for a freer Iran. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his allies prevailed. Then the revolutionary government turned on political rivals, including people who had helped it succeed. The Tudeh communist party, which had supported the Islamic Republic, was banned in 1983; its leaders were arrested

and imprisoned. The revolution had eaten its allies, and it had barely finshed setting the table (Moghadam, 1987; Encyclopaedia Iranica, n.d.).

And this was not simply political hardball. Under Khomeini, Iran established revolutionary tribunals, prisons, and instruments of ideological enforcement. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps emerged as a principal defender of the new order. Political opponents were tortured, imprisoned, and killed. Historian Ervand Abrahamian documents thousands of political executions in the early 1980s. In 1988, on Khomeini's orders, Iranian authorities summarily executed thousands more prisoners. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International describe those killings as grave crimes against humanity (Abrahamian, 1999; Amnesty International, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2022). The precise total across those years remains disputed. The depravity does not.

What do we call educated people who willingly help an intolerant movement gain power, assuming that their own freedoms will somehow be preserved? History has an unflattering expression: useful idiots. It is deliberately provocative, and it should be. The point is not that every progressive or every Muslim shares these ambitions. The point is that political naivety becomes dangerous when we excuse the coercion of allies simply because they oppose someone we dislike. Those Iranian leftists were not merely outmaneuvered in a seminar debate. Some were arrested, tortured, or executed. That is what the price of ideological blindness can look like.

Here is a question for the modern activist who romanticizes any revolutionary movement as long as it despises the same people you despise: when your alliance wins, will you still be allowed to criticize its leaders, reject its religion, organize your own party, and walk away alive? Ask the surviving Iranian dissidents how that gamble worked out. A protest slogan is not a constitutional safeguard. And a useful idiot does not cease to be useful merely because he has a graduate degree.

Jay Smith's lecture includes a warning about decisions made over the next thirty years shaping Islamic institutions in the United States for the next three hundred. That is his projection, not an established demographic forecast (Smith, 2026, lecture transcript). But it raises a fair question about institutional foundations: what we build, neglect, teach, and tolerate now can influence generations. I ask the same question of Christian churches. What kind of faith are we transmitting to our grandchildren?

The atrocities committed in the Hamas-led attack of October 7, 2023, must also be condemned without euphemism. Approximately 1,200 people were killed and 251 were taken hostage. Innocent Israelis were murdered, and the taking of hostages was indefensible. The suffering and deaths of Palestinian civilians in the war must likewise matter to our conscience. Genuine moral consistency refuses to excuse the deliberate killing of civilians because the victims belong to the

"wrong" side. Isaiah 5:20 warns against calling evil good and good evil. The warning applies regardless of tribe or uniform.

None of this is an argument for shutting down questions or demanding blind allegiance to my side. Quite the reverse. The antidote to authoritarianism is the moral and intellectual courage to question even our own tribe. Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood that surrendering judgment is not a harmless personality quirk.

Bonhoeffer: The Stupidity of Intelligent People

Years ago, I became deeply interested in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and more recently I wrote The Stupidity of Intelligent People about his warning concerning the surrender of independent judgment. I want to bring that argument into this essay because it belongs at the center of what is happening to our thinking, our politics, and our churches. Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian who resisted Nazi interference in the Church, participated in resistance networks, and was executed in April 1945. In his wartime reflection *"After Ten Years,"* he explored how destructive power could make apparently intelligent people strikingly resistant to reason (Bonhoeffer, 2010).



His point was not that stupidity is low intelligence. One can have a magnificent intellect and still surrender one's judgment in exchange for belonging, approval, and protection. When a movement's slogans become more important than examining reality, a person may grow more certain while becoming less capable of independent inquiry. The tragedy is not lack of cognitive horsepower, but the unwillingness to use it when the group demands loyalty.

I know this at a personal level, too. In my earlier essay I described friendships that once accommodated political disagreement, laughter, and genuine curiosity. Over time, some conversations began to feel less like exchanges of ideas and more like tests of ideological belonging. Asking a sincere question could be treated as betrayal. I have been disappointed by that tendency in some progressive circles, and I have seen its counterpart on the right, where conspiracy, personality worship, and reflexive defense of favored leaders can equally replace evidence.

Different uniform. Same damn stupidity.

Bonhoeffer confronted a murderous totalitarian regime, not an ordinary election or a disagreement around the Thanksgiving table. Yet the psychological warning remains painfully relevant: when people surrender their independent judgment to the power of a crowd, intelligence is no safeguard. We may cheer the very forces that would silence us. Different uniforms, different circumstances—and the same human temptation to stop thinking.

And the cost of thinking is not merely intellectual. It can be friendship, belonging, professional opportunity, and reputation. Bonhoeffer understood that moral courage is not merely a position we hold in private. It involves responsibility for our actions when the price is real. His life, and finally his death, make me ask a question I cannot easily put down: what am I willing to pay for my convictions?

Bonhoeffer had propaganda, fear, and mass conformity to contend with. We have added an ingenious little rectangle that can deliver a fresh outrage before we finish the previous one. Progress, apparently. We carry an entire propaganda delivery system in our pockets—and we pay the monthly bill ourselves.

The Screen, the Fragmented Mind, and the Loss of Reflection

To this old psychological vulnerability, we have added an astonishingly powerful modern amplifier: the smartphone and the social-media feed. Our attention is recruited, interrupted, and recruited again by headlines, clips, outrage, notifications, and slogans. We skim a thousand claims and examine almost none. We can mistake familiarity for knowledge because we have seen a phrase fifty times, and we can mistake intensity for truth because the person saying it sounds absolutely furious. The algorithm does not ask whether an idea is wise, morally serious, or even accurate. It is built to keep us engaged. Apparently, our attention has become a commodity, and our outrage comes with excellent profit margins.

Working memory and attentional control are finite. Under stress, high arousal can interfere with prefrontal processes that support reflection, inhibition, and perspective-taking (Arnsten, 2009). Research on media multitasking raises concerns about distractibility and cognitive control,

though individual findings and causal interpretations remain contested (Ophir et al., 2009). The point does not require claiming that every smartphone has permanently damaged every brain. We need only look at the habits we repeatedly practice: react first, share second, inspect the evidence sometime next week—if there is time between notifications. We have built a marvelous environment for reaction and then wonder why patient discernment feels increasingly foreign.

Put this beside the watered-down church, the symptom-managing clinic, and the political movement that demands loyalty before examination. The pattern leaps off the page. The clinic says, 'Here is a label; let's move on.' The church says, 'Here is a comforting message; let's not make anyone uneasy.' The feed says, 'Here is your next righteous outrage; don't bother reading the whole story.' A catchy clip becomes an argument. An accusation becomes proof. A fashionable slogan becomes a moral identity. Before long, intelligent people are certain of everything and have carefully examined almost nothing. Bonhoeffer's warning is no museum artifact. The crowd he feared now fits conveniently in our pockets.



This is why the digital problem belongs in an essay about milquetoast Christianity. A faith that cannot tolerate sustained attention, difficult questions, silence, self-examination, and the discomfort of disagreement will not withstand much pressure. Neither will a profession, a political movement, or a civilization. We are not simply distracted; we are being tempted to exchange the work of discernment for the pleasant sensation of already knowing. It is intellectual milk toast: easy to swallow, difficult to live on.

Standing Atop My Own Pile of Bullshit

Standing Atop My Own Pile of Bullshit

Before anyone imagines that I have appointed myself the intellectual guardian of Western civilization, allow me to return to that wonderful old academic joke. A bachelor's degree is B.S. — Bull Scheiße; a master's degree is More Scheiße; and a Ph.D. means it has been Piled Higher and Deeper. Having spent a substantial portion of my life in academia, I suspect there is considerably more truth in that observation than some of my distinguished colleagues would care to acknowledge. Academic credentials are wonderful things, but they hardly guarantee wisdom. Sometimes they simply give us more sophisticated ways to defend our own stupidity.

But perhaps, after all these years, I have finally managed to climb atop my own enormous pile of academic bullshit and see a little farther over the horizon. Not because I am particularly brilliant or somehow immune to the intellectual blindness that afflicts the rest of humanity. Good grief! I've been a psychologist far too long to entertain that fantasy. Rather, I would like to believe that experience, history, faith, and the intellectual courage of others have helped me recognize dangers I might once have overlooked.

And frankly, **I wish I were wrong about much of what I am seeing.**

I wish I were wrong about the growing conformity within our institutions, the willingness of my profession to substitute symptom management for transformational healing, and a Church increasingly tempted to exchange costly discipleship for comfortable Christianity. I wish I were wrong about a digital culture that rewards outrage over reflection and political movements willing to overlook authoritarianism when it serves their immediate ideological interests. Most of all, I wish I were wrong about how easily intelligent, educated, well-intentioned people can become instruments of movements whose ultimate objectives they scarcely understand.

But history offers too many examples of what happens when we refuse to examine uncomfortable realities.

That is why I return to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I am no Bonhoeffer, nor would I presume to compete with his theological brilliance or extraordinary courage. But his life and writings have profoundly influenced how I understand the vulnerability of intelligent people to collective moral blindness. Bonhoeffer witnessed the rise of National Socialism, the accommodation of much of Germany's institutional Church, and the terrible consequences of surrendering conscience to political power. He understood that moral catastrophe does not always begin with overt wickedness. Sometimes it begins with the desire to belong, the reluctance to challenge authority, and the comforting assumption that surely things cannot become as bad as the alarmists suggest.

Bonhoeffer refused that comfort, and he paid with his life.

I have also been challenged by Jay Smith, Craig Considine, Brigitte Gabriel, William J. Federer, and Raymond Ibrahim, whose work raises troubling questions about political Islamism, religious authority, coercion, and the historical relationship between Islamic movements and Western societies. I do not regard these men and women as infallible authorities, but their warnings have pushed me to examine evidence, ask difficult questions, and consider the consequences of dismissing uncomfortable ideas simply because they challenge fashionable assumptions. Their concerns are not identical to those Bonhoeffer confronted, but his example reminds me that warnings about authoritarian power deserve examination rather than automatic dismissal.

The Iranian Revolution provides a horrifying illustration. Secular intellectuals, Marxists, and political reformers helped overthrow the Shah, only to discover that Khomeini's revolutionary government had no intention of preserving their political freedoms. Former allies were imprisoned, tortured, and executed. They helped empower a movement that ultimately turned against them.

An alliance made in hell. Terms and conditions apply.

History is littered with similar tragedies. Under Stalin and Mao, millions died as ideological objectives eclipsed human dignity. Under authoritarian theocracies and violent extremist movements, dissenters have been imprisoned, persecuted, and murdered. Different historical circumstances, different political and religious justifications, but one recurring moral catastrophe: when ideology becomes supreme, human beings become expendable.

When ideology becomes more important than humanity, life becomes cheap.

And the frightening part is that such catastrophes have never required a society composed entirely of fools. Educated people rationalized. Professionals accommodated. Religious institutions compromised. Ordinary citizens looked away. Many convinced themselves they were acting for the greater good.

Bonhoeffer understood that intelligence is no guarantee against such blindness. Neither is a doctorate, a prestigious title, a political affiliation, or a Sunday morning pew.

Which brings me back to the uncomfortable thread running through this entire essay. A Church that substitutes reassurance for repentance, a clinical profession that confuses labels with healing, a digital culture that rewards reaction over reflection, and political movements that demand loyalty before examination can all reinforce the same human weakness: **the willingness to surrender discernment for comfort, approval, or belonging.**

Different uniforms. Same damn stupidity.

And where is the Church in all of this?

Are we preparing Christians to think deeply, recognize deception, resist conformity, protect the vulnerable, and stand courageously for truth? Or have we become so preoccupied with being agreeable that we have forgotten how to be discerning? Have we confused meekness with cowardice, compassion with capitulation, and Christian love with the obligation never to offend?

Christ did not call us to become spiritual ostriches, burying our heads in the sand while congratulating ourselves on being wonderfully nice people.

He warned us against deception (Matthew 24:4), instructed us to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves (Matthew 10:16), and commanded us to remain watchful. In Mark 13:37, His words are unmistakable: "What I say to you, I say to everyone: Watch!"

Paul's instruction to put on the whole armor of God (Ephesians 6:10–18) is equally compelling. Truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, the word of God, and prayer are instruments of spiritual steadfastness, not invitations to hatred or violence. Christian courage demands that we love people while refusing to surrender truth, that we challenge destructive ideas without abandoning human dignity, and that we remain faithful even when the cost becomes personal.

I return here to Brennan Manning's *Ruthless Trust*. The more I reflect upon that title, the more deeply it challenges me. Ruthless trust is not cruelty toward others; it is the radical surrender of our pride, illusions, self-sufficiency, and desperate attachment to comfort. It means allowing Christ to confront and transform those parts of ourselves we would prefer to leave undisturbed. Following Him was never meant to be a pleasant religious hobby. It is a lifelong surrender, and sometimes the most difficult battle is not with the world around us but with the man looking back from the mirror.

And that brings me to what troubles my heart most.

What kind of world are we leaving our children and grandchildren?

Will they inherit a society that still values liberty, conscience, truth, and the dignity of every human being? Will they inherit institutions courageous enough to correct themselves and a Church substantial enough to sustain them when following Christ becomes genuinely costly? Will we teach them to think critically, resist manipulation, and challenge injustice without surrendering compassion?

Or will we leave them the consequences of our distractions, compromises, intellectual laziness, and unwillingness to confront what was happening right before our eyes?

I cannot escape the possibility that one of my grandchildren may someday look me in the eye and ask, "Grandpa, you knew about these things. You studied history. You spent your life helping people. Why didn't your generation do more?"

What would I say? That we were too busy? Too comfortable? Too afraid of being unpopular? That we trusted the experts without asking questions, followed the crowd because it felt safer, and spent our evenings scrolling through our phones while the foundations of our freedom quietly eroded?

God help us if those become our answers.

We cannot promise our children a world without suffering, nor can we guarantee that every warning we raise will prove correct. But surely we owe them something better than the consequences of our indifference. We owe them the example of men and women willing to examine evidence, acknowledge mistakes, defend human dignity, and stand for what is right even when doing so costs us something.

I can tolerate being mistaken. But I cannot make peace with being willfully blind.

And to my dear Christian friends, I say all of this as a fellow traveler, not as some righteous judge standing above the rest of humanity. I have been timid. I have compromised. I have chosen comfort when courage was required. I have sometimes confused intellectual understanding with spiritual maturity, and I am still learning what it means to surrender my life fully to Christ.

I am standing atop my pile of academic bullshit, not above my fellow human beings.

But from this vantage point, I see enough to be concerned, enough to ask difficult questions, and enough to refuse the comfortable temptation to look away. I wish I were wrong about some of these dangers. I genuinely do. Yet I would rather raise a warning that invites serious examination than remain silent simply because speaking might make someone uncomfortable.

And despite everything I have written, **I remain hopeful.** Not because I believe humanity can engineer a perfect society, or because another political movement, professional organization, or technological innovation will rescue us from ourselves. My hope rests in Christ, who calls us beyond the very fears, compromises, and selfishness that so often hold us captive.

I want the ruthless trust Manning described, the courage Bonhoeffer demonstrated, and the discernment Jesus commanded. I want a faith that transforms me rather than merely reassures me, and I want my children and grandchildren to recognize that faith in how I live, not simply in what I write.

Now, as anyone who has survived this essay knows, I love ice cream. Give me rocky road, chocolate, butter pecan, hot fudge, and enough toppings to make my cardiologist nervous. I have no intention of surrendering that particular pleasure without a serious theological argument and perhaps a second opinion.

But when it comes to Christianity, I am finished settling for the spiritual equivalent of soggy toast.

Jesus warned the Church in Laodicea about being lukewarm (Revelation 3:15–16). His words are uncomfortable because they confront the temptation to mistake religious familiarity for genuine commitment. And they challenge me personally.

I do not want to be milquetoast. I do not want to be lukewarm. And I do not want Christ to spit me out.

I want to follow Him, even when it costs me something.

So here is my plea, to myself first and then to my fellow Christians: **For the love of God, wake the hell up!**

Let us recover the courage to think deeply, the humility to acknowledge when we are wrong, the conviction to confront evil without becoming consumed by it, and the faith to follow Christ even when the world pressures us to do otherwise. Let us teach our children not merely what to believe, but how to examine what they are told, how to recognize manipulation, and how to remain compassionate without surrendering their convictions.

And let us remember that the future is not written solely by those who threaten our freedoms. It is also shaped by those who possess the courage to defend them.

Our children are watching. Our grandchildren will inherit the consequences of what we do—or fail to do. And Christ has never called us to be comfortable spectators.

The hour is late. The stakes are enormous. And the time for milquetoast Christianity is over.

References

Abrahamian, E. (1999). *Tortured confessions: Prisons and public recantations in modern Iran*. University of California Press. https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/public/book/tortured-confessions-prisons-and-public-recantations-in-modern-iran.html

Amnesty International. (2018). *Blood-soaked secrets: Why Iran's 1988 prison massacres are ongoing crimes against humanity*. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2018/10/blood-soaked-secrets/

Arnsten, A. F. T. (2009). Stress signalling pathways that impair prefrontal cortex structure and function. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience, 10*, 410–422. https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn2648

Bonhoeffer, D. (2010). *Letters and papers from prison* (J. W. de Gruchy, Ed.; Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 8). Fortress Press. https://www.fortresspress.com/store/product/9780800697037/Letters-and-Papers-from-Prison

Considine, C. (2026). *When Marx meets Islam: Navigating radical ideologies in defense of the West*. Pitchstone Publishing. https://www.pitchstonebooks.com/catalog/when-marx-meets-islam

Coyne, J. C. (1976). Toward an interactional description of depression. *Psychiatry, 39*(1), 28–40. https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1976.11023874

Encyclopaedia Iranica. (n.d.). *Hostage crisis*. https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hostage-crisis/

Federer, W. J. (2007). *What every American needs to know about the Qur'an: A history of Islam & the United States*. Amerisearch. https://openlibrary.org/search?q=William+Federer+What+Every+American+Needs+to+Know+About+the+Quran

Gabriel, B. (2008). *They must be stopped: Why we must defeat radical Islam and how we can do it*. St. Martin's Press. https://us.macmillan.com/books/9780312383633/theymustbestopped

Harper, D. (n.d.). Milquetoast. *Online Etymology Dictionary*. https://www.etymonline.com/word/milquetoast

Human Rights Watch. (2022, June 8). *Iran: 1988 mass executions evident crimes against humanity*. https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/08/iran-1988-mass-executions-evident-crimes-against-humanity

Ibrahim, R. (2018). *Sword and scimitar: Fourteen centuries of war between Islam and the West*. Da Capo Press. https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/titles/raymond-ibrahim/sword-and-scimitar/9780306825552/

Manning, B. (2000). *Ruthless trust: The ragamuffin's path to God*. HarperSanFrancisco. https://openlibrary.org/search?q=Brennan+Manning+Ruthless+Trust

Moghadam, V. M. (1987). Socialism or anti-imperialism? The left and revolution in Iran. *New Left Review, 166*, 5–28.

https://newleftreview.org/issues/i166/articles/val-moghadam-socialism-or-anti-imperialism-the-left-and-revolution-in-iran

Moncrieff, J. (2008). *The myth of the chemical cure: A critique of psychiatric drug treatment*. Palgrave Macmillan.

researchgate.net/publication/316062000_The_myth_of_the_chemical_cure_A_critique_of_psychiatric_drug_treatment/citation/download?_tp=eyJjb250ZXh0Ijp7ImZpcnN0UGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIiwicGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIn19&__cf_chl_rt_tk=F.TgTHispiJkBj20f59xq8twadyeluk0EH0gZ24KjwQ-1795460087-1.0.1.1-sHLzcWWA_8wFieUlTt7_RXEPAqDt_k9ojsiFUo_bD680-230-58944-5

Moncrieff, J., Cooper, R. E., Stockmann, T., Amendola, S., Hengartner, M. P., & Horowitz, M. A. (2023). The serotonin theory of depression: A systematic umbrella review of the evidence. *Molecular Psychiatry, 28*, 3243–3256.
https://doi.org/10.1038/s41380-022-01661-0

Ophir, E., Nass, C., & Wagner, A. D. (2009). Cognitive control in media multitaskers. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 106*(37), 15583–15587.
https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0903620106

Pew Research Center. (2013). *The world's Muslims: Religion, politics and society*.
https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-overview/

Pew Research Center. (2025). *Religious Landscape Study*.
https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/decline-of-christianity-in-the-us-has-slowed-may-have-leveled-off/

Smith, J. (2026). *Political Islam in America* [Unpublished lecture transcript supplied by the author].

https://www.youtube.com/live/Cjfz8E4ODBw?is=H9P20x5pb2O0oeYe