A Theological Sickness unto Death:
Philip Rieff’s Prophetic Analysis
of our Secular Age

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Abstract: Philip Rieff’s sociological analyses explore the implications of Western Civilization’s unprecedented attempt to maintain society and culture without reference to God. He argues that this attempt to desacralize the social order is deeply detrimental and encourages Westerners to resacralize the social order. For Western Christians who wish to help facilitate a “missionary encounter” between the gospel and our secular age, Rieff’s work will pay rich, albeit uneven dividends. His work is most helpful when diagnosing the ills of our secular age but is less illuminating in its prognosis and prescription. Thus, a Christian framework of thought must be employed to evaluate Rieff’s work and leverage it for the Christian mission.

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The great American sociologist Philip Rieff (1922–2006) stands as one of the 20th century’s keenest intellectuals and cultural commentators. Rieff did sociology on a grand scale—sociology as prophecy—diagnosing the ills of Western society and offering a prognosis and prescription for the future. Although he was not a Christian, his work remains a great gift—even if a complicated and challenging one—to Christians living in a secular age.

In his work, the Western church will find a perceptive diagnosis of Western society and culture and an illuminating, though insufficient, prognosis and prescription.

1. A Therapeutic Revolution

Rieff began his academic career in the 1950s and 60s by focusing on the work of Sigmund Freud. In The Mind of the Moralist and The Triumph of the Therapeutic, Rieff argued that Freud’s exploration
of neurosis was really an exploration of authority, as Western man was coming to view the notion of divine authority as an illusion. If God does not exist, appeals to divine authority are illegitimate. Freud recognized that as belief in God was fading, psychological neuroses were multiplying. He posited a cause-and-effect relationship between the two phenomena but, instead of healing neurosis by pointing persons back to God, Freud sought to heal it by teaching his patients to accept this loss of authority as a positive development.²

This psychotherapeutic view of modern man came to serve as a unified theory of modern society. In Rieff’s view, therapeutic ideology, rather than Communism, was the real revolution of the twentieth century. Compared to Freud, the neo-Marxists were cultural conservatives who still believed in the notion of authority and the idea of a cultural code. The proponents of Freudian therapeutics, on the other hand, would not countenance authoritative frameworks and normative moral codes. In a therapeutic culture, authority disappears. In place of theology and ethics, we are left with aesthetics and the social sciences. Thus, therapeutic culture was born. This tradeoff would turn out to be so destructive that Rieff would describe the United States and Western Europe (rather than the Soviet Union) as the epicenter of Western cultural deformation.³

2. A Sickness unto Death

Though Rieff rose to prominence as a public intellectual in the 1970s, he suddenly withdrew from the public eye for more than three decades.¹ In fact, it was not until after his death in 2006 that he re-entered the public square with the publication of My Life Among the Deathworks, the first volume in a “Sacred Order/Social Order” trilogy which would bring his earlier cultural exegesis to maturation.⁵

Deathworks is a devastating critique of modern culture, focusing on our vain Western attempts to reorganize society without a sacred center. According to Rieff, a patently irreligious view of society—which many Westerners desire—is not only foolish and destructive, but impossible. We can no more live without a religious framework than we can communicate without a linguistic framework or breathe without a pulmonary framework. Religion is in our blood, and the more we deny it, the sicker our society becomes. As Rieff surveyed the 21st-century Western world, he perceived the sickness had become nearly fatal.


¹ By the 1970s, Rieff had become one of America’s premier public intellectuals, publishing regularly in the major literary magazines and appearing on prominent talk shows. In the 1980s, however, Rieff mysteriously withdrew, for the most part, from the public eye. As Jonathan Imber notes, Rieff was protesting “against the vainglorious encounter he saw at work between intellectuals and the public.” In his writings and lectures during the latter part of his career, therefore, Rieff took care to display the sort of public modesty that he thought behooved intellectuals. Jonathan B. Imber, “Philip Rieff and Fellow Teachers,” Sociology 50 (2013): 61.

3. Three Cultural “Worlds”

To expose the problems of modern society, Rieff organizes Western history chronologically according to three cultural “worlds.” The first was the pagan world, enchanted by its many gods. Following this was the second cultural world, one dominated by monotheism. This era has only recently given way to the third cultural world, our present age, in which many wish to do away with the gods altogether.

The striking characteristic of third world culture, as Rieff saw it, is its historic departure from the belief that social order should be underlain by sacred order. The latter always and necessarily funds the former by providing a world of meaning and a code of permissions and prohibitions, in which and through which society could flourish. Historically, sacred order translates its truths into the tangible realities of the social order. Rieff writes:

> World creation comprises the historical task of culture: namely, to transliterate otherwise invisible sacred orders into their visible modalities—social orders. As transliterating institutions of sacred order into social, cultures are what they represent: ‘symbolics’ or, in a word that represents what it is, ‘worlds.’

Thus, sacred order historically shaped social order, employing culture makers and cultural institutions as middlemen between religion and society. Yet, the spirit of our third cultural world seeks to undo all of this.

3.1. First World Cultures

First world cultures tended to be pagan, with many pantheons of whimsical and capricious gods. These societies and their cultural institutions centered on “fate.” Even though one finds exceptions such as Socrates or Plato, first world influencers were magicians or conjurers upon whom society depended to manipulate the gods and change the course of history. In first world cultures, social order was maintained less by a moral code of permissions and prohibitions than by a system of taboos.

3.2. Second World Cultures

Second world cultures are generally, though not exclusively, monotheistic. Their conception of sacred order is one in which God the Creator reveals himself to his creatures and endows the created world with life and significance. James Davison Hunter’s summary of Rieff’s second world cultures is apt:

> [In] second world cultures...truth about the world and how to act in the world is grounded in revelation and is creedal in character. The interdictions, then, are divinely commanded. Faith, rather than fate, is the dominant cultural motif, again especially as it depicts the address of social order to sacred order. God is active in history, and it is through trust and obedience, and with the guidance of various teaching authorities, that ascent in the vertical in authority is possible.

Rieff placed Christianity in the second cultural world. Although Rieff had been critical of Christianity early on, by mid-career he was committed to monotheism and embraced the positive role Christianity

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6 Rieff, Deathworks, 2.
7 Ibid., xxi.
should play in society. Christian monotheism provided the sacred foundation on which Western society was built and gave individuals a place to stand and a way to live. Virtue was not just taught explicitly but reinforced implicitly through cultural institutions—in such a way that it shaped the habits and instinctual desires of each successive generation. In so doing, the underlying sacred order provided a powerful means of opposing social and cultural decadence. Similarly, individuals learn to identify themselves and find meaning in life through this theistic world of meaning. “Wherever we may be, in the whatness of our whoness, what we are is constituted by where we are in the sacred order.”

3.3. Third World Cultures

In contrast to the first and second world cultures whose social order is undergirded by a world beyond the visible and a moral authority beyond the self, third world cultures (contemporary Western cultures) sever the connection between sacred order and social order, limiting the “real” world to the visible and locating moral authority in the self. Similarly, whereas each of the first two worlds sought to construct identity vertically from above, our third world rejects the vertical in favor of constructing identity horizontally from below. Rieff knew the result of this rejection would be nihilism: “Where there is nothing sacred, there is nothing.”

Rieff pulls no punches in describing the cultural fruits of this project, terming them deathworks. Instead of causing society to flourish (via works of life), modern cultural institutions and culture-makers function as subversive agents of destruction (works of death), undermining the very culture from which they arose. Rieff indicts an array of cultural elites—but especially Freud, Joyce, Picasso, and Mapplethorpe—for their role in poisoning society. “The guiding elites of our third world,” he observes, “are virtuosi of de-creation, of fictions where once commanding truths were.” Wishing to forget religion and rebuild society (irreligiously) from the ground up, these elites labor to construct a contemporary tower of Babel.

One of the front lines of the contemporary battle is the notion of truth. The third world perspective abolishes truth, leaving only desire. Yet desire proves to be as fierce an authority as any god—and jealous to boot. Nature, after all, abhors a vacuum. So, the throne on which God once reigned does not remain empty; it is filled with the more erratic god of desire.

The chief desire in our American third world culture is sexual, and this desire demands freedom of exercise. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is kicked out the front door, while the god of sexual desire is whistled in through the back.

Rieff argues that attempts to desacralize society are, ultimately, futile. “Culture and sacred order are inseparable…. No culture has ever preserved itself where there is not a registration of sacred order.” Even though our third world continues its production of deathworks as a “final assault [on] the sacred order,”

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8 In Charisma, a book written mid-career, but not published until just after his death, Rieff’s central argument is that the New Testament concepts of grace and humility are essential to moral order. Philip Rieff, Charisma: The Gift of Grace, and How It Has Been Taken Away from Us (New York: Pantheon, 2007), 288.
9 Rieff, Deathworks, 3.
10 Ibid., 12.
11 Ibid., 4.
12 Ibid., 13.
and even though third world elites are now busy congratulating themselves on an apparent rout, the third world culture will not prevail.

4. Onward to a Fourth World

Christians who resonate with Rieff’s grim assessment may be tempted to rewind the clock in a futile attempt to retrieve the lost Christendom of a previous age. But Rieff pushes us forward to envision a fourth world. We cannot rewind the clock by ignoring third world deathworks and returning to an ostensibly golden age, but we can recognize the realities of third world culture even while building for a fourth world culture in which sacred order once again underlies social order. Rieff writes:

The faith instinct...simply cannot be killed. That ‘simply cannot’ means that we simply cannot not live—cannot live as if life were meaningless, without purpose; as if life were merely material or mechanical or not spiritual. Such an effort in its deadly futility represents a historical ending time, a time just before the faith instinct will show itself again.13

The third cultural world seems powerful now, Rieff avers, but its foundations are weak and already starting to crumble.

The construction of a fourth world will involve a recovery of sacred order and, by extension, recoveries of revelation and authority, and of transcendent meaning and morality. Recoveries such as this do not enact themselves; they await a people who will speak and act responsibly. This fourth world “people,” Rieff argues, must articulate and embody seemingly defunct notions of truth and virtue, a formidable task in our radically disenchanted and morally permissive third world culture.14 Nonetheless, in spite of the formidable challenges posed by third world order, there are already cracks in the foundations; although it once seemed liberating to fire God from his post and live without limits, the third world will soon realize that a world without boundaries is a frightening—not a freeing—place. Thus, a responsible people must arise to manifest the beauty of the “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not.”

5. Rieff in Perspective

Critics have faulted Rieff for his dense prose, for the demands he makes upon his readers. He read widely, and even a cursory glance at his trilogy shows that he had “at his fingertips” a broad cadre of culture-makers such as Nietzsche and Derrida, Freud and Jung, Picasso and Mapplethorpe, Joyce and Kafka. More to the point, however, he alluded to these culture-makers in complex and sometimes obscure manners, making the reader work hard to follow the argument. Indeed, his books are complicated and challenging, but are strategically so, rewarding the reader who perseveres. In Fellow Teachers, Rieff reflects upon his rhetorical strategy:

Privileged knowledge...can only be conveyed by the art of concealment. We teachers are called to represent the god-terms, in all their marvelous indirections, inhibiting what otherwise might be too easily done. Even Christ, as he revealed, precisely in order to

13 Rieff, Officer Class, 6.
14 Rieff, Crisis, 169.
reveal, concealed.... Concealment is the most necessary pedagogic art, without which there are not revelations.¹⁵

The reader must work hard to understand Rieff’s text, just as the reader will have to work hard to discern the deathly contours of third world culture and to help build a fourth world.¹⁶ But Rieff has worked harder than the reader, and those who are patiently attentive will reap dividends.

For Western Christians who wish to help facilitate a “missionary encounter” between the gospel and our secular age, Rieff’s work will pay rich, albeit uneven, dividends. One way of assessing the potential dividends is to evaluate his work in light of the biblical pattern of formation–deformation–reformation, concluding that Rieff’s work is most helpful when it is diagnosing the ills of our secular age (deformation), but is less illuminating when it reflects back upon original order (formation) or looks forward via prognosis and prescription (reformation).

5.1. Deformation

Rieff is at his gimlet-eyed best when he explores the deformation of Western culture and society. He spent the large part of his career analyzing and diagnosing the ills of Western society and culture. He is prophetic in drawing conclusions that cut to the heart of the problem: the West is in the midst of an unprecedented attempt, by the cultural elite, to rip the sacred foundations from underneath social order, leaving social order to float on its own, slowly but surely toward death. When we, in the wake of Rieff’s analysis, read and re-read the events of our own time, we will be able to recognize many cultural products of our time as deathworks and the authors of those products as subversive agents undermining social order.

In his analysis of deathworks, Rieff focused on philosophers, social scientists, artists, and writers as the most subversive creators and purveyors. He critiques various cultural elites for their poisonous influence on society. To supplement and enhance Rieff’s analysis, the Christian community is well-served to shift the emphasis of our analysis to include a greater role for other, less recognized types of subversive culture-makers, such as those found in the legal, commercial, and educational sectors.

Consider, for example, United States Supreme Court justices as members of the “officer class” who sometimes play the role of subversive agents and purveyors of deathly culture. The monumental Roe v. Wade (1973) decision is case-in-point; the Roe v. Wade majority functioned as members of the creative class when they forsook their calling to interpret the Constitution, engaging instead in the fabrication of new “rights” and enshrining those rights as the law of the land. Additionally, the Court majority made themselves purveyors of death when they treated the unborn human being as the mother’s “personalty” (the legal word for a moveable piece of property), able to be disposed of if the mother so chooses. Indeed, mere decades after having given proper legal and moral status to an entire class of human beings—black slaves—who previously had been treated as property, America decided to rescind proper legal and moral status to an entire class of human beings—unborn babies—who previously had been


¹⁶In the introduction to Deathworks, James Davison Hunter reflects upon Rieff’s rhetorical strategy, writing, “The book is difficult, intentionally so. His is a strategy of concealment. In a culture where everything is on display yet so little of substance actually revealed, Rieff tends to write with deliberate and often clever obscurity as a means of veiling his contentions and insights.... Rieff wants the reader to work for the insight he has to offer; to read and then reread” (xvi).
treated as human persons, and allow members of that class to be terminated on demand. As a cultural “deathwork,” Roe v. Wade is especially significant because it brought death to society not only indirectly but directly through its legitimation of lethal violence against innocent and helpless persons.

So, Rieff’s analysis of cultural deathworks bears fruit, not only through his written page, but as a heuristic framework and mode of socio-cultural analysis that Christians can adopt as we take a “missionary posture” toward the secular West.

5.2. Formation

Though Rieff’s work is especially helpful for understanding the social and cultural degradation of our secular age (deformation), it is less helpful when reflecting back upon original sacred and social order (formation). Positively, Rieff recognizes that, historically, sacred order has always underlain social order, funding it with meaning and a moral code. His answer, as far as it goes, is good and helpful. Or, we could say, it is helpful but “thin.” Even better, or “thicker,” would be a full doctrine of creation, reflections on the goodness and order of the created world, and indications of how that goodness and order connects to human flourishing.

For a thick description of formation, the work of Abraham Kuyper is especially helpful, undergirding, as it would, Rieff’s analysis with an articulation of creation’s order in terms of “sphere sovereignty.” This concept of sphere sovereignty was Kuyper’s way of describing the various spheres of human activity and their relationship to one another. As the name implies, Kuyper understood each sphere of culture to have a God-given inherent sovereignty in relation to other spheres; each sphere has its own center (reason for being) and circumference (limits to its jurisdiction). The political sphere, for example, exists to achieve justice for the individuals and communities under its purview, but its jurisdiction is limited and does not extend to the artistic, educational, or ecclesial spheres, and vice-versa. In other words, Kuyper’s description reveals creation order as a \textit{de facto} system of checks and balances—not at the political level by dispersing governmental authority but at a deeper, ontological level by dispersing


18 For a summary overview of the physical, psychological, and sociological harm caused by abortion on demand, see Mary Cunningham Agee, “The America We Seek: A Statement of Pro-Life Principle and Concern,” First Things 63 (1996): 40–44.

19 In his book \textit{The Interpretation of Cultures}, anthropologist Clifford Geertz offers a helpful contrast between “thick” and “thin” descriptions of reality. A thick description of human behavior is one that explains not just a human behavior but the cognitive, affective, and evaluative framework operative in the cultural context in which the behavior arises. By contrast, a “thin” description is one that does not provide such context. Transferred from anthropologic to public life, a “thick” argument or explanation is one that appeals to religious and ideological frameworks and beliefs overtly, while a “thin” argument or explanation will use more generic or consensual language. Clifford Geertz, \textit{The Interpretation of Cultures} (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30.
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Cultural authority. So Christ the King rules over every sphere, but he also orders each sphere according to distinct patterns.

An understanding of God’s normative order for creation is so important because, as James K. A. Smith puts it, humans are embodied actors rather than merely cognitive machines. Thus, in a discussion of Christianity’s relationship to cultural context, nothing less than true or false worship is at stake. Cultural institutions have visions of the good life (of the kingdom!); those visions of the good life produce habits and practices (liturgies!) that shape our instinctual desires and thus our ways of thinking and living. Humans shape culture but culture in turn shapes them.

Our recognition of creation’s normative order reminds us that God is faithful to his creation even when his creatures are not faithful to him. It causes us to remember that God created the spheres and holds them in his sovereign hand. By implication, no sphere, no matter how corrupted or misdirected, is too far gone. No matter how strong of a hold the officer class might have, no matter how compelling its cultural deathworks may be, they cannot contradict reality indefinitely with impunity. “Truth has a way of making its presence felt, even as some undertake to deny it.” By God’s grace, our faithful social, cultural, and political efforts may eventually bring some healing and redirection to the political sphere.

In Kuyper’s approach, therefore, faithful Christians should approach a given sphere of culture by discerning God’s creational design for it (formation) and exploring the ways his intentions for that sphere have been corrupted and misdirected by individual sin and corporate idolatry (cultural deathworks, or, deformation). After having done so, the Christian community can work together to seek healing and redirection for that sphere (reformation). Consider again the example of Roe v. Wade. God has instituted government to do justice to the various individuals and communities under its purview (formation). Unfortunately, the United States Supreme Court has corrupted and misdirected

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20 Kuyper gave politics a “pre-Fall” location in God’s plan for his good creation. He argued that there would have been a need for government even if the Fall had not occurred. Even though political authority in an unfallen world would not have involved “the sword,” there still would have emerged “one organic world-empire, with God as its King; exactly what is prophesied for the future which awaits us, when all sin shall have disappeared.” Abraham Kuyper, Lectures on Calvinism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 92.

21 Kuyper developed his view of sphere sovereignty as an alternative to two competing conceptions. The first competing conception is what Kuyper viewed as the church-controlled culture of the medieval period, in which God ruled the spheres of culture via the institutional church; ecclesiastical authorities gave direction to the various spheres. The second competing conception is the modern secularist view, which rightly wanted to liberate the spheres from ecclesiastical control, but wrongly tries to liberate the spheres from God’s rule altogether. By way of contrast, Kuyper places the spheres under God’s rule, but not under the rule of ecclesiastical authorities. See Abraham Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” in Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 463–90.


24 Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen’s Living at the Crossroads is an introduction to Christian worldview conceived in line with Kuyper’s notion of sphere sovereignty. In the book, they not only evaluate the rise and development of Western thought in light of its conformity with, or departure from, Christians principles, but also explore what it means for Christians to bring healing and redirection to Western cultural institutions and areas of public life. Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).
God’s design by legalizing lethal violence against innocent unborn beings (deformation). Therefore, the Christian community must work for cultural renewal and legal reform in hopes that every human being created in God’s image and likeness will be “protected in law and cared for in life” (reformation).25

Reflecting back on Rieff’s heuristic framework, we should recognize that his concept of “cultural deathworks” has enormous potential for helping Christians explore the corruption and misdirection of our cultural institutions and the deforming powers of many Western culture-works. Yet, his understanding of original sacred order is not fully-formed and would benefit from a more robust understanding of that order, such as Kuyper’s construal.

5.3. Reformation

Having illumined the cultural deformation of our secular age, Rieff found it necessary to reflect upon how we might reconnect sacred order and social order, paving the way once again for cultural institutions and works to nourish and reform society rather than sickening and deforming it. He recognized that the medicine for our sickness is theological, that society must once again allow sacred order to fund its cultural institutions and inspire its culture makers, thus shaping its social order. Its cultural elite must restrain themselves from decadence, producing a culture that fosters social renewal rather than decay. It must do so without regressing to Christendom, with its imposed theocratic uniformity, or lapsing into multiculturalism, with its incipient relativism. What Rieff provides, in fact, is an eschatology, in which a fourth world “people” call for a reintroduction sacred order, accompanied by moral restraint and a theologically-underscored principled pluralism.

And yet, Rieff does not sufficiently name the “people” who are uniquely capable of helping our third world move onward to a fourth world era. Again, Kuyper’s theological framework is helpful. Kuyper emphasizes that, when the crucified-but-risen Lord ascended, he left behind a “people,” the church. The church exists in two capacities—as institution and as organism.26 As an institution, this people gathers weekly to worship the Lord through the proclamation of the Word, celebration of the Lord’s Supper, and fellowship with one another. The institutional church’s “power” is not social, cultural, or political activism but proclamation of the gospel, a proclamation that challenges the cultus publicus of our secular age. By proclaiming that Jesus is Lord (and Caesar is not), the church nourishes our true identity and previews the day when the Lord will return to set the world aright, securing once-and-for-all the reconnection of sacred and social.

Yet the church exists also as an organism. After having gathered institutionally to nourish our political identity, this people is sent as ambassadors of the King into their respective stations in life. We are able to serve society and culture, to reconnect social order to sacred order by serving the king in every sphere of culture—art and science, scholarship and education, business and entrepreneurship, politics and economics, sports and competition. Reshaping cultural institutions in accord with God’s design, the Christian community can thus minister to our secular age by proclaiming a Christian vision


of the good life and infusing that vision into our culture’s “gut” by means of gospel-centered culture formation.

In summary, Sunday morning public worship prepares this “people,” the church, for Monday morning public life. Sunday morning worship reminds us that Christian Scripture provides the true story of the whole world and that Jesus stands at the center of that story as the King of the world. Monday morning public life provides the opportunity for Christians to allow the Bible’s story and Jesus’s kingship to shape the way we speak and act in the public square. After gathering together in the light of word and worship, we are prepared to disperse for the rest of the week to reflect the “light of the world” together in our respective stations of life.

Similarly, the eschatology Rieff provides is good as far as it goes, but is not muscular enough to accomplish what he envisions. Only a fully Christian eschatology, rooted in the atonement of Christ and awaiting the triumphant return of Christ, provides what is necessary to push forward toward a “fourth world culture.” Any eschatology like Rieff’s that lacks the power and promise of the resurrection is destined, as a rule, to end in disappointment. What we see around us in Western culture is not merely a sickness, but a sickness unto death. Thus, we need not only a heavenly vision of society, but a supernatural power to bring heaven down to earth.

This is what Christianity, and Christianity alone, offers as we look to the future. The resurrection of Christ teaches us that where death seems to have uttered the final word, this “ending” is penultimate. God will restore the earth, and his kingdom will prevail. What he created, what he mourned over as it reveled in deathworks ranged against him, what he pursued and redeemed—this he will restore, from top to bottom. The Father does not intend to trash his creation or provide a salvation that removes us from it. He will do for creation what he did for his Son, taking what was dead and making it alive. What gives us grounds for hope is that we are privy to this finale before the finale.

6. Where Hope Prevails

As those who know the end of history’s story, Christians can engage in cultural activity with a humble confidence. The realm of culture, as dark as it may often seem, will one day be raised to life and made to bow in submission to Christ. Christ will gain victory and restore the earth, but it will be his victory rather than ours, so we remain confident but humble.

We conclude with a reminder from Lesslie Newbigin, who recognized the profound implications that history’s final act had for contemporary social action, even in the midst of a deformed society. He writes:

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27 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 26.

28 Plato viewed salvation as an upward movement, away from the physical realm which imprisons us and toward a non-physical realm that liberates us. This, however, is not the type of salvation provided by God through Christ. The biblical depiction of God’s salvation is one in which God renews and restores his original creation (Acts 3:21; Rom 8:21–22; Eph 1:10; Col 1:20; Rev 21:1–4) instead of annihilating it; his salvation does not take us up and away from creation but places us firmly in the midst of it, both now and forevermore. Some commentators point to 2 Pet 3:10–12 to argue that God will annihilate the earth by fire, but, as Al Wolters has argued, the Greek word εὐφανεία is better translated “will be found” than “will be burned up.” This translation is faithful to the Greek and reinforces the teaching of other biblical passages such as Acts 3:21 and Rom 8:21–22. Al Wolters, “Worldview and Textual Criticism in 2 Peter 3:10,” *WTJ* 49 (1987): 405–13.
The point is that [a transformed society] is not our goal, great as that is.... Our goal is the holy city, the New Jerusalem, a perfect fellowship in which God reigns in every heart, and His children rejoice together in His love and joy.... And though we know that we must grow old and die, that our labors, even if they succeed for a time, will in the end be buried in the dust of time, and that along with the painfully won achievements of goodness, there are mounting seemingly irresistible forces of evil, yet we are not dismayed.... We know that these things must be. But we know that as surely as Christ was raised from the dead, so surely shall there be a new heaven and a new earth wherein dwells righteousness. And having this knowledge we ought as Christians to be the strength of every good movement of political and social effort, because we have no need either of blind optimism or of despair.29
