

Engaging Culture from the “East” of the West



How to Reach the West Again is a thought-provoking book that I find extremely informative and helpful. Many insightful and praiseworthy points stand out, but I would like to focus on areas in which I have some concerns or corrections.

Before I do that, however, I believe that it is important to state my social location: I serve as a pastor in Athens, Greece and as coordinator for City to City Balkans. In a way, I represent the eastern portion—or just “East”—of the globally acknowledged “West.” This realization already raises concern as I consider the complexity of the term “West.”

DEFINING OUR TERMS

First, I believe that the book’s references to the “West” are assumed and not clearly defined. We need to take into account the internal differentiation within Europe and the well-attested differences between secularization in Europe and North America. Perhaps it will help to have a more nuanced definition of what exactly we mean when we say “West.”

Many people almost take for granted the fact that the West is becoming less religious and less Christian. However, this process is not necessarily happening uniformly across the continent or in all areas of life. [As Grace Davie has shown](#), there is still “vicarious religion” in Europe. Europeans are still surrounded by many monuments of a Christian past (art, churches, language) which may still

play a role in our present, sometimes recognizably, but sometimes subconsciously.

WHAT ABOUT JUSTICE?

Second, I think we need to give careful thought to how we engage politically. I agree with Keller that the church must avoid “political captivity” on the one hand or “some imaginary apolitical withdrawal” on the other. I agree that we should avoid making “an effort to secure political power in order to impose Christian standards,” as Keller rightly rejects, but I also see a great need for taking a prophetic and critical stance against both prevailing political views and systemic injustice. In *How to Reach the West Again* (and in much of Keller’s other work), there is an admirable and refreshing referral to issues of justice and the poor. I wonder, though, whether the church can promote a “category-defying social vision” without applying criticism to the systemic roots of evil and injustice. In other words, without being political.

I WONDER, THOUGH, WHETHER THE CHURCH CAN PROMOTE A “CATEGORY-DEFYING SOCIAL VISION” WITHOUT APPLYING CRITICISM TO THE SYSTEMIC ROOTS OF EVIL AND INJUSTICE. IN OTHER WORDS, WITHOUT BEING POLITICAL.

For example, it is important to teach believers to use their money for generosity and mercy, thus creating a community that is “highly committed to caring for the poor and marginalized.” But isn’t it also important to reflect on the question of why there is poverty in the first place? It brings to mind the well-known quote of Hélder Pessoa Câmara: “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.”

ASKING A DIFFERENT QUESTION

Third, the issue of “authority”—some standard to which we must conform—may not be going away to the extent the book assumes. I definitely see a transfer of authority from the church and the religious center to other entities. That does not, however, completely eclipse the idea of authority in general. For example, while young people as a whole may not care anymore about what a church or pastor teaches them about moral norms, they *do* choose to put themselves under the hard (and at times harsh) authority of a sports coach. Instead of confessing to a priest, many receive psychoanalysis from a counselor. Perhaps what we need to explore is *why* people don’t view the church as a serious source of authority anymore.

To press the point further, when we analyze the world, we need to be aware that the church is not immune to it, but part of it. Before we reach the West with the gospel, we need to realize that the *West* has reached *us*! In other words, what happens “out there” shapes the church as well. In order for a church to be missional, we need to start with a thorough self-examination. If, for example, consumerism and entertainment are the new religions of our culture, then we need to start examining how that influences the church. Some great resources I have found on this topic are David F. Well’s books *No place for Truth* and *God in the Wasteland*.

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WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE WEST

A fourth point of concern with Keller’s book is the way he seems to see the Western way as *only* problematic. Charles Taylor came to Athens a couple of years ago and gave a talk on secularization. He repeated his basic analysis of the trajectory that led the West to where it is today. Interestingly enough, he emphasized Luther’s (and Protestantism’s) insistence on personal salvation. Before he started his lecture, he noted that he was coming to what he considered to be the global East, hoping to find some light that would perhaps help the West break through her dead ends. What he found was of no help. One after the other, university professors who attended the lecture pointed out the ills of the Eastern way. They emphasized how communitarian societies foster nationalism, ethnocentrism, and totalitarianism.



What I mean by this is that Western individualism is not altogether negative or problematic. In some ways, it may actually be welcomed. For example, in the Greek Orthodox Church, there is resistance to the idea of translating the liturgy into modern Greek. Most people don’t understand the text, but this is not seen as a problem because “individual” understanding and salvation is less important in their context than following tradition. We need to carefully explore the positive aspects of the spread of Western values and develop them, not just see them as a problem we have to fight against, and thus revert back to collectivism.¹

My final point is again related to my particular social location. Framing the evangelistic praxis in terms of “questions we answer” or something we explain, as important and irreducible as this is, may be one-sided. Keller mentions James K.A. Smith’s proposal for what he calls “engagement of imagination” in the

service of “character formation.” Can the same be true for evangelism as well? And if so, what form shall it take? Can we engage the imagination in order to understand evangelism of the global West?

In closing, let me state once again that I believe that Keller provides us with an extremely thoughtful analysis and with helpful and practical principles to reach the West again.

In Him,
Giotis Kantartzis

1 For a timely example of the same issue, also see my article [“The Challenges of Retrieval: Theological Reflections in the face of COVID-19.”](#)



About the Author

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