

BOOK REVIEWS

Review of *Evangelism in an Age of Despair: Hope Beyond the Failed Promise of Happiness*

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Evangelism in an Age of Despair: Hope beyond the Failed Promise of Happiness. By Andrew Root. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2025. 304 pages.

Andrew Root's *Evangelism in an Age of Despair* helpfully challenges Christians and their clergy to reorient the aim of Christian evangelism from a potentially instrumentalized believe-this-and-get-that approach towards a sacramental ministry of consolation. The ministerial act of consoling sad people in an era of sad times becomes evangelistic, in Root's analysis, as people are drawn into a life of faith and into a faith community beyond an empty pursuit of individual happiness. Put plainly, this book is about ministry, rooted in a religious community and tradition, to sad, stressed-out people who find it practically implausible to believe in a divine being, let alone a God who acts in and through the world for the good of the world. Two broad questions, though not explicitly stated, serve as the exploratory engine of the book: Why are the times in which we live animated with such collective sadness? How do religious communities respond to sad people living in sad times while at the same time navigating life in the Secular Age, where belief in God is no longer the default and where all forms of belief are equally viable and equally contestable?¹

Happiness Hunters Who Are Sad

In characteristic fashion, Root offers an insightful historical genealogy that helps answer "how we got here" alongside a fictional story that embodies what Root is trying to convey about ministry. Woven throughout the book

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¹ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (London, England: Belknap Press, 2018), 3–4. The famous question Taylor begins with frames the situation well: "The change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others. Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives. And this will also likely mean that at least in certain milieux, it may be hard to sustain one's faith."

is a fictional story about a woman named Renate. The fictional story of Renate appears to be born out of Root's experience reading Rina Raphael's *The Wellness Gospel*.² Masked behind the fictional story of Renate is Rina Raphael's own story as told in her book.

In multiple podcast interviews promoting the book, Root shared that a primary impetus for the content and shape of *Evangelism in an Age of Despair* came from reading how Rina Raphael's father died. Rina, like the fictional character Renate in Root's book, was alone in her prolonged grief. Her yoga instructor did not come to the funeral. Her friends, also disciples of what she called the wellness gospel, wished her well and gave her hugs, but mostly gave off the vibe that they had moved on. Her loneliness was only interrupted when her Jewish family and friends from the synagogue where she attended as a child and had not attended much since showed up to console her. Armed with potluck meals and words from the *Ketuvim*, they ministered to her with food and words from their scripture. This ministry of consolation placed her, like Renate in Root's fictional story, on the re-orienting journey towards faith in God inside a community of faith.

One of the primary arguments of *Evangelism in an Age of Despair* is that the modern cultural obsession with happiness has paradoxically made people sad, anxious, lonely, and stressed. Here the subtitle of the book comes into view: *Hope Beyond the Failed Promise of Happiness*. Living in a country like the United States where the Declaration of Independence itself fills the pursuit of happiness with a moral force – it would be wrong not to pursue individual happiness! – Root carefully explains why the opposite seems to have happened. Contrary to the notion that Isaac Newton and René Descartes are the sole grand architects of modernity,³ Root cites Stephen Toulmin to convincingly claim that Michel de Montaigne, a sixteenth century philosopher, is the real father of modernity. The Renaissance thinkers of the sixteenth century, even more than the seventeenth century rationalists, produced the scaffolding of modernity as it is experienced today. This is especially true as it pertains to the modern cultural obsession with individual happiness.

Michel de Montaigne, in his *Essays*, famously wrote, “When I dance, I dance. When I sleep, I sleep.”⁴ The thrust of this sentence captures the essence of Montaigne's message: Find happiness in this life, in what you are doing right now. The goal of life, for Montaigne, was to joyfully partake in all

² Rina Raphael, *The Wellness Gospel* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016).

³ The generally accepted storyline that Root *vis-a-vis* Toulmin pushes against is that Newton and Descartes ushered in the age of reason and thus are the sole fathers of modernity. The late 1960s, with images of firehoses from being turned on African Americans and bombs being dropped in North Vietnam, exposed technical rationality and instrumental thinking to be cold and with much fault. Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 86.

⁴ Andrew Root, *Evangelism in an Age of Despair: People, Poverty, and the Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 117.

aspects of life. Whether gardening, working out, binge watching Netflix, or playing games with your children, pursue what brings happiness. Montaigne, who sounds at home among contemporary spiritual gurus and life coaches, challenged his fellow citizens to be happy and content within themselves, independent of any transcendent presence. Root, citing *Why We are Restless: On the Modern Quest for Contentment*, calls this “immanent contentment”: individual humans seeking contentment and happiness within the immanent frame, apart from God, from within the self.⁵

Montaigne still exerts great influence. Modern religious people, too, implicitly or explicitly seek happiness as a form of the ultimate good. If religious communities are not careful to examine their implicit or explicit bent towards the obsessive pursuit of happiness, then evangelism may simply become the method by which religious people find non-religious people and tell them about how their religion will bring happiness. This instrumentalizes evangelism into a form of lifestyle marketing where God is the product. Recovering the sacramental nature of ministry, especially ministry to sad, hurting people, sets the scene for a personal experience where God meets people amid loss, grief, and pain. It also sets the scene for shepherding a person into a life of faith and the community of faith.

Ministers Who Console

Root’s theology of the cross, which undergirds virtually all his publications to this point, is crucial for understanding his critique of the modern obsession with happiness and his proposal for a ministry of consolation as the place where evangelism reflexively materializes. A theology of the cross posits that God meets people personally while they endure suffering, grief, and loss. God, who is familiar with the redemptive suffering of the cross, draws near to those who are sad and hurting.

Describing the life of Gregory of Nyssa, an early Church Father and prolific theologian and philosopher of the fourth century, Root introduces readers to the influence of his sister, Macrina. Gregory and his older sister Macrina together mourned the loss of multiple family members who died early deaths. Macrina herself lost her fiancé and sworn an oath to never marry again, instead devoting her life to the Church. Root emphasizes Macrina’s role in understanding the depths of human suffering and the mystery of God’s presence amidst it. He uses Macrina’s conversations with Gregory of Nyssa in his work *The Life of Moses* as an example of how Christian spirituality should not be about escaping the realities of human life but rather facing them head-on in communion with God. Root highlights how Macrina’s approach to suffering and human despair is not one of simplistic solutions but a call to

⁵ Root, *Evangelism in an Age of Despair*, 121. See also Andrew J. Rotter, *Why We Are Restless: On the Modern Pursuit of Contentment*, (New York: Random House, 2021), 27.

enter the mystery of human existence, much like how Christ entered into suffering on the cross. Root notes that Macrina reacted to grief not as a Stoic or Epicurean, but as a Christian. In this, Macrina becomes a model for evangelism as a movement centered not on providing easy answers, but on walking alongside people in their brokenness and despair, offering the hope of God's presence amid suffering.

This is partly why Root spends an entire chapter detailing the life Blaise Pascal, the brilliant French polymath. Pascal passionately wrote against the immanent contentment found in French culture birthed out of Montaigne's writings. Pascal believed that Montaigne was selling a lie. Pascal, prior to a mysterious mystical encounter with God, tried to live the life that Montaigne claimed would bring happiness and found that he was merely distracting himself from the truth of reality.⁶ The difficult reality for Pascal as amplified by Root is that life inevitably brings sadness and discontentment. Montaigne offered mere diversions from the sad realities of life. They masked the deep things of his soul.

This experience is what led him to pen the now famous "Pascal's wager." Root's take on Pascal's wager is that if a person confesses their sadness and refuses to flee from it, then they will likely encounter the God who is familiar with suffering.

Chaplains in Secular Institutions

Many happiness-hunters in the modern world do, in fact, try to "work through" their sadness through therapy. Root does not reject therapy. He affirms it, rightly. Root's discussion about the cultural turn to the therapeutic is particularly helpful for military chaplains. His argument runs as follows. People often get depressed because the pursuit of happiness is elusive and exhausting, especially in times of stress. Stress, according to Root, is the great adversary of happiness-hunters. In response to stress society took a turn toward the therapeutic gospel, which is typically, if not always, distinct in both its practice and aim from ministry. Historian Eva Moskowitz writes:

There are three tenets to this 'therapeutic gospel.' The first is that happiness should be our supreme goal . . . the second tenet of our therapeutic faith is the belief that our problems stem from psychological causes . . . the third and final tenet of the therapeutic gospel is the most important, but it is so universally accepted, so seemingly self-evident, that we hardly notice its existence. This tenet is that the psychological problems that

⁶ At the time of Pascal's death, a note was found sewn into his coat. The note contained roughly 230 words and recounted an intense vision he experienced on the night of November 23, 1654 (often called his "Night of Fire"). Christ encountered Pascal and his note bore witness to the experience. Pascal famously summarized the experience with three words: "Fire, fire, fire." Root, *Evangelism in an Age of Despair*, 180-82.

underlie our failures and unhappiness are in fact treatable and that we can, and indeed should, address these problems both individually and as a society.⁷

It is important here to place Root's book within the context of military culture, where readiness instead of happiness is the number one collective priority. In pursuit of readiness, chaplains and behavioral health providers are deployed as solutions to problems with readiness. In this context, the ministry of chaplains may be seen as an instrumentalized tool designed to merely increase readiness. However, even as uniformed clergy working in a secular organization, chaplains owe ultimate allegiance to aims beyond readiness. Their aim is religious in nature because their ordination and endorsement come from an ecclesiastical body. Leaving professional therapy for trained military psychologists can free chaplains to act distinctly and uniquely as ministers.⁸ Chaplains who act as ministers can lead sad people living in sad times to gaze beyond the immanent frame, beyond the therapeutic gospel outlined by Eva Moskowitz, beyond an obsession with happiness. Military chaplains, who proudly put primacy on their ministerial presence with those who are sad or suffering, enter a person's sadness not as Epicurean or Stoic philosophers, or as clinicians, but as ministers who bring a word of salvation from one pilgrim to another that can transform the soul. The very act of showing up to minister through consolation becomes evangelism because it becomes sacramental, like a "a doorway into an encounter that gives ontological participation" in God's presence.⁹

Conclusion

A transformative encounter with God often happens within, not despite, human suffering. While I wish Root offered a clearer exploration of how joy fits into this framework without minimizing or opposing suffering, I do see a need for clergy in the west, including military chaplains, to adjust the *telos* of their ministry away from happiness, health, readiness, and wellness. These fit nicely within the immanent frame and lend themselves to an instrumentalized approach to ministry, where the concept of spirituality is a tool for overcoming suffering, adversity, and sadness in service to military readiness. Service members need chaplains whose *telos* is oriented towards God and rooted in their faith tradition. These chaplains can more readily minister within a person's suffering without needlessly rushing through their suffering. Root's claim is not radical, despite the provocative title of his book. He is merely arguing, and I am affirming, that if Christians show up and

⁷ Eva Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust* (New York: Random House, 2022), 103, quoted in Root, *Evangelism in an Age of Despair*, 157.

⁸ War and National Defense Act of 2015, *US Code 50* (2015), § 3814 (g) (1).

⁹ Root, *Evangelism in an Age of Despair*, 20.

minister to sad people, aiming not at making them happy but instead on consoling a person in God's presence, sad people will reflexively be beckoned to begin or continue their wandering journey into God.

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