

Blessed Are Those Who Mourn?  
Practicing Christian Faith in a Death-Denying Culture

Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, Ph.D.

Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, February 2, 2025

50TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

*The*  
Denial  
*of* Death



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With a NEW FOREWORD by BRIAN GREENE,  
author of *The Elegant Universe*

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Ernest Becker

“One of those rare masterpieces that will stimulate  
your thoughts, your intellectual curiosity, and . . . your soul.”  
—ELISABETH KÜBLER-ROSS, MD, author of *On Death and Dying*

First published in 1973

50<sup>TH</sup>  
ANNIVERSARY  
EDITION

ON DEATH  
& DYING

What the Dying  
Have to Teach Doctors,  
Nurses, Clergy &  
Their Own Families

ELISABETH  
KÜBLER-ROSS, M.D.

*foreword by* IRA BYOCK, M.D.

First published in 1969



APR • 57



# APPALACHIA

The Other Side of the Mountain

By Shelby Lee Adams

When someone dies in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky, the custom is that after the body has been embalmed at the local mortuary, it is brought home for a two- to three-day wake before burial. Relatives, friends, and neighbors all bring flowers and food to the home for long day and night visits.

I arrived at the family home around five in the afternoon on the first day of the wake, bringing flowers and food. Standing in the entryway to the home, I immediately saw the photograph I wanted to make. The partition in the middle of the home divided two separate events. Memories from my own grandparent's wakes when I was a child flashed to mind. To the right, the formal parlor with the corpse displayed and children running around; to the left, the informal visiting room with people chatting, laughing, eating sandwiches, bouncing babies, and the general camaraderie that is so typical of country people.

At 9 P.M. that evening I returned to the funeral home with family members to attend a prayer service conducted by a local preacher. Having previously talked to the family members, I was asked to take pictures of the family and friends around the coffin. This is also a traditional custom throughout the Appalachian Mountains. After the service, I set up my 4 × 5 camera and location light kit. I made over fifteen different compositions around the coffin with different family members, friends, and relatives of the deceased. In addition, several 4 × 5 Polaroids were made and distributed throughout the group. After I had made all the photos the family had requested, I asked if I could set up my camera in the doorway and take a few pictures for myself. Everyone was cooperative.

As you can see from the watch the woman is wearing in the photograph, it was almost midnight when I took the image I had envisioned in my mind earlier that afternoon.





Esther Renee Adams (“Nay Bug”), age 7

Mamaw was laid out in her own home. In the mountains of eastern Kentucky, such “country wakes” could last for days, as mourners emerged from the coal mines or drove out from the factories. Sometimes so many people showed up, the parlor floor had to be reinforced. Guests paid their respects to the dead, then went into another room for sandwiches, coffee and a long visit.

Not Nay Bug. While people talked outside, “you know where I was?” she asks. “Right there with my Mamaw. I stayed up with her all night.”

And when a man with a camera came and asked to take her picture, she said she wanted to lay a rose across her grandmother’s chest. “He said, ‘Sure, if it’s what you want to do,’ ” Nay Bug recalls. Then he took the picture.

Capturing Appalachia’s “Mountain People,” Abigail Tucker, *Smithsonian*, March 2010  
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/capturing-appalachias-mountain-people-7194840/>

Mourning is not an illness to be treated, it is a virtue to be cherished.



“Grief is essentially love  
under the condition of  
absence.”



“Blessed are those who  
mourn, for they will be  
comforted.”

(Matt. 5:4)





Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1906-1945

“By ‘mourning’ Jesus, of course, means doing without what the world calls peace and prosperity: He means refusing to be in tune with the world or to accommodate oneself to its standards. Such men mourn for the world, for its guilt, its fate and its fortune. While the world keeps holiday they stand aside, and while the world sings, ‘Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,’ they mourn. They see that for all the jollity on board, the ship is beginning to sink.”

*The Cost of Discipleship (1937)*

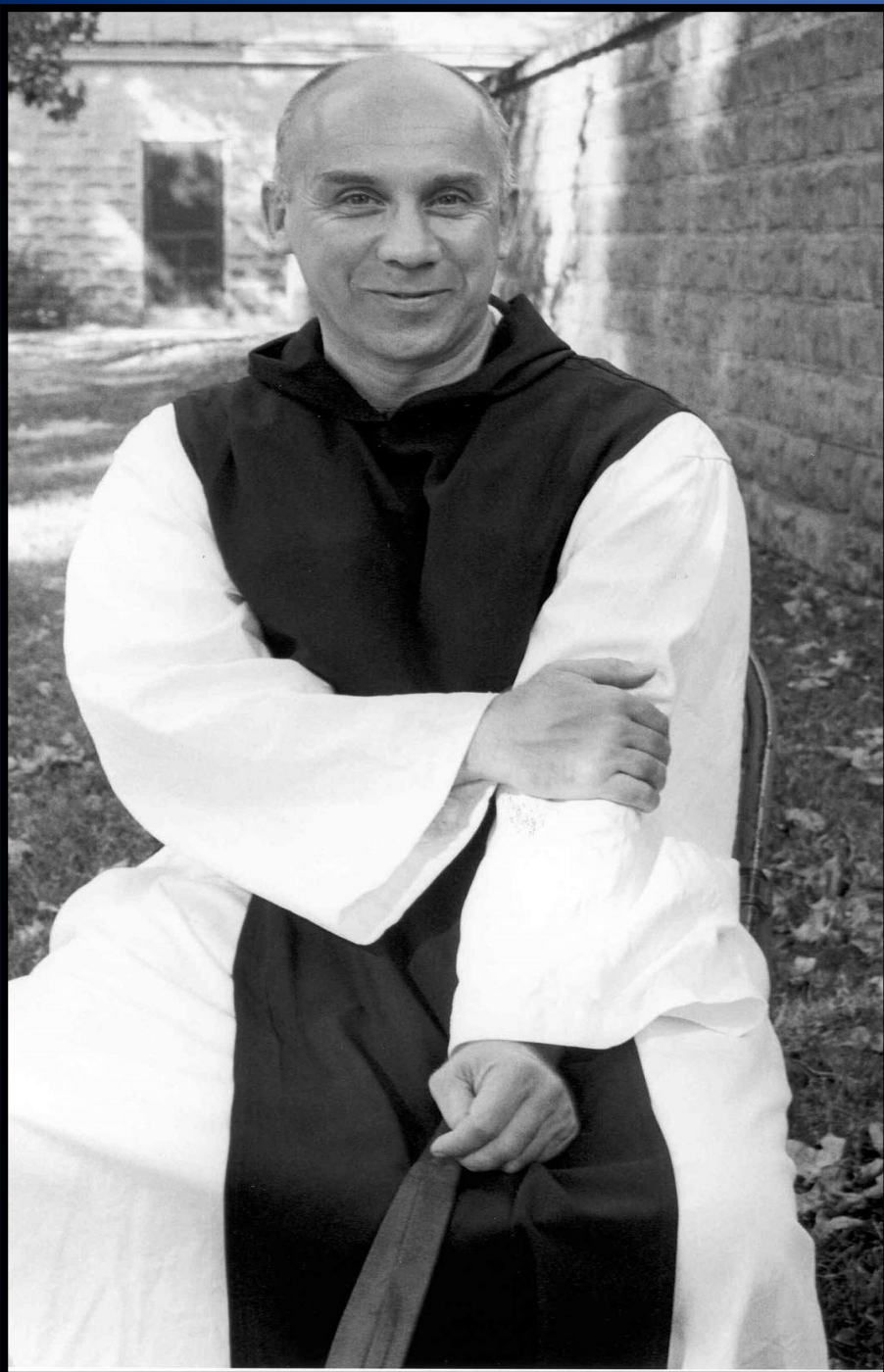


Johann Baptist Metz, 1928-2019

“This substantive loss of tradition shows itself most clearly in relation to the dead. ... The love that mourns for the dead is that form of love that cannot be taken up into a consumer society’s exploitation structures.”

“A symptom of this is the fact that ... men and women are forbidden any mourning or melancholy.”

*Faith in History and Society*, p. 51



“I have come to think that care of the soul requires a high degree of resistance to the culture around us, simply because that culture is dedicated to values that have no concern for the soul.”

Thomas Merton



*Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 75, No. 1, 2019, pp. 189–216  
doi: 10.1111/josi.12305

This article is part of the Special Issue “The Social Psychology of Neoliberalism,” Karim Bettache and Chi-Yue Chiu (Special Issue Editors). For a full listing of Special Issue papers, see: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/josi.2019.75.issue-1/issuetoc>.

## The Psychology of Neoliberalism and the Neoliberalism of Psychology

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*University of Kansas*

Daniel Sullivan  
*University of Arizona*

Hazel Rose Markus  
*Stanford University*

*In this article, we approach the relationship between neoliberalism and psychological science from the theoretical perspective of cultural psychology. In the first section, we trace how engagement with neoliberal systems results in characteristic tendencies—including a radical abstraction of self from social and material context, an entrepreneurial understanding of self as an ongoing development project, an imperative for personal growth and fulfillment, and an emphasis on affect management for self-regulation—that increasingly constitute the knowledge base of mainstream psychological science. However, as we consider in the second section, psychological science is not just an observer of neoliberalism and its impact on psychological experience. Instead, by studying psychological processes independent of cultural–ecological or historical context and by championing individual growth and affective regulation as the key to optimal well-being, psychological scientists reproduce and reinforce the influence and authority of neoliberal systems. Rather than a disinterested bystander, hegemonic forms of psychological science are thoroughly implicated in the neoliberal project.*

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The Cultural Psychology Research Group at the University of Kansas offered valuable feedback on an initial draft of the article. The Jack Brehm Fund for Basic Research in Social Psychology provided support for the project.



**Table 1.** Primary Features of Neoliberalism in Psychology

A: Feature of neoliberalism	B: Implication for psychological experience	C: Role of psychology in reproduction
<b>Radical abstraction</b> (of person from place, time, social and material context)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Relational mobility</b> (experience of choice about creation and dissolution of relational ties)</li> <li>• <b>Conditional identification</b> (i.e., choice about whether to invest in collective solidarities)</li> <li>• Freedom from constraints on action via spatial and temporal displacement of negative consequences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Methodological abstraction: priority of WEIRD standards, laboratory experiments, value neutrality</li> <li>• Ontological individualism: reduction of collective phenomena (e.g., racism, well-being) to aggregate of individual experience</li> </ul>
<b>Entrepreneurial self</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Exploration, innovation, and cultivation of self to create and extend marketable brand</b></li> <li>• <b>Prioritization of a self that takes risks and bears responsibility for own success (and failure)</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychological essentialism: ability testing, trait assessment</li> <li>• Responsibilization: blame misfortune on bad choices</li> </ul>
<b>Growth imperative</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Freedom to pursue core aspirations, goals, choice</b></li> <li>• <b>Freedom from obligations, expectation, norms</b></li> <li>• Necessitates exploration and elaboration of authentic preferences.</li> <li>• <b>Emphasis on self-expansion, flourishing, and personal fulfillment</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influential perspectives: growth mindset, self-determination, self-control, attachment, positive psychology</li> <li>• Individualist conception of empowerment</li> </ul>
<b>Affect management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Emphasis on high-arousal positive affect</b> (excitement, optimism, enthusiasm) as index of health and morality</li> <li>• Production of anxiety due to assumption of risk</li> <li>• <b>Affect regulation as key to success</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Love as fulfillment</li> <li>• Self-esteem movement</li> <li>• Happiness studies</li> </ul>

*Note.* We define neoliberalism as a cultural pattern including both (a) a political–economic agenda emphasizing limited government and deregulation of markets, and (b) a cultural ideology emphasizing freedom over other liberal values (e.g., equality). The table delineates four features of neoliberalism (Column A), summarizes consequences of these features for psychological experience (Column B), and summarizes the contribution of psychological science to the reproduction of these features (Column C).

“The relentless fascination with quantities of subjective feeling can only possibly divert critical attention away from broader political and economic problems. Rather than seek to alter our feelings, *now would be a good time to take what we’ve turned inwards, and attempt to direct it back out again.*”

William Davies, 2015, p. 11

‘A fascinating story . . . rich,  
lucid and arresting’  
—John Gray

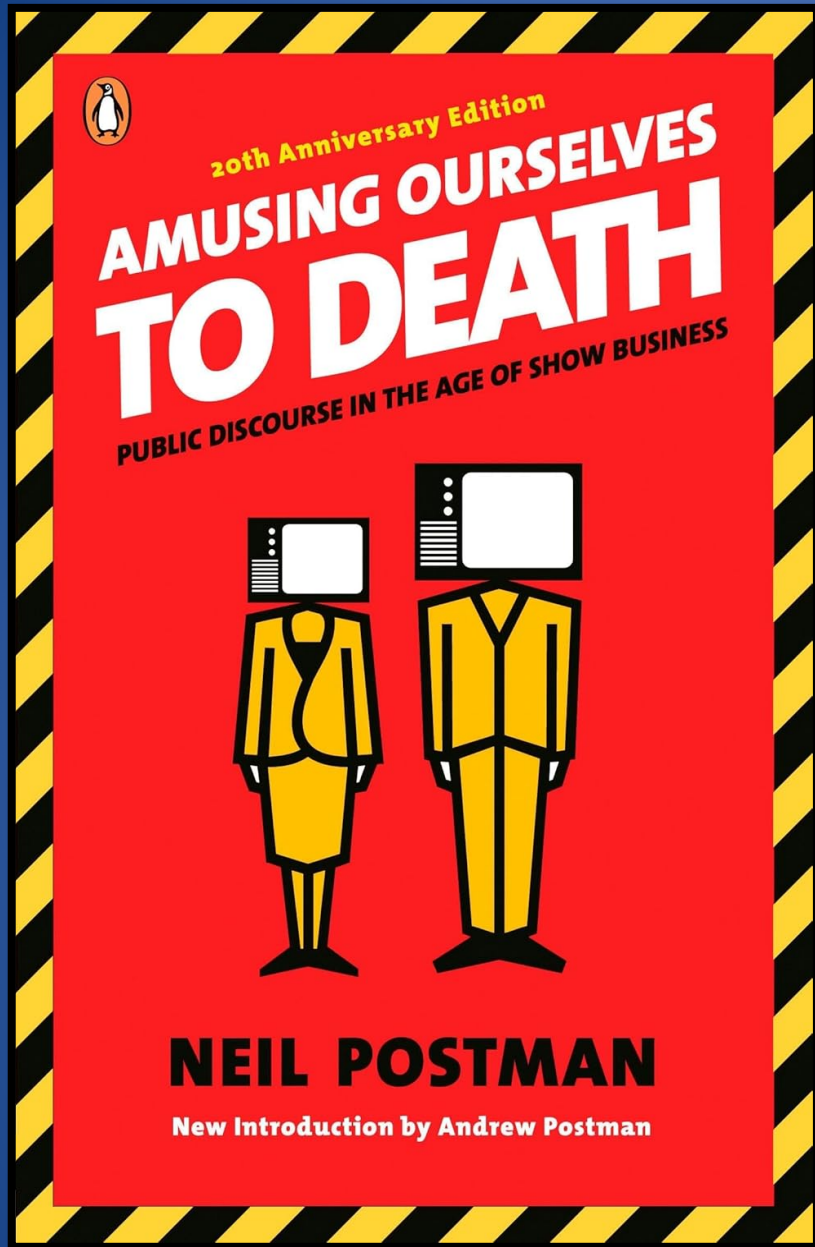
‘An eye-opening, head-spinning,  
and mind-expanding book’  
—Ha-Joon Chang



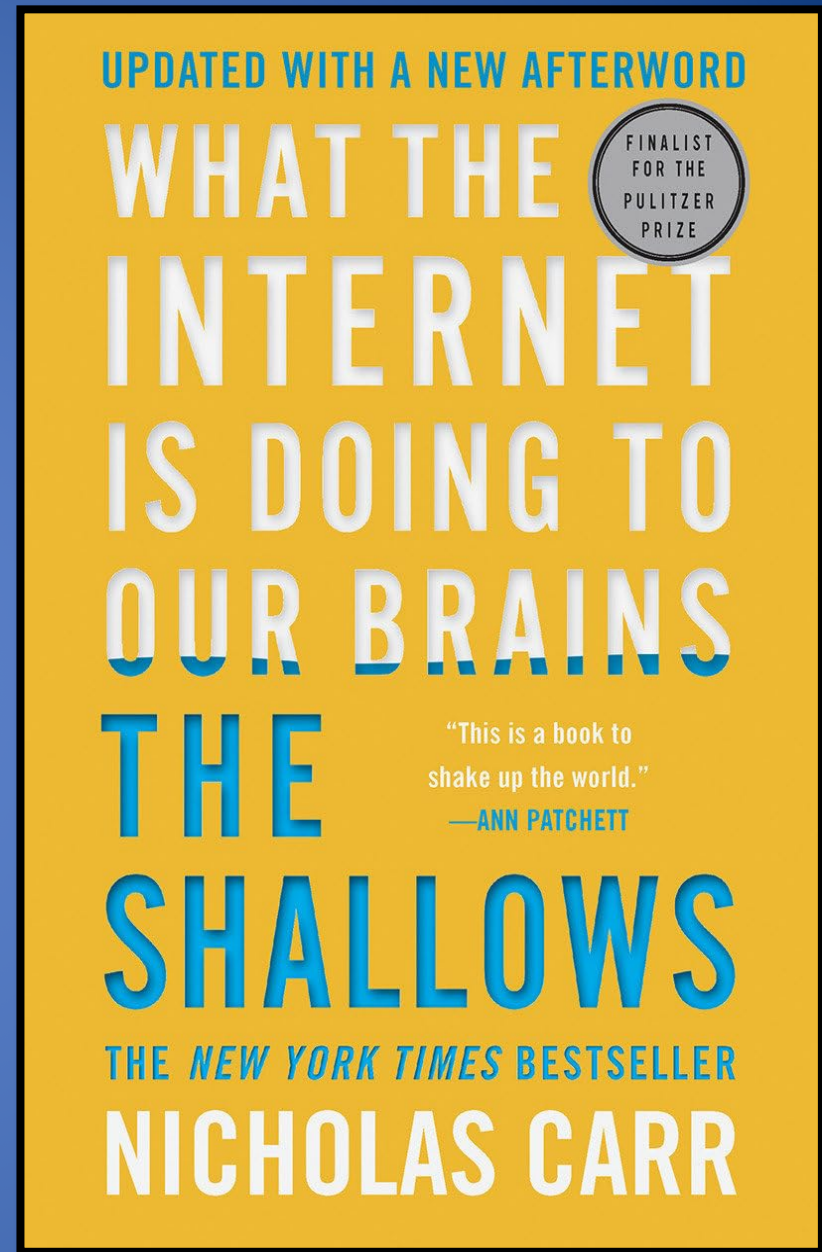
# THE HAPPINESS INDUSTRY

How the Government and  
Big Business Sold Us Well-Being

**WILLIAM  
DAVIES**

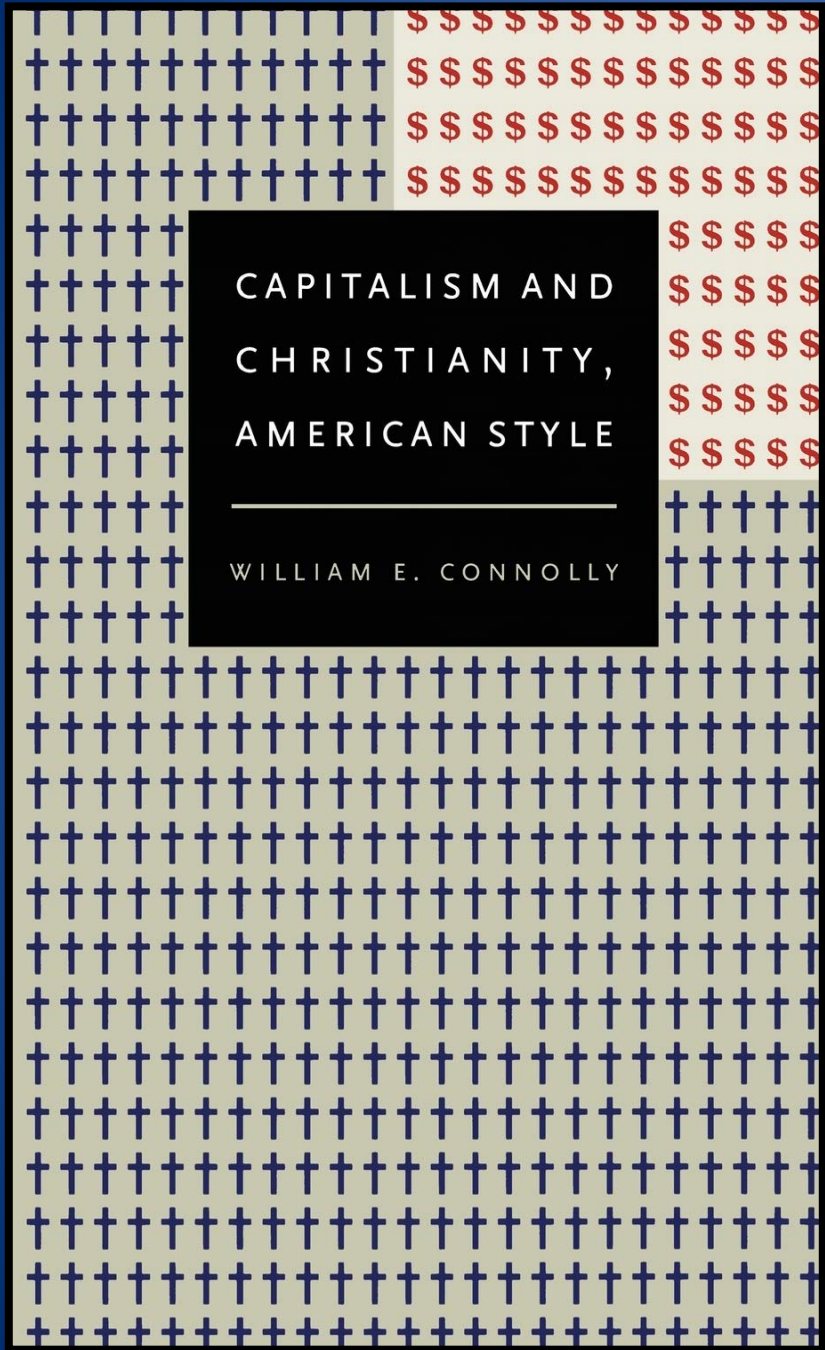


Published 1985



Published 2010





“The right leg of the evangelical movement today is joined at the hip to the left leg of the capitalist juggernaut. Neither could hop far unless it was joined to the other.”

# The Prosperity Gospel



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# THE GOSPEL OF CHURCH

How Mainline Protestants  
Vilified Christian Socialism and  
Fractured the Labor Movement



JANINE GIORDANO DRAKE

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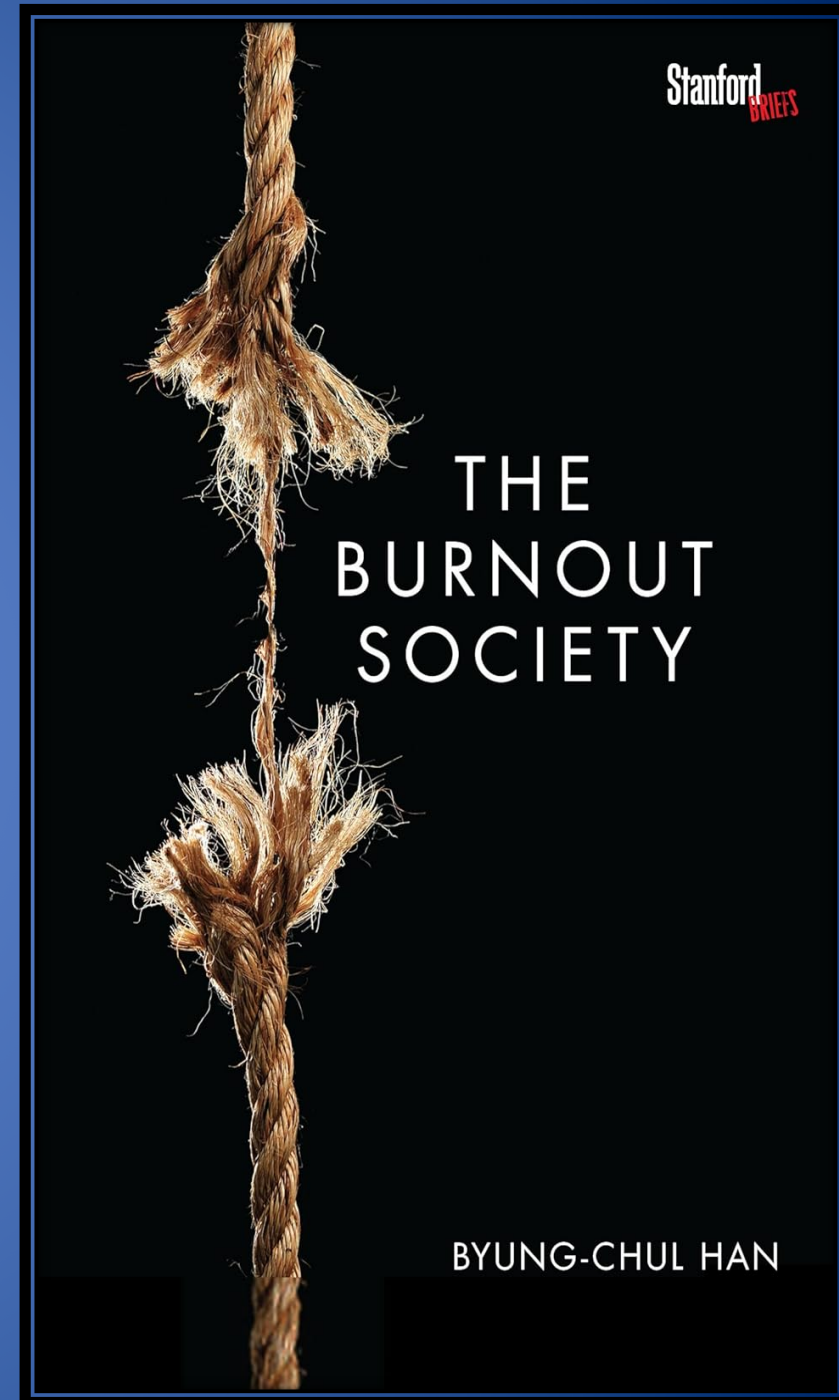


Janine Giordano Drake  
Professor of History, Indiana University

In today's societies, burnout results from "excessive positivity." We are not simply attacked from without, but from within, as we constantly strive to optimize ourselves.

"Mounting positivization of society also weakens feelings such as dread and mourning, which are based on a kind of negativity; they are negative feelings." (p. 23)

Without any negativity, our ability to reflect deeply is stunted. We live a shallow, unreflective existence.





Byung-Chul Han  
Prix Bristol des Lumières 2015

“The capitalist economy absolutizes survival. It is not concerned with the *good* life. It is sustained by the illusion that more capital produces more life, which means a greater capacity for living. The rigid, rigorous separation between life and death casts a spell of ghostly stiffness over life itself.”

People inhabiting this society: “They cannot be killed at all. Their life equals that of the undead. They are too alive to die, and too dead to live.”

(pp. 50-51)

# Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students Over Time: A Meta-Analysis

Personality and Social Psychology Review  
15(2) 180–198

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DOI: 10.1177/1088868310377395

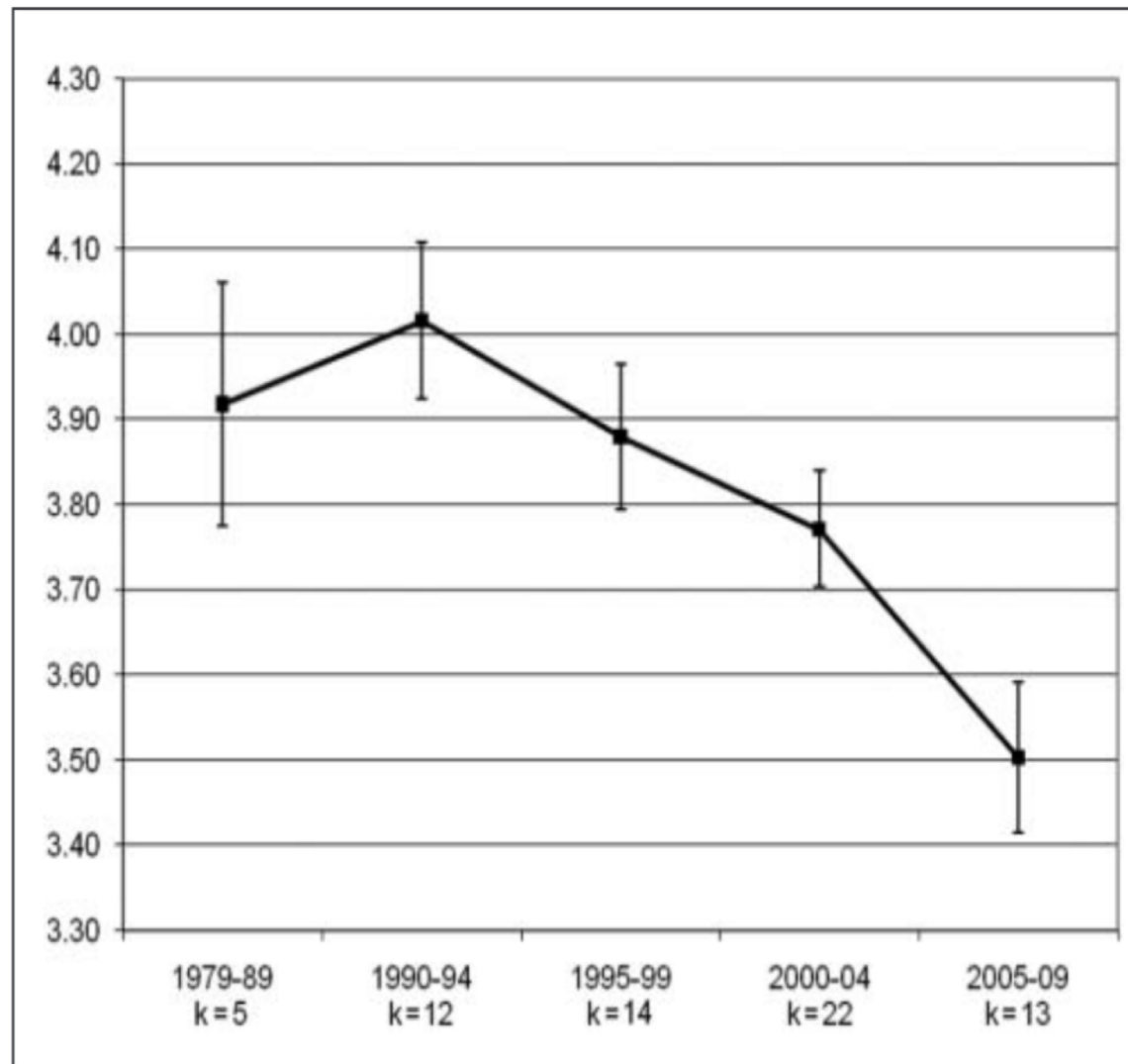
<http://pspr.sagepub.com>



Sara H. Konrath<sup>1,2</sup>, Edward H. O'Brien<sup>1</sup>, and Courtney Hsing<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

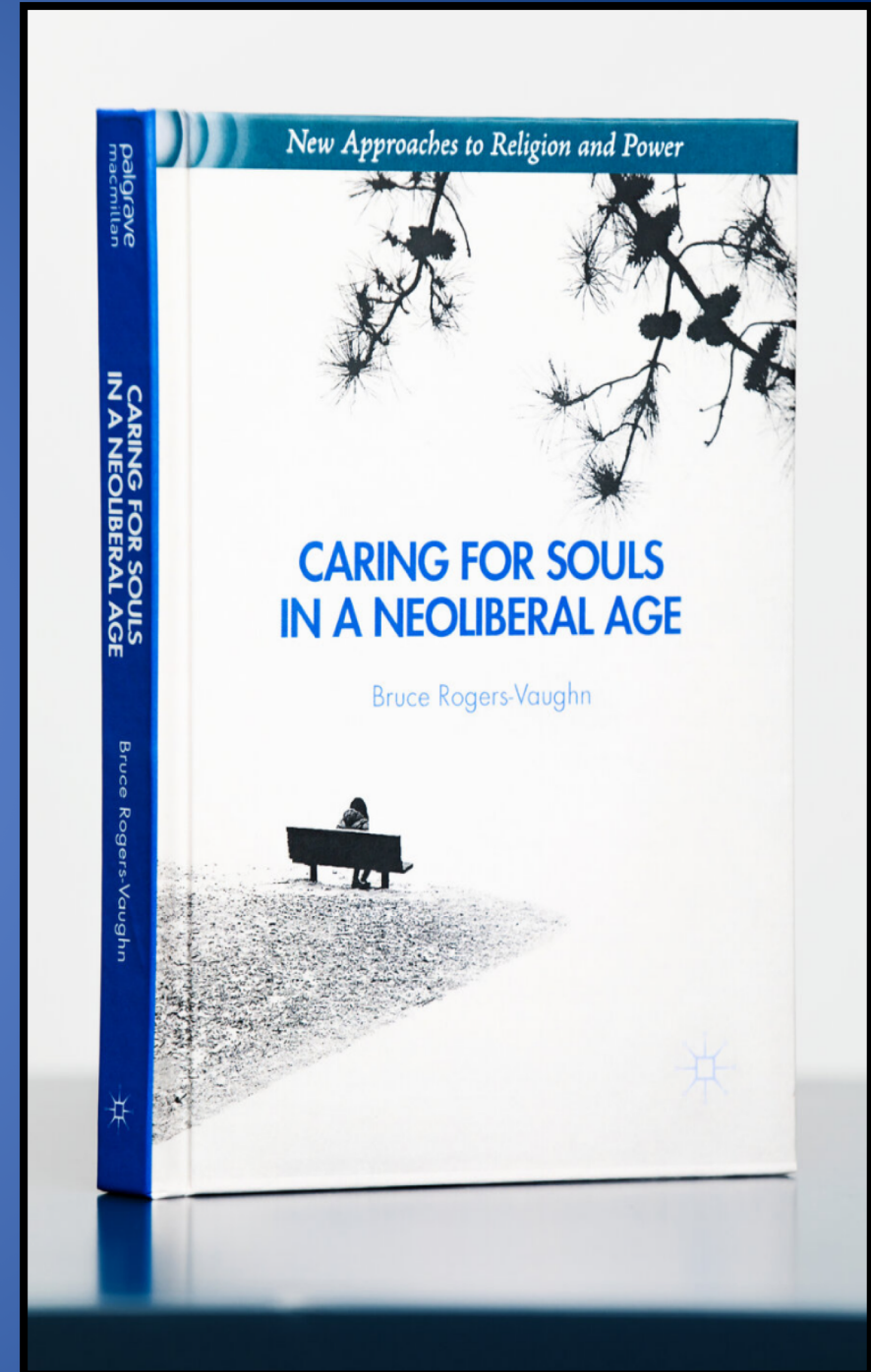
The current study examines changes over time in a commonly used measure of dispositional empathy. A cross-temporal meta-analysis was conducted on 72 samples of American college students who completed at least one of the four subscales (Empathic Concern, Perspective Taking, Fantasy, and Personal Distress) of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) between 1979 and 2009 (total  $N = 13,737$ ). Overall, the authors found changes in the most prototypically empathic subscales of the IRI: Empathic Concern was most sharply dropping, followed by Perspective Taking. The IRI Fantasy and Personal Distress subscales exhibited no changes over time. Additional analyses found that the declines in Perspective Taking and Empathic Concern are relatively recent phenomena and are most pronounced in samples from after 2000.



**Figure 1.** College students' Empathic Concern scores by period  
Note: Capped vertical bars denote  $\pm 1$  SE.

# “Third Order Suffering”

- Individuals lack traditioned communities that support them and sustain a sense of belonging even in their suffering.
- Individuals are increasingly deprived of a symbolic system or narrative (other than the market) through which to understand their suffering.
- Individuals thus feel fragmented. They are less aware of subjective meaning and lack a durable sense of self.





# Zombie Suffering





# Meaning and Melancholia

Life in the Age of Bewilderment

Christopher Bolas

ROUTLEDGE

“By the start of the twenty-first century, Americans and Europeans had turned away in significant numbers from introspective living.... Seeking a safer and less disturbing day-to-day existence, they turned away from subjectivity. **They dropped out of their minds.**”

Bollas calls this “normopathy,” and believes that, during the neoliberal era, we are witnessing the emergence of a “normopathic society.”

Christopher Bolas, 2018, pp. 41-45.

This erosion of soul in  
our time appears as an  
inability to mourn.

## **Blessed Are Those Who Mourn: Depression as Political Resistance**

**Bruce Rogers-Vaughn**

Published online: 6 November 2013  
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2013

**Abstract** In this essay, I explore the political significance of depression, particularly as a prominent form of resistance to conditions of life under contemporary global capitalism. After noting the political context of the second beatitude, which suggests a form of mourning that bears witness to public suffering, I assert that under the current dominance of the disease model, depression has lost its political voice. This loss is of grave concern given evidence that the culture of late capitalism (neoliberalism) has initiated a global epidemic of depression. I reframe depression as the final cry of souls diminished under these conditions. Finally, I denote the qualities of such souls, illustrating with a pastoral psychotherapy case summary. A dream presented during the termination phase not only provides a clinical presentation of the attributes of souls under neoliberal governance, but suggests how voice may ultimately be restored even when depression has become unconscious.

**Keywords** Depression · Melancholy · Neoliberalism · Capitalism · Political resistance · Soul

“It is utterly critical to realize that mourning is the root motivation for resisting and overturning neoliberal systems.... Knowledge is necessary, but it is not enough to know. Speaking is essential, but it is not enough to speak. Organizing is indispensable, but it is not enough to ‘rise up.’ First, we grieve. We grieve for those who do not know the way, who cannot speak, who are too exhausted to rise up—in other words, for all of us. We grieve for those who have come before us, and for the already dead.”

Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, pp. 167-168

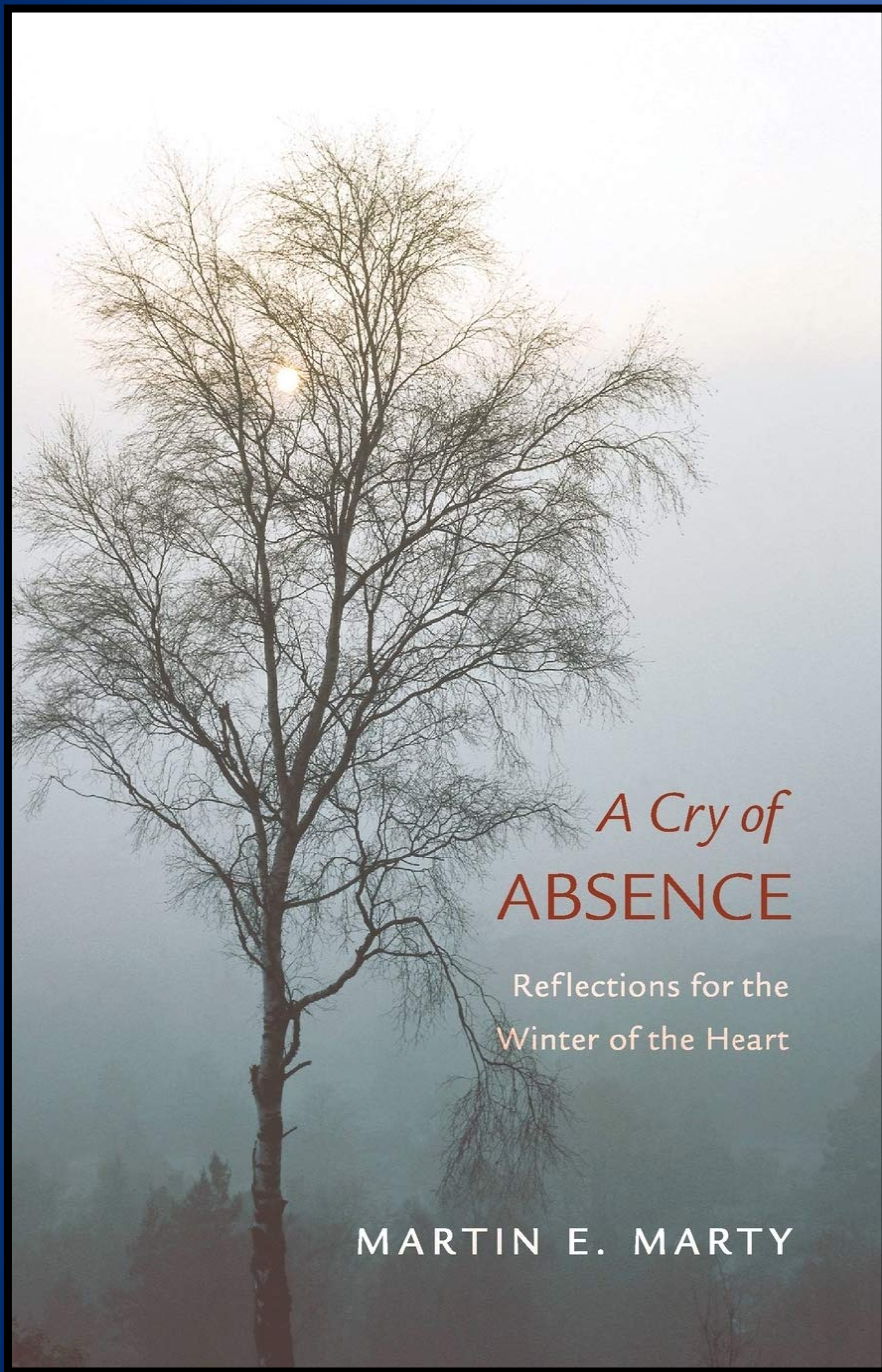


## *Postcolonial Images of Spiritual Care*

*Challenges of Care in  
a Neoliberal Age*

*Edited by Emmanuel Y. Lartey & Hellena Moon*

*Foreword by Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im Epilogue by Bonnie Miller-McLemore*

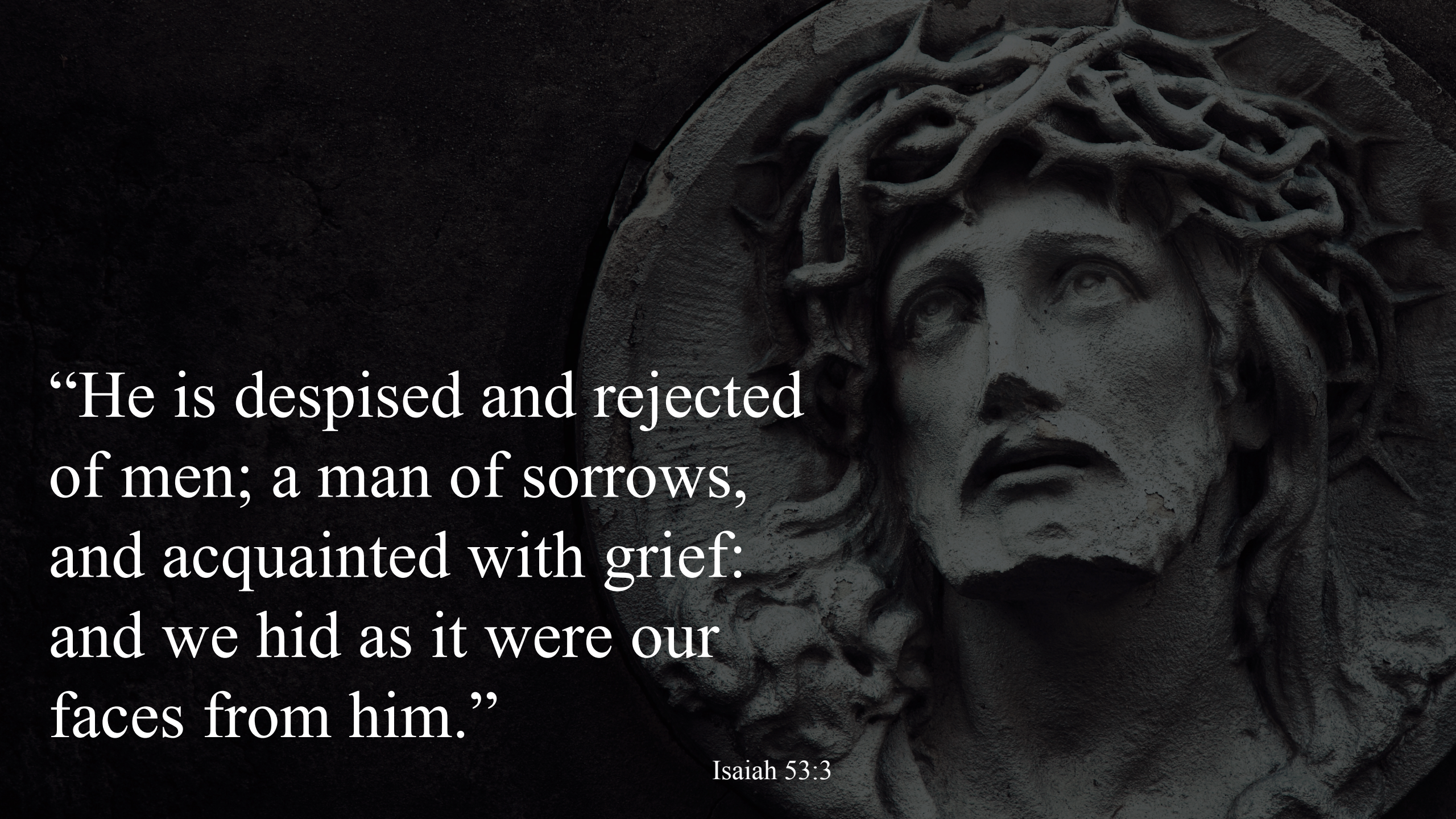


“For my life is spent with sorrow  
And my years with sighing;  
My strength has failed because of my iniquity,  
And my body has wasted away.

Because of all my adversaries, I have become a  
reproach,  
Especially to my neighbors,  
And an object of dread to my acquaintances;  
Those who see me in the street flee from me.

I am forgotten as a dead man, out of mind;  
I am like a broken vessel.”

Psalm 31:10-12

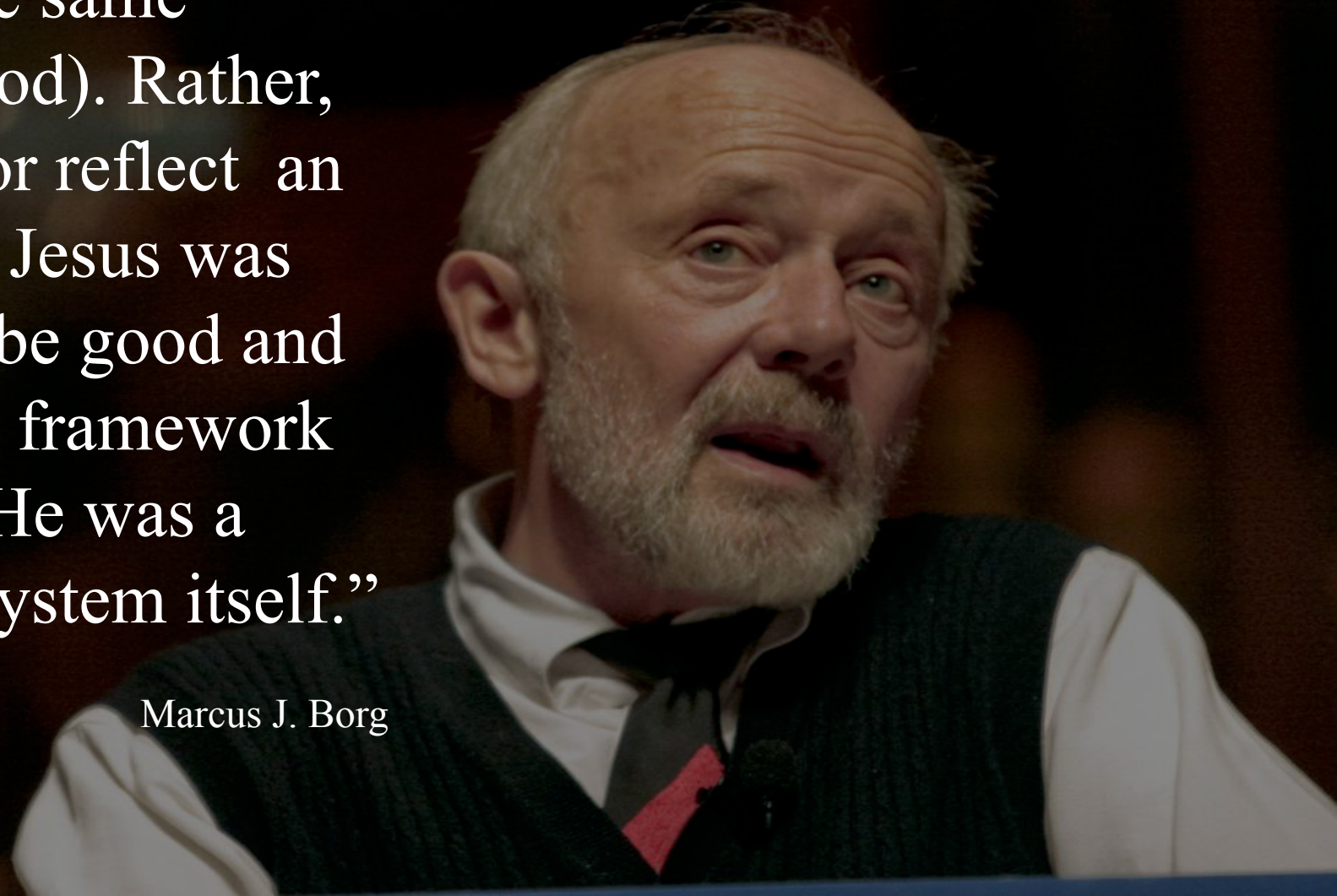


“He is despised and rejected  
of men; a man of sorrows,  
and acquainted with grief:  
and we hid as it were our  
faces from him.”

Isaiah 53:3

“The point is not that Jesus was a good guy who accepted everybody, and thus we should do the same (though that would be good). Rather, his teachings and behavior reflect an alternative social vision. Jesus was not talking about how to be good and how to behave within the framework of a domination system. He was a critic of the domination system itself.”

Marcus J. Borg





Jesus belongs to  
the masses, not  
to the churches,  
or even  
Christianity.

