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American Christians: A Review of "The Redemptive Self"

Abstract

"This book holds up an important mirror to the culture that should be both a comforting affirmation and a deep challenge to American Christians."

Posting about the book *The Redemptive Self* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/american-christians-a-review-of-the-redemptive-self/>

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in things

September 8, 2018

American Christians: A Review of “The Redemptive Self”

Donald Roth

Title: *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By*

Author: Dan P. McAdams

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For the past few years, I have found myself wandering into the world of psychology, curious as to what the significant developments in that field might offer for contextualizing our understanding of religious belief and Christian engagement with the world around us. Recently, this led me to eminent personality psychologist Dan P. McAdams’ *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By*.

This is an excellent book, but its pacing and sidetracking into research discussions may only appeal to armchair enthusiasts like myself. However, this is also a book about virtue, about culture, and about our commitment to future generations, and these topics are deeply important for Christians to be considering. Indeed, this book holds up an important mirror to the culture that should be both a comforting affirmation and a deep challenge to American Christians.

Summary

McAdams' major contributions in psychology center around his emphasis on the narrative qualities of our personalities, especially how we use story to make sense of the world around us and our place in it. One of the biggest challenges in making sense of our place in the world is thinking about what mark we make on it. For many people, especially as they enter their midlife years, making this mark centers around the legacy we leave for the next generation, and McAdams starts out the book pointing out that if most of us were asked, "Who are the good people?" we would likely point to those who dedicated themselves to making the world a better place. This concern with promoting the welfare and development of future generations is what psychologist Erik Erikson calls "generativity," and it has been described in several places as the "prime virtue of adulthood."

This book is an extended meditation on the storylines that repeatedly pop up in the life stories told by highly generative Americans, rooted in a wealth of psychological research. From the wealth of interviews he has conducted over the years, McAdams noticed that many people who scored the highest on inventories meant to gauge generativity tell stories from their lives that are filled with themes of redemption. These narratives could take the form of atonement, emancipation, upward mobility, recovery, enlightenment, or simple development and maturation, but the storylines followed similar patterns. Often these subjects reported growing up with some special gift that they became aware of that others did not enjoy. As young children, this blessing impressed upon these highly generative adults a strong sense of calling to help others that was reinforced by a deep-rooted personal belief system. Although suffering and hardship could feature heavily in these stories, it was usually cast in terms of growth or as part of some larger plan. As a result, these highly generative adults grow up feeling like "chosen people" with a powerful desire to both lead and be deeply loved by and connected to a community.

Looking more broadly at culture, McAdams points out that the stories that Americans tell one another often feature these same themes. From the Puritan settlers' "city on a hill" and Ben Franklin's autobiography to the cover stories on *People* magazine, our moral examples are people who have sacrificed for their convictions, conquered addictions, and pulled themselves up by their bootstraps. From slave narratives to self-help books, we are drawn to stories of those who have overcome and cling to the hope that we can do so ourselves. Throughout Woodrow Wilson's optimistic pursuit of a League of Nations to George W. Bush's "Operation Iraqi Freedom," we have viewed ourselves as a redeemer nation. McAdams even compares the life stories of George W. Bush and Barack Obama side by side to show how they each tell particular redemptive stories, often more gripping ones than their political opponents, suggesting this may be a significant factor in their ultimate political success.

This research is all integrated in the last chapter, which looks to how culture interacts with the three layers that make up our personalities, according to McAdams. These levels are (1) our dispositional traits, (2) our characteristic adaptations, and (3) our narrative identity. The first level is made up of the "Big Five" traits that are widely studied and regarded as universal across cultures. The second level speaks to the specific ways that we pursue what we want and avoid what we do not want in certain situations, in specific times, and in certain roles. The last level is

the integrative life narrative that we develop over the course of our life that gives “meaning” to our lives. From early childhood, the pieces of this third level develop as we grow in our cognitive affinity for story, a particularly strong characteristic that humans share. It is at this third level that we drink most deeply from culture, appropriating themes and storylines from the culture and subcultures around us as we learn to make sense of our place in the world. While every society has many generative adults, redemptive storylines are not as closely associated with generativity in all cultures and that is why McAdams can subtitle this book “stories Americans live by.”

Disentangling Our American and Christian Social Imaginary

With this foundation, we can begin to unpack what is so important about this book. In doing so, we can see both the affirmation and the caution of these redemptive narratives.

This book underscores why many of the redemptive themes will resonate strongly with the American Christians who read it. In his studies, McAdams finds that religion is correlated with generativity for Americans. Many of the stories told by his research subjects feature belief as a driving aspect of life. In addition, even highly generative adults with loose religious affiliations were raised in strongly religious homes. For Christians, this affirms the somewhat common-sense expectation that Christian homes provide prime soil for rearing children who will develop this “prime virtue of adulthood.” Further, a surprising finding for McAdams and others is that highly generative people are often quite settled in their beliefs. The moral compass developed in youth might get tuned, but it is rarely reset. That is, while the academy often finds heroes in those beset by existential questions and doubts, the average highly generative person does not walk that path. In other words, a firm faith is a desirable characteristic to encourage for parents hoping to raise generative children. Overall, McAdams has a rather positive outlook on the role that faith plays both in generativity and in mental health overall.

However, the redemptive self is not an unqualified positive, and because Christians will likely find deep resonance with redemptive themes, the cautions that McAdams raises are especially important. First, the American redemptive story tends to be highly individualistic. Even though generative people feel a strong draw to community, this pull can be in tension with an equal desire for power and freedom. Highly generative Americans tend to want both agency and communion, which can leave us prone to feel fractured or lonely even in a crowd. Second, this sense of being “chosen people” is mirrored in the narrative of American Exceptionalism, an eagerness not only to challenge adversity but an often-excessive confidence that we know how to overcome it. This feeling can foster a certain naiveté that can come across as arrogance, narcissism, or narrow-mindedness. The redemptive story can even be rallied to justify violence in the name of the fight of good versus evil. Lastly, and perhaps most pointedly for Christians, making sense of life in consistently redemptive ways can have a way of rationalizing away poor decisions or undervaluing the narrative power of tragedy. Sometimes things suck, and sometimes redemptive narratives can trivialize the depth of human suffering in an unhealthy way, constantly looking for the positive and even looking down on lament.

While McAdams specifically points to these qualifications, I think that Christians need to be especially wary of other themes that are presented in this book. I found myself resonating deeply with the redemptive self that McAdams lays out, and I suspect many who have read this far into this review would as well. This idea tempts us to be reinforced by the sense that our redemptive storylines are a good thing because they make us more generative, and we weave these stories even more tightly into our narrative identity.

However, the American redemptive self is not a thoroughly *Christian* redemptive self. As McAdams points out, the American narrative, even as early as De Tocqueville's observations, sees "no contradiction between economic progress and moral progress, between living well and being good." That is, consumerism and the aforementioned individualism come wrapped up in the very roots of the American redemptive self. Because these redemptive stories resonate in many ways with our Christian narratives, it becomes even harder to see what is being smuggled in alongside. It makes it all the easier to dress up sinful desires in redemptive language and pass them off to ourselves as Christian themes, blissfully swimming along, unaware of the water around us.

So, what do we do with this? What can Christians take away from this book? I will make a simple list:

1. We need to take McAdams' personality theory into account when we think about Christian formation. According to his research, high school and college age students are at the prime developmental age to begin naming themes and plotlines in their story. Do we take the narrative aspects of our young people into account when thinking of their formation?
2. Are we being careful not to merge our Scripture stories too easily into our American stories? The Biblical worldview is ancient, and in many ways, it is alien. We need to nurture not just an imagination, but a *historical* imagination around Scripture that brings us face to face with a culture that is not entirely our own. In doing so, we will expose ourselves to a different culture, a different set of stories that can shape us and reform us, helping us to root our narrative identity more and more in the cosmic drama of Christ—rather than our own.
3. To do both things, we need to engage in the practice of personal cultural exegesis, taking the time to pay attention to the stories that swirl around us and pick apart the intentions and themes that suffuse them. Further, we need to reflect on our own stories and take the time to pull out narrative threads and examine them. It is inevitable that we have adopted and adapted narrative themes from the world around us. Are we aware of the pressure that these themes exert on our development? If not, we should work to recast them in a more intentionally Biblical light.

If we do these things—because the last line of the book rings true, and our next story is likely to be a redemptive story—we can endeavor to make sure that this story is shaped principally by the redemptive story.