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The Catechism as Counter-Culture: A Review of You Are Not Your Own

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Abstract

"Because it is *Christ* who we belong to, we can rest in His provision for us."

Posting about the book *You Are Not Your Own* 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/the-catechism-as-counter-culture-a-review-of-you-are-not-your-own/>

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The Catechism as Counter-Culture: A Review of *You Are Not Your Own*

Donald Roth

December 2, 2021

Title: *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World*

Author: Alan Noble

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“What is your only comfort in life and in death?” In his new book, Alan Noble takes the first question and answer from the Heidelberg Catechism and uses it as a frame for cultural analysis. While the catechism starts from the truth that *You Are Not Your Own* (the book’s title), Noble says that society instead saddles us with the “responsibilities of self-belonging,” charging each of us with the unbearable burden of creating meaning and identity for ourselves in a world stripped of inherent content or character.

I deeply resonate with Noble’s inclination, which is why I first picked up the book, and I think he offers a number of helpful insights that diagnose the challenges of our culture. At the same time, something about Noble’s final posture leaves me wanting, not because I think he’s wrong, but because I think the worldview captured by the catechism offers more than Noble takes from it.

The Responsibilities of Self-Belonging

Noble argues that modern society has responded to its rejection of God (or any external transcendent meaning) by telling each of us that we instead belong to ourselves. The loss of objective meaning in life then challenges us with defining our own preferred sense of meaning from a dizzying array of choices. Noble calls this societal expectation of meaning-making the “Responsibilities of Self-Belonging,” saying “we come to feel that our existence is the only thing we can truly know, and to live authentically to that existence means we must choose our identity.”¹

Of course, society doesn't just create these expectations without offering some preferred ways of meeting them. Instead, society offers us a buffet of options for making meaning; however, it also renders these options shallow and contingent, so that they can remain optional. This means that society tries to make the feeling of belonging more accessible than ever while minimizing whatever obligations might come with that. Moving away from family? There's FaceTime. Getting older? There are retirement homes to keep us from "being a burden" on one another. Feeling the pains and frustrations of marriage but not looking to leave? Pornography offers us emotional and physical autonomy from burdening others with our needs.

Even a church (or any of other institution or community) can help you with the Responsibilities of Self-Belonging so long as it does not infringe on your self-belonging. But when it does, there is always another community ready to welcome you." ² Some of Noble's best writing comes in these middle few chapters where he describes the ways that society sets us up, both in the sense of seeking to equip us for self-belonging and in getting us to buy into a sucker's promise that it is utterly unable to fulfill.

The problem with the Responsibility of Self-Belonging is that meaning doesn't feel "meaningful" when it is purely subjective. Charles Taylor compares this to trying to say that (1) our choices matter about as much as our preferred flavor of ice cream, and yet, (2) those choices express something deeply meaningful about who we are.

We can give a sense of "weightiness" to our personal choice of meaning by seeking acknowledgement and affirmation from society, but this requires us to engage in constant self-expression. Further, the affirmation of others becomes a required component for giving "weightiness" to our chosen meanings. Thus, our self-expression (and affirmation of it) becomes a weight of anxiety and contingency that undermines supposed virtues like contentment or any sort of stable happiness.

Ultimately, Noble says that society places us in a "binary tension of existentialism" that entices us with "godlike powers of self-creation" and damns us to "eternal self-preservation," as we must constantly express ourselves in order to connect with a sense of meaning. This puts us in a constant tension between what Noble calls "Affirmation" and "Negation." That is, we think we can conquer the world, or we are burning out and seeking to just "get by." Fortunately, society offers us a range of options for self-medication that help us cope with our state of alienation and exhaustion, too.

A Noble Alternative? ³

In place of the "Responsibilities of Self-Belonging," Noble argues that we embrace the truth of the Heidelberg Catechism's first line: "I am not my own, but belong, body and soul, to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Noble takes pains to explain why this might be scary and why, if it were anyone else, this could open us up to abuse or worse. Instead, Noble argues that because

it is *Christ* who we belong to, we can rest in His provision for us, knowing that we don't have to fix everything and find comfort in the promise that in Him "it is finished."

Noble fleshes out his response to the lie of self-belonging by turning especially to the cultural critique of Jacques Ellul. In a society where values become optional, Noble asserts that we instead gravitate toward judging value by what is quantifiable. Ellul argued that the supreme value of a society driven by the quantifiable is efficiency, and he called the methods that we derive to pursue this value "technique." Ellul's critique of technicism is powerful, and it carries with it a deep suspicion of human efforts to blanket ourselves in technology and layers of culture that nurture our delusion that we are self-sufficient. As a result, Ellul viewed the modern city as the heart of human rejection of God's provision.

Ultimately, Noble calls for us to recognize that our identities are rooted in our personhood before God, that this carries with it responsibilities to God and neighbor, but that it is God who meets these requirements in Christ. What remains for us is to live "prodigally" (here meaning in pursuit of love, goodness, and beauty with a conscious rejection of efficiency in that pursuit) and to, in the words of T.S. Eliot "wait without hope." This doesn't mean hopeless resignation, instead, Noble means "your obligation is faithfulness, not productivity or measurable results."⁴ He contrasts this to more optimistic engagement with culture, saying, "It is not difficult to work courageously when you believe that your actions will turn the tide and bring about change. It is another thing altogether to act courageously without the expectation that you will change the world."⁵ His final call to readers is to essentially embrace who we are, where God puts us, to "represent God in the city."⁶

A Second Question

While I think there is much to agree with in Noble's book, and I actually largely agree with his thesis, I found myself wanting a conclusion more satisfying than "waiting without hope," and I think that the Kuyperian tradition (which is steeped in the Heidelberg Catechism), might offer something a little more robust than this.

Noble interprets the Heidelberg through the lens of existentialism, and he turns to Kierkegaard and Ellul to fill out what that might mean in a life lived out. The catechism itself follows up the question of what our comfort is with "what must I know to live and die in that comfort?" The answer—our guilt before God, the grace we receive in Christ, and the grateful obedience we render as a result—agrees with Noble on human ability and our obligation to faithfulness, but the grounding in gratitude is a meaningful difference of posture that Noble doesn't present in his analysis.

More fundamentally, though, while Noble shares my distaste for the "agents of redemption" framing of a Christian cultural task, his turn to Kierkegaard and Ellul draws on their framing of humans as *individuals* pressed up against the presence of God. In this

way, our primary, *collective* calling as Christians can become obscured as the cultural mandate and Great Commission remain disconnected.

Noble is right that our primary calling is not a measurable improvement in societal righteousness; instead, our call is to “spread the aroma of Christ *to God*” (2 Corinthians 2:15-17) throughout the world. However, Adam was also charged with spreading the awareness of the presence of God throughout creation. This religious orientation was intimately woven into Adam’s cultural mandate to “fill the earth and subdue it.” (Gen. 1:28) For Christians, that unity of calling is recovered.

I have argued *elsewhere* that I believe we would do well to draw more heavily on the “temple” metaphor to frame our cultural task, and I think that would be helpful here as well. Noble is right that problems arise “when we are convinced that we have the plan for redeeming the world” (emphasis added).² When Abraham Kuyper described cultural works, such as science, he characterized them as a temple to God’s glory that emerges from our common (Christian and non-Christian) efforts in these arenas. In this sense, it is precisely *because* of the lack of human coordination or agreement that it becomes clear that their only possible architect is God. While God uses our human hands to build His temple, we don’t have the plans for what that exactly looks like. While this should engender humility in how we approach cultural work, we are also priests, and we know whose temple we’re building. Our calling entails approaching our cultural tasks as genuine ways to unveil the presence of God.

Put in perhaps simpler terms, I come away from Noble feeling like the good gifts of God are providences that help us cope with the inhumanity of our current condition. They are this, but they are also an inbreaking of the truth that God is everywhere present with us. We are ultimately welcomed to more than survival, we are welcomed to joyfully and gratefully partake in a calling that cannot be suppressed, even by our inhuman culture.

1. p. 37

2. p. 49

3. If the author reads this, I personally and sincerely apologize for the pun. Once I’d typed it out, I couldn’t abandon it.

4. p.169

5. p. 169

6. p. 176

7. p. 164