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Life's Too Short to Pretend You're Not Religious

Josiah Hatfield
Messiah College

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Life's Too Short to Pretend You're Not Religious

Dark, D., 2016
Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press

Reviewed by Josiah Hatfield, M.A.

80

When I was entering college as a first-year, one's religion status on Facebook was prominently displayed right there alongside one's birthdate and the much-scrutinized relationship status. In line with my generation's tendency to eschew definitive labels, one of the more popular religious statuses among my circle of Christian college friends and acquaintances was the ever-non-committal phrase, "spiritual, but not religious." David Dark's book, *Life's Too Short to Pretend You're Not Religious*, is for those trying to avoid religious labels but are nevertheless defined by their "likes."

Dark beckons the reader to reconsider how they define and practice religion, to recognize our relatedness to each other, and to practice liturgies of embodied curiosity. By way of communicating these ideas, Dark writes with a level of openness and authenticity, willing to self-disclose his own journeys as a longtime thinker and follower of Christ that are relevant to the reader. Literary and pop culture references abound, less so as a gimmick to relate to any specific audience as much as, simply, Dark's way of synthesizing the world he perceives. Likewise, the introduction and nine chapters move along with wit and charm without creeping into the saccharine. The book serves as a model for how one might interact with and relate to college students.

Core to Dark's thesis for the book is a broadening of one's definition of "religion." Moving beyond a particular worldview, Dark parses out his nuanced understanding of the term. First, he proposes that our religion is passed down through tradition, whether it is caring for the earth by environmentalists, practicing spiritual disciplines within the Christian tradition, or the avid football fan's Sunday afternoon ritual. While few of these traditions may constitute one's entirety of belief, they are all manifestations of religious behavior. Closely tied to this idea of tradition is the idea of being formed by one's ancestors. Dark references the idea that "...we may very well be stuck with our relatives, but we get to choose our ancestors" (p. 67). Inherent in this idea is that we are born or placed within a specific context with its specific beliefs and practices, but we get to choose (ideally, at least) who and what influences our religious habits. From there, Dark proposes that the way our religion is played out is within the context of relationship and, in a rightly ordered world, we might participate in learning from others. The mutual exchange of relationship is a "...gift economy upon which we've all along depended" (p. 136).

Within Dark's gift economy is the idea that there is no such thing as an individual life. Despite our best efforts to distance and protect ourselves from vulnerability and harm, we are inevitably held up by each other or, to use a phrase co-opted from Scooby Doo via Dark's son, by 'chother (the abbreviated version of "each other"). Throughout the entirety of the book, Dark hammers home the idea that we need our 'chother to exist, to play out our beliefs, and to accurately view the world. As Dark sees it, "...it takes a village to perceive a reality" (p. 93). Inherent in our interrelatedness is to whom we direct our attention. We often give our attention to a lifelong friend, an up-and-coming thought-provoking auteur, or our most trusted poet. With that in mind, Dark writes, "If we're begging to accept the work of always cultivating our attention collections with care as a kind of cultural obligation, I'd like to push the notion even further by observing that it might be more helpfully held as a sacred necessity" (p. 56). The result of such an idea provides a call for a greater awareness of our media and thought consumption liturgies, both personal and corporate. Perhaps by broadening our attention collections, we might also strengthen the bond with others, and perhaps by unpacking the world with others, we might better understand the world.

Upon broadening one's definition of religion in the context of relationships, a strange curiosity develops. At least this is the way that I, as a reader, responded to the book. As mentioned before, Dark models curiosity well by using source material ranging from pop music to twentieth-century

literature to moments in recent U.S. history. Truth, though perhaps not complete, is found all around us. This sacred curiosity should be nourished and fed, and it encourages us to cherish and value our relationships with others or, even better, with the Other. Dark concludes the book with a charge to “...*give* voice anytime at all by listening to someone else” with the admonition that “...you can’t fix what you won’t join” (p. 183). These words challenge us to develop liturgies of unplugging from the virtual world and take the time to understand others through joining in the conversation and giving others a voice.

In *Life's Too Short to Pretend You're Not Religious*, Dark eloquently and complexly models what we try so hard to instill in students in the college setting: important ideas can be complex and nuanced and thus require complex and nuanced explanation. The themes of broadening our understanding of religion, emphasizing our interrelatedness and sparking one’s curiosity are all important to consider when working with college students. Many of these themes can be found useful as we, as practitioners, determine our posture in working through the tumultuous times in which we live and interact with students. As we aim to better perceive reality, *Life's Too Short to Pretend You're Not Religious* could also serve as a valuable source of material for a book club with a group of students. The material is approachable, though dense, and students could learn much from Dark’s call to rewrite our definition of religion and reconsider our connectedness with curious minds.

In a time where we want so badly to shed labels and boxes, it is vitally important to understand our inability to do so as humans. Rather, all of our actions, attention, and conversations point towards some sort of religious habit. Dark’s *Life's Too Short to Pretend You're Not Religious* expertly and charmingly allows the reader to think through how we order our attention, structure our liturgies, and join the curious conversations happening all around us.

Josiah Hatfield serves as a Residence Director at Messiah College, where he has worked since 2012. He holds a Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development from Taylor University.