Book Review

Aaron M. Renn, *Life in the Negative World: Confronting Challenges in an Anti-Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2024), xviii + 248 pp. $26.99

Reviewed by Tony Seel

The seeds for his book, *Life in the Negative World: Confronting Challenges in an Anti-Christian Culture*, were sown in a *First Things* magazine essay in 2022. In that essay, author Aaron M. Renn laid out what he terms the three stages of secularization in America. According to Renn, prior to 1994, Christianity was seen as a positive for American culture. Between the years 1994 and 2014, Christianity was viewed as an acceptable lifestyle choice among many others. This neutral stance was upended in 2014 when the Christian faith increasingly became understood as a threat to the secular moral order.

Welcome to the negative world. In the Introduction to the book, Renn reports that he started developing his premise of a negative world in 2014. The *First Things* essay in 2022, entitled "The Three Worlds of Evangelicalism,"[1] introduced his three worlds schematic to a wider audience. His book-length treatment of this subject was published in 2024.[2]

In March 2025, the *Lutheran Witness* magazine published an article by Renn titled "The Negative World – Facing a New Social Reality as Christians." In the *Lutheran Witness* article, Renn states that "As late as the 1950s, half of all U.S. adults attended church each week."[3] From the 1960s onward, church attendance and cultural influence declined. The three phases of his premise articulate the decline of the church's cultural influence.

Accompanying this decline are three strategies that evangelical Christians and churches have adopted to counteract the trend militating against the church and Christians. One strategy is identified with Pastor Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority organization he founded in 1979. The Moral Majority sought to unite the Christian right, consisting of fundamentalists, evangelicals, and Christian traditionalists, into a movement to influence American politics. As a strategy that developed in the positive world, Renn views this culture warrior approach as less effective in the negative world.

Yet, while evangelicals are divided on President Donald Trump, significant numbers of them coalesced around his candidacies in the last three presidential

election cycles and were an important part of his winning coalition in two of them. Perhaps, there is more life in the culture war modality than Renn is willing to concede. He does identify the Christian Right with lower status and being "unpopular with society's elites" (42). This ties in with his critique, along the lines of Mark Noll's book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, that there is a dearth of evangelicals in leadership positions at "major conservative think tanks and publications" (66). The late pastor Tim Keller is also cited concerning evangelicalism's "strongly anti-intellectual cast" (65).

My critique of his critique on this point pertains to walking and chewing gum at the same time. Could it be possible that evangelicals can work to raise up worthy intellectuals while a larger segment remains engaged in the culture war front of politics and law? Renn seems to favor the intellectual side while expressing disdain for the culture war side. He views culture war engagement as creating divisions that are "ripping churches and other evangelical institutions apart" (38). He appeals to David Brooks, who identifies a small portion of the "Roughly 80 percent of white evangelicals [who] supported Trump in 2020, as a divisive element within evangelicalism.[4]

That supports Renn's point, but consider what Brooks also says: "It would certainly be a vast improvement if evangelicals were better equipped to separate truth from propaganda, if they had more refined criteria for what a responsible leader looks like, if they had better training for how to be involved in their communities."[5]

Couldn't we say that about any group? Even intellectuals aren't immune from accepting propaganda as bona fide truth. Second, a host of social elites have shown less than "a refined criteria for what a responsible leader looks like," if they agree with her or his policies. For example, historian Timothy Stanley writes,

> Because Bill Clinton used his presidential authority to defend abortion rights, accusations made against him were ignored or dismissed by supporters. The feminist writer Anne Roiphe said at the time: "It will be a great pity if the Democratic Party is damaged by this.… I just wanted to close my eyes, and wished it would go away."[6]

A second strategy for evangelicals was also first deployed in the positive world. It is on display at megachurches such as Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago, and Saddleback Church in Orange County, California. This approach, often called seeker sensitive, seeks to make the Sunday experience more palatable to the otherwise non-churched. Renn notes that this approach had an appeal to baby boomers.

However, with the "resurgence" of America's large cities, a third strategy came to the fore. This strategy is called "cultural engagement." With this third strategy,

evangelicals play up values they hold in common with the wider population, and downplay "flashpoint social issues" like abortion and human sexuality (27). The weakness of this approach is a perception of "bait and switch." Secularists are drawn in and then discover that the packaging misrepresents the product. The evangelical engagers hope to influence without giving offense. That's a very tall order for a moral framework that differs greatly from the secular moral order of the negative world.

Renn acknowledges that in the negative world, the church has entered "unfamiliar territory" (43). He asserts that "finding a path in this fundamentally unknown world will require a different approach from the strategies of the past" (44). What is that path?

Renn admits that the seeker-sensitive approach is "still applicable in many situations today" (44). He also understands that "a one-size-fits-all model" will not work in our diverse nation (46). In other words, what works in suburbs does not necessarily work in urban areas. This ignores the seeker sensitive churches that thrive in urban settings, such as the Hillsong campuses in Los Angeles, New York City, and Boston.[7]

Renn doesn't offer any easy answers. However, there are some mindset shifts that he deems essential. The first is recognizing that we are now a moral minority. Because of this, the Christian mindset must be countercultural since our values are at odds with the wider culture. The question then becomes: how can we engage with culture while acknowledging that we are a minority that is viewed overall as a negative force?

Renn identifies "three key domains" for engagement: personal, institutional, and missional (49). He concludes his book with three chapters on each of these domains. Personally, we are called to live the Gospel in both easy and difficult times in obedience to Christ, by integrating our faith into every area of our lives. Institutionally, the Gospel is to be proclaimed in our churches and other church institutions such as schools and nursing homes, with integrity and competence, building communities of faith that support and strengthen the faith and resilience of members. Missionally, the church is to love our neighbors through verbal witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and through acts of mercy and compassion.

One question that Renn's work raises is whether he is reading our times correctly. Certainly, we can find markers in earlier times that militate against clean demarcations, like the Supreme Court decision in 1962 to remove public prayer from our public schools during the period that he deems the positive world. That we can find instances like this doesn't negate his framework, in my estimation. Even if he is wrong about the positive and neutral worlds, and overall, I don't think he is, surely he has made a sound case for the negative world in which we presently live.

Even though he discusses new approaches and strategies, his prescriptions for our time are based on models from earlier eras. One example he cites is Roman Catholics who created their own schools in response to public schools that didn't support their values. Another example is black communities that have supported black-owned businesses. In a culture where major corporations support anti-Christian endeavors, creating Christian-owned and operated businesses is a viable way to provide jobs for Christians as a bulwark against employment that requires subscription to anti-Christian values. Author Rod Dreher predicts that we are heading toward a time when what "has happened to Christian bakers, florists, and wedding photographers will be much more widespread."[8] All that Renn says about the negative world points in that direction.

In his *Lutheran Witness* article, Renn states that the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod "is far ahead of much of the rest of Protestant America in adjusting to the Negative World, because it has been structured… [with] denominational schools, universities and the like. It has a rooted theology, historic liturgy and a rich collection of hymns."[9] Is that enough? With 800 LCMS elementary schools and 78,000 students, that isn't much of a dent in a society of over 340 million. With an average Sunday morning attendance of less than 500,000; again, not much of a dent.

The LCMS wrestles with how to address an aging membership, declining churches and schools. Recruiting younger men and women for service to the church is one initiative. Another is revitalizing older congregations, particularly small churches. A third initiative is church planting. The broader Lutheran community in America would be wise to embrace these initiatives in their own denominations.

The challenge for Christians, churches, and denominations in the negative world is daunting. However, Jesus Christ does speak about how something small can grow into something large. Evangelical Christians in our negative world have not yet been silenced completely, even with employee codes that discourage personal witness. Evangelical churches have not been prevented from proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, even during the Covid crisis when federal and state governments decreed that they be shuttered. God still gives Christians and churches opportunities to share with others what Jesus Christ has given to us, the words of God's grace, mercy, and love. How we do that is a challenge in every circumstance where the Church finds herself. God's promise given through the prophet Isaiah is still true—God's Word will not return empty (Isa 55:11).

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Notes

1. Aaron M. Renn, "The Three Worlds of Evangelicalism," *First Things*, February 1, 2022, https://firstthings.com/the-three-worlds-of-evangelicalism/. Accessed July 10, 2025.
2. Aaron M. Renn, *Life in the Negative World: Confronting Challenges in an Anti-Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2024).
3. Aaron M. Renn, "The Negative World: Facing a New Social Reality as Christians," *Lutheran Witness* 144, no. 3 (March 2025): 8-10.
4. David Brooks, "The Dissenters Trying to Save Evangelicalism From Itself," *New York Times*, February 4, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/04/opinion/evangelicalism-division-renewal.html. Accessed July 10, 2025.
5. Ibid.
6. Timothy Stanley, "The Problem with Bill Clinton," *CNN*, March 1, 2016, https://www.cnn.com/2016/01/04/opinions/stanley-bill-clinton/index.html. Accessed July 31, 2025.
7. For more information, see https://hillsong.com/usa/. Accessed July 10, 2025.
8. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017, 2018), 63.
9. Renn, "The Negative World," *Lutheran Witness*, 10.