



Children are growing up in an increasingly post-Christian, secular society, where the public views people of faith as irrelevant or even, in some cases, as extremists. As Christian educators, our challenge is to engage with the culture in a godly manner and teach our students to do the same. But first

we have to understand what it means to live in a secular society. James K. A. Smith, a professor of philosophy at Calvin College who has spoken at various ACSI events, recently gave a fascinating talk on that topic.

Smith believes that the terms “secular” and “secularism” don’t do justice to the increasing complexity of our society. Secularists are increasingly characterized by persistent, enduring longings for transcendence and fulfillment. Those longings provide a unique opportunity for people of faith to speak into the inevitable “cracks” that develop when questions are left unanswered by those who view faith as irrelevant.

As an example of a crack that people of faith need to be looking for, Smith cites British novelist Julian Barnes’ memoir, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*. Barnes wrote, “I don’t believe in God, but I miss Him.” By writing this statement, Barnes made himself a poster child for secularism, especially since he didn’t grow up in religious circles and has no interest in anything related to faith. Yet Barnes is looking for answers that only a transcendent God can provide.

Smith believes that in this climate, Christians shouldn’t be manning our battle stations, but seeking out new opportunities to share the hope we possess and to make an impact only the gospel can make. The world desperately needs Christians in the public realm who can articulate how faith addresses people’s need for transcendence and true fulfillment. This is especially important for educators, who have the opportunity to initiate transparent conversations with young people who are natives to the secular culture.

Doubt is another characteristic of a secular society, but we shouldn’t fear it.

“Doubt isn’t the enemy of faith; it’s a companion of faith,” Smith says. “We are all Thomas now. If the church doesn’t have the courage to be honest about that, then a rising generation who feels this cross pressure is going to feel like we are hiding something.”

As Christian educators, we can teach children to “listen for the cracks” from those who are skeptical of believers and to winsomely and courageously share the truth that transcends time and culture. How do we raise up a generation of Daniels to be the voices of faith in an increasingly hostile and secular Babylon? The challenge is to share absolute truth uncompromisingly while not coming across as what author Philip Yancey calls “moral exterminators” for the evil-infested society around [us]” (1997). Instead, we should be about the business of dispensing the “perfume of Christ.” Twenty-first-century believers must adopt winsome methods of engagement amid an environment of suspicion and skepticism.

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Jay Ferguson, headmaster of Grace Community School in Tyler, Texas, has said that we need to address five key areas in raising the next generation of Daniels:

1. A deep understanding of Christian faith and Scripture as a unifying construct for reality
2. A philosophy and theology of cultural engagement
3. A profound understanding of work, calling, and vocation
4. Effective engagement with faith through authentic worship and redemptive community
5. An understanding of the church’s role in redemptive history and the individual believer’s role within the church

What would you add to this list? We will continue this conversation in the months ahead. *Carpe Aeternitatem!*

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References

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