

SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

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Talk to the Hand

"Talk to the hand 'cause the face ain't listening," the saying goes.

In her new book, *Talk to the Hand*, Lynne Truss asks, When did the world stop wanting to hear? When did society stop valuing basic courtesy and respect? When did "please" and "thank you" become passé? In her latest work Truss, author of the bestselling *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, offers a stirring cry for civility.

In an article in USA Today, Bruce Kluger unflinchingly suggests that the source for such interaction can be found hidden within the Trojan horse of mainstream entertainment. With each new episode of *Survivor*, aren't we maintaining that duplicity and betrayal are character traits to be rewarded? For every gratuitous tongue-lashing we hear delivered by *American Idol* judge Simon Cowell, aren't we saying it's okay to be cruel? Doesn't *The Apprentice* tell us that cut-throat is the only way to go?

But it doesn't work. At least not if one wishes to contend for something in the marketplace of ideas. Those who are winsome and compelling are far more effective than those who are caustic and abrasive.

Fortunately, Christians are starting to get this right – and as a result, gaining a cultural ear - right when many secularists are not.

Consider the following two stories:

In response to the controversy surrounding the Kansas Board of Education voting to insert significant criticism of evolution into the state's science curriculum standards, Kansas University professor Paul Mirecki asked his department to formally approve a new elective class, titled "Special Topics in Religion: Intelligent Design and Creationism."

"The fundies (fundamentalists) want it all taught in a science class," Mirecki wrote in an email. "But this will be a nice slap in their big, fat face by teaching it as a religious studies class under the category 'mythology.'"

To his credit, Mirecki later apologized, and called the comments “ill-advised” and “offensive.” Chancellor Robert Hemenway said Mirecki’s comments were repugnant and vile, and “misrepresents everything the university is to stand for.” State Sen. Kay O’Connor added her voice, criticizing the “hatefulness toward Christians.” The class was later canceled.

Compare this to the article by John Leland in the *New York Times* lauding the new tack taken by Christians engaging such films as *Brokeback Mountain*, a love story between two male ranch hands. *Brokeback Mountain* has received overwhelming acclaim from mainstream critics, but to his surprise, Leland found that Christians engaged the film in a way that was both respectful and laudatory, while still finding fault with the film’s content.

Steven Isaac, who reviews movies for Focus on the Family, noted the talents of director Ang Lee while objecting that it portrayed the characters’ tribulations as consequences of an intolerant society rather than of “the destructiveness of acting on homosexual temptations.” The Office for Film and Broadcasting of Catholic Bishops states, “While the actions of Jack and Ennis” – the film’s cowboy lovers – “cannot be endorsed, the universal themes of love and loss ring true.”

Leland then offered several websites, such as *Focus on the Family* and *Christianity Today*, that offered insightful reviews coupled with conviction. Again, this in the *New York Times*.

Robert Johnston, professor of theology and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary, notes that this represents a change in the way conservative Christians engage with popular culture. Until recently, Christian groups would have ignored such a movie except to protest it. Now, there is more constructive cultural engagement. By affirming the artistic achievement of a director as talented as Ang Lee, they do not lose culture’s ear; by refusing to endorse the film’s message, they offer conviction without compromise, and offer the culture something it does not already have.

So while many in the world seem eager to say, “Talk to the hand,” Christians are learning the value of talking with their heads.

And finding that it works.

James Emery White

Sources

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