

BOOK REVIEW***THE CONGREGATION IN A SECULAR AGE: KEEPING SACRED TIME AGAINST THE SPEED OF MODERN LIFE.***

BY: ANDREW ROOT

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Andrew Root argues that the “accelerating of time has had a huge impact on the congregation” (xii). He does so by tracing humanity’s experience of time under a historic succession of timekeepers: the church, nation-state, and Silicon Valley. Each of these regimes has exercised immense influence on both our experience of the present and our vision of the good life.

For Root, the present timekeeper is the tech industry. The high goods it promotes are those of newness, speed, and change. While not inherently bad, under Silicon Valley these have become ends unto themselves, forcing society into an untenable experience of acceleration. Free to avail ourselves of the limitless opportunity technology provides and compelled to do so to communicate an “authentic” self, we find the sheer number of options before us fatiguing. As technological acceleration is inseparable from social and pace-of-life acceleration (60), the very technology promising openness and freedom disregards the wisdom of old and becomes a taskmaster to us all. It demands we accomplish more with our time to maintain our reach and to avoid falling behind.

The effect of acceleration is a compressed and flat present, one in which people experience a “time-famine” (154). In such a scenario, resource accumulation becomes paramount, under the belief that the good life has become a future fantasy. Per Root, we believe that if we can harvest enough resources in the present, the possibilities for living well will one day make themselves known. In such a state, our engagement with others takes the form of “casual and instrumental connections and interactions” (183), by

which we experience others according to how they can further our agenda, not as independent agents to whom we can truly relate. The net effect is a powerful experience of alienation to the world and those who inhabit it.

Addressing congregations, Root calls into question the assumption that churches who wish to flourish must innovate to meet the demands of their day. This is an unwinnable strategy as the congregation is forced into a state of endless change. A congregation may also become a victim of its own success, in which busy people who sought a busy church soon fall away when they realize their own inability to keep pace (40). At the same time, Root is clear that our entire world is predicated on a system of dynamic stabilization, meaning that the health of any organization or agency is secured (and judged by) its ability to grow continuously (176). Because congregations are themselves subject to the demands of dynamic stabilization, they are unable simply to slow down to counteract this acceleration that leads to alienation.

While escaping the modern time-keeper is impossible, Root believes congregations can poise themselves to reclaim a sense of sacred time. He suggests this can be accomplished through resonance. Resonance is a relational encounter in which one's experience of other persons affects them, eliciting an emotional response. Resonance also has a practical dimension, in which emotion moves the individual to action, but of a type that eschews objectification and recognizes the other's personhood. Whereas innovation to meet the demands of an accelerating present is a human-led initiative, resonance and the transformation it can bring is the work of the Spirit. For Root, resonance is anchored in Eros, a love that constantly seeks out the other.

As the Carrie Olson Baalson Chair of Youth and Family Ministry at Luther Seminary, it is perhaps no surprise that Root suggests "carrying children," as a central way in which congregations can experience resonance and so reclaim a sense of sacred time (217). For him, the importance Jesus placed upon welcoming and becoming like children is best understood through the lens of resonance, by which we accept another without thought of how

they might benefit us, and humbly acknowledge our own need to be cared for and carried by others.

The *Congregation in a Secular Age* is a fascinating social study on humanity's changing conception of time. While in some places it tends toward the dystopian, this is not necessarily hyperbolic. Rather, Root's study pulls back the veil on an existing reality that the reader might initially find far-fetched, simply because it is the only world we know. As such, the reader may discover a need to translate their learning from this volume if its purpose is to help a congregation become more aware of time. In fairness, Root's interest does not seem to be that clergy enable their people to tell time, so much as experience it in deep and meaning-filled ways.

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