

Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* An Appreciation and Analysis

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So much has been written about Francis Schaeffer, what could be left to say? It might be an idea at this point to go back over the influential book, followed by the television film series, *How Should We Then Live?* It represents a nearly complete summary of the author's views on every subject of concern. The series was first published in 1976, so it will soon be approaching its 50th anniversary. That's a good time for a reassessment.

For full disclosure I should set forth two admissions. First, my introduction to the gospel and my early grounding in Christ were at L'Abri in 1964. I was a

“seeker” from Harvard and found myself in Huémoz, with Francis Schaeffer as my father in Christ. I gave a brief account of my story in the book, *Francis Schaeffer on the Christian Life: Counter-Cultural Christianity* (Crossway, 2013). Second, I was involved with the film series at several levels. The Director, Franky Schaeffer V, asked me to look into various aspects, particular the music (I was a music student in college). Some rather amusing tales could be told about my involvement, which I will spare the gentle reader. Thus, my views may be colored, though it’s hard to say how, exactly.

At the time, the series made quite a splash. A study guide was produced. The Schaeffers, including Franky, crisscrossed the country with viewings and seminars meant to expose people to the message. Christian leaders weighed in. Magazines presented reviews. Our church in Greenwich, Connecticut, for example, hired the local movie theater and showed each episode, followed by intense discussion.

Many factors explained this flourishing. The title is brilliant, a quote from Ezekiel 33:10. One was simple: nothing quite like it existed before. As with many of Schaeffer’s works this one gave permission to Christians explore the arts, economics, the scientific revolution, without giving up one’s piety. Many evangelicals had been ashamed or unaware of thinking at all and were liberated by this exposure to a wide-ranging approach to culture, combined with a rather fundamentalist theology.

Let me say at the outset, these episodes are fresh and fill a space, never before occupied, especially by Christians. If for no other reason, *How Should We Then Live?* deserves praise. Few art history books at the time were as explicit. But it makes greater claims.

While, for reasons of fairly mediocre filming quality, it didn’t have a chance against the big guys in Public television. *How Should We Then Live?* was intended as a Christian answer to Bronowski’s *Ascent of Man* and especially to Kenneth Clark’s *Civilisation*. In my conversations with Francis Schaeffer he seemed consumed with the need to answer Clark from an evangelical viewpoint. To his credit, he cared deeply that audiences be given an alternative to the reigning documentaries.

Kenneth Clark’s riveting series took the viewer through the stages and phases of Western cultures, expertly interspersed with images and sound from its greatest highlights right down to the present. Of particular interest is his historiography, placing the Renaissance at the center of human

achievement (episode 4 is titled, “Man the Measure of All Things,” while episode 5 has “The Hero as Artist” and features figures such as Leonardo da Vinci). The Reformation, by contrast, qualifies as belonging to the age of “Protest and Communication,” one that included Luther, but also Montaigne and Shakespeare.

In Schaeffer’s view the Renaissance was radically different. While appreciative of the greatness of some of the art, he was highly critical of the spirit of humanism he saw in this era. Not the humanism of classical scholarship, but the man-centered philosophy exhibited (in his view) by Michelangelo’s statuary and Leonardo’s mathematical attention to particulars, unable to yield a larger meaning (74). In Schaeffer’s view, Renaissance humanism grew out of the soil of Thomas Aquinas’ reliance on Aristotle, again, unable to yield a larger meaning. For Schaeffer, this was the beginning of a breakdown that would only exacerbate in later periods, particularly the Enlightenment. As a college student I had studied the Renaissance from specialists who praised its achievements. It took me a while to adjust to the more negative view I encountered at LAbri. The Reformation was seen almost as a golden age, though with two flaws: unclarity about race and an uncritical acceptance of wealth.

Schaeffer’s views did not emerge out of the blue. His negative critique of the Renaissance was influenced by the Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd, though he is almost never acknowledged. His first little book, *Escape from Reason* shows an unmistakable debt to Dooyeweerd. Other historians include Jeremy Jackson and various critics of Thomas Aquinas from an earlier era. Key to his analysis is the *line of despair*, which is the borderline in the nineteenth century separating rationality and the “non rational.” Following certain views of cultural history, Schaeffer believed that artists best know the way: “The philosophers from Rousseau, Kant, Hegel and Kierkegaard onward, having lost their hope of a unity of knowledge and a unity of life, presented a fragmented concept of reality; then the artists painted that way. It was the artists however who first understood that the end of this view was the absurdity of all things.” (190).

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The book, and the television series, contain a dazzling array of names, quotes and trends. One has the sense that the zeal to include so much information is somewhat impulsive, meant to reassure readers nothing has been

missed. It comes across as a shotgun. Through the bullets, we get glimpses of a narrative, in the end stated again and again: without a “Christian base” things will fall apart. The phrase that comes up over and over is “he opened the door to” and then follows a description of the decline, often using vague indictments such as this leads to “the area of non-reason” (200). In the place of a Christian base, a vacuum is created, filled by either chaos or arbitrary authoritarian régimes. The basic message is clear, even though stated breathlessly. However, many names and events are crammed-in, the basic theme is repeated: when they are gone, Christian values are replaced by arbitrary absolute which eventually issue either in chaos or authoritarianism. (218-219)

This is a fairly standard conservative diagnosis, though stated in a scatological manner. The subtitle of Schaeffer’s series is *The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture*. Frustratingly for the specialist there is a paucity of references to sources. This, despite a good deal of declinist literature available out there. Was he influenced by Richard Weaver’s best-selling book *Ideas Have Consequences* (1947) in which the author defends the great thinkers over against the mediocre pundits of the day? Interestingly, *fragmentation* for Weaver is among the major symptoms of a civilization in decline. For Schaeffer as well, fragmentation is among the chief evils of contemporary culture. (194)

Or was he influenced by Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*, a sweeping journey through the “age-phases” of the human life cycle? The final stage of these phases being civilization and its decadence.¹ The book title is listed in the bibliography but there is no evidence that Schaeffer interacted with Spengler’s ideas. They are admittedly eclectic, dependent on thinkers such as Nietzsche and Goethe and even Eduard Meyer. He was drawn to Fascism but not entirely convinced. Schaeffer would not have gone near Fascism. Instead he warned against the deeper reasons for these trends. But did he understand Spengler?

Seeing the reasons behind the reason may be Schaeffer’s lasting contribution. For example, the use of drugs in the 1960s was not just escape, but the search for a “final experience.” Existentialist philosophy was articulated not so much through the normal channels of philosophical discourse, but through films and theater, which is where people really live. The young people who revolted in the universities were right about the problems (escape into “personal peace and affluence”) though wrong in their answers. Later, thinkers such as Os Guinness would develop the idea of deeper reasons more thoroughly.²

The lack of clearly acknowledged sources removes from the series' credibility. Still, there are hints of a method behind the investigations which deserve some careful scrutiny. Some of his insights are most enlightening, if a bit puzzling. Let's take his views on Beethoven.

Beethoven's music, he says, "more than that of any composer before him, gives the impression of being a direct outpouring of his personality." It expresses modern man, on self-expression. Schaeffer cites the last string quartets as evidence: they "opened the door to twentieth century music." (158) (He later claims Claude Debussy "opened the door" to fragmentation in music, leading to such trends in classical but also popular music, including jazz. This is presumably a different door.)

Schaeffer cites Leonard Bernstein, and also Arnold Schönberg and Stravinsky as recognizing the prophetic nature of these last quartets (192-193). Beethoven's final quartets are indeed unique. He himself declared they were "for a later time." He no doubt in some fashion bridged the way from classical to romantic music. But why is that a negative? Schaeffer makes it sound as though there were some occult movement driving the West away from something like reason, to something like fragmentation and the expression of personality. Beethoven's biographers, especially A. W. Thayer, certainly identify him with the romantics, though Beethoven refused the label. But is romanticism entirely bad? Was it not in part a corrective to the rationalism of the Enlightenment, and the acknowledgment of freedom, humanity, and other virtues suppressed by the rationalists? Otherwise, why are these quartets such a portent? He cited Donald J. Grout as saying the modern musician is "helpless in the grip of forces he does not understand." But how so? Lots here depends on the shock value of some bold steps taken by avant-garde composers, which is reduced to "perpetual variation with no *resolution*." (193). But could the music not be a needed corrective to the cold rationalism of a previous time? Curiously, back in the Middle Ages Giotto had achieved a corrective to the colder iconic Byzantine representations of sacred subjects. (57) But with Beethoven the same move is a negative.

As to the music itself, I have to ask does Schaeffer really have a deep acquaintance with these masterpieces. Of course, one would tremble to suggest he did not, as he incorporated so much into his horizon. Still, should he not have saluted these compositions as remarkable for their craftsmanship alone? The C sharp minor quartet is surely one of the greatest pieces ever composed.

It is almost entirely a highly hewn meditation in a baroque mode. Of the third movement of op. 132 the composer wrote on the manuscript, “*Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart [Sacred Song of Thanksgiving from a Convalescent to the Deity, in the Lydian Mode]*.” What connection can there be to the trend to modernity? Why would it be negative?

If these quartets are an open door to negative trends Schaeffer really owes it to us to show how. (With Debussy he might be closer: certainly, in him, a number of classical conventions were challenged, replaced with wispy evocations of nature. But pessimist? Fragmented? Schaeffer should at least help us see how.)

Thus, pessimism and fragmentation are the malefactors of modernity (182). They become an “almost monolithic consensus.” Beethoven pioneered in music. In painting, the key “breakthrough” is the Impressionists. Then came the post-Impressionists who “felt the loss of universals, tried to solve the problem, and failed.” I have studied the post-Impressionists, particular Paul Cézanne all of my life. His real struggle was not to find absolutes but to achieve a unique artistic goal: center the reality of painting on a canvas, while respecting the natural world, without slavishly copying nature. He once likened himself to Moses, seeking to lead the arts not away from absolutes, but toward the promised land of truly artistic integrity. This is hardly the road to fragmentation.³

Schaeffer’s view are supported by some outrageous examples he finds of modern artists who not only failed to find unity but also cried out in agony in their failure: Gauguin with his personal despair; Marcel Duchamps with his (failed) attempts to capture people in motion; the Marquis de Sade in his cruelty; John Cage with his impossible commitment to a chance universe; Jackson Pollock’s tragic alcoholism, etc. Such artists are marshalled into Schaeffer’s “almost monolithic consensus.”

I would not call these cheap shots. But there is a kind of sensationalism attending to their person and work. Significantly absent are the voices such as Georges Rouault’s, the believing Catholic painter of poverty and loneliness, all within a redemptive frame. Romare Bearden is absent, as are Aaron Douglas and Lawrence Jacobs. No Maurice Ravel, no Olivier Messiaen, no Makoto Fujimura. Is this the decline of Western thought and culture?

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So, where does this leave us? *How Should We Then Live?* is a lavishly illustrated tour through much of Western art history. It has great value as a guide, one which many evangelicals have lacked. Its uniqueness is not so much that

nothing else was around, for that is simply not true. It is that nothing quite like it from an evangelical viewpoint was recognized.⁴ Its value is enhanced by having a hard-hitting denunciation of lazy, escapist, “bourgeois” ethics. As a cultural analysis it has some value, reflecting a conservative message, with a Schaeffer twist. What is now needed is follow-up. Christian scholars need to develop and apply, and occasionally correct the insights of this series. Then we can better answer the question, *How Should We Then Live?*

¹ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York: Knopf, 1966), 37 and ad loc.

² Particularly significant are Os Guinness’ insights from the sociology of knowledge.

³ See, Denis Coutagne, *Cézanne in Provence: Mémoire* (Assouline, 2005).

⁴ In addition to the many “art appreciation” texts, there were those written by Christians, such as John Walford’s *Great Themes in Art* (New York: Prentice Hall, 2001).