

REVIEW ESSAY

Finding Your Voice: Engaging Confidently in All God Created You to Be

by Jennifer Turner

Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2021, 160 pages

Western Fundamentalism: Democracy, Sex, and the Liberation of Mankind

by Gordon Menzies

2020, 204 pages

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Both of these very readable books document the intense personal reflections of the authors, their harvests from decades of professional service. These are Christian contributions to public discourse about Christian discipleship, initially from within Australian society. I enjoyed reading these two books. There is a strong autobiographical element in both. As we read them, we find ourselves addressed by authors who have also examined themselves in the matters they lay before us.

Both books are written in undemanding ways; they are presented in a format that enables us to read each of them through in one sitting—say, over an intense 3-hour stretch—or by taking a chapter at a time as we consider their views over a few months. These are well crafted, carefully percolated accounts of reflections that have arisen from professional experience. The books have been published to share their views about how they see life *coram Deo*, under heaven, in Australia, in the 3rd decade of the 21st century.

It would be possible, and indeed it would be valuable, for both books to be reviewed in ways different from the approach I adopt here in this review. Both books have an *aide memoire* character. These are books that may have first been penned in diaries and “written up” to enable the authors to maintain momentum in forming a coherent outlook upon complex realities; they have already contributed in many ways to many conversations about the issues they raise for us. And it is those conversations that constitute the back stories of what we read here.

Perhaps some reviews will delve critically into the Christian assumptions or fundamental beliefs that have guided Jennifer and Gordon in their efforts to write to encourage Christian thinking. Another kind of review might explore their use of Biblical teaching. There may be other angles as well. But here I focus upon the books as invitations to serious and ongoing Christian discourse about matters vital for Christian discipleship, particularly for any *sociological* understanding of what concerns them.

This review considers them together in one essay because their respective narratives include auto-biographical reflections about their professional outlook. Jennifer Turner and Gordon Menzies invite readers to explore the insights they have collated from their years of service. They present us with their reflections about the way their professional perspectives have emerged while busily following Christ in professional life. They write as authors who sense a responsibility to encourage others to join in the vital conversations to which they have been contributing.

Turner is concerned that respect be ascribed to the self-identity of all persons. That is the basis for respect, affirmation, and nurture, with her special focus being upon women and girls, although not exclusively so. Menzies' concern is to encourage engagement in Western public life after the collapse of neo-liberalism and the onset of its culture wars. He wants Christians and others to see themselves as having been caught up in the pompous demands of competing Western fundamentalisms.

I am not going to expound their respective views here, nor do I launch into a critical encounter with either book even though I suspect that some important matters have been overlooked or might have been given greater clarity. I am assuming these two books have been written to stimulate fresh and lively discussion among Christians and their neighbors; they have been written in straight-forward English without recourse to jargon.

Finding Your Voice: Engaging Confidently in all God Created You to Be is Jennifer Turner's account of how she found her voice, and was enabled to step forward with confidence as a well-respected professional and pastor of a Christian congregation. Turner gives evidence of having marinated in Biblical studies, a vital element, she says, for "finding her voice." This is her encouragement to readers to see the inner connection between the Bible and the life we Christians are called to live here and now, day to day. The mutual encouragement which is called for within the Body of Christ is to help us all find our voice, and having done so to then go on to flourish in understanding and affirming who we are, in service to God and neighbor.

The book is a sharp prod, albeit politely and at times indirectly, to think about how the Biblical message continues to be heard and received, as well as misheard and dispensed with by fellow Christians, both men and women, and not only by those who have moved on from Christianity. What she writes suggests a keen awareness of various social perspectives, including feminist views, about the intersection of gender, faith, and work. Her encouragement of readers, male as well as female (and any who may be uncertain about how they should identify themselves), is to give her account of finding the path to confident engagement "in all God has created (us) to be."

This is not a scholarly text, even as it breathes the author's scholarly appreciation as she recounts her journey as a woman who has served in public life and with distinction in congregations. She discusses how she has applied the teaching she gives to others to herself. In those terms, it is, in the view of this reviewer, most appropriate for review in this Christian sociology journal. I could go on, but I hope that gives sufficient insight into the kind of volume with which we are dealing here.

Some chapters I found particularly challenging. These are matters that could be construed as “women’s secret business”, perhaps more so for my generation (I was born in 1951). I am thinking of Chapter 7 “Beautiful with God’s Beauty”; Chapter 8 “Beyond Shame”; Chapter 9 “Invitations to this Season of Your Life.” These involve topics that boys growing up in the 1950s and 1960s might have known about only because we were told that we didn’t need to know about these “girl” or “women” matters, about physiology, maturity, childbirth and what happens when young girls reach puberty and women reach middle age. But to read these chapters is to be presented with another side of the world in which we grew up, and to which we were not necessarily introduced in a fulsome and unembarrassed way. Male readers of my post-war baby boomer generation might well benefit from these chapters. Only so much insight can be gleaned from furtively looking through *Women’s Weekly* in the dentist’s waiting room.

Reading these now, I find myself positioned relative to the text in a way that is roughly parallel with how I, as a Gentile, read the Letter to Hebrews. That letter is the detailed advice tendered to Jewish and Hebraic Christians concerning the way they should view their covenantal heritage. Turner, like the writer of that Letter, has a particular readership in mind (women, young women, and girls) who she particularly wants to encourage, to see them nurtured in positive ways, as she presents the story of her journey in which she has found her voice and gone on to make a well-rounded contribution. She has also discovered a way of writing that makes it easy for males like me to hear her challenge that is given not only to girls and women, but to the Body of Christ writ large. That way of writing, that tone, is similar to how Gentile Christians are called to benefit from hearing and reading the Letter to the Hebrews.

Indeed, I would encourage Christian men, young men too, to read this book, and to read other Christian female discourse like it, in order to benefit from hearing the sensitive and nuanced account of significant Christian life from a woman’s point of view, and that of a woman pastor. One doesn’t have to agree on all points. I particularly have in mind the chapters detailing Turner’s confrontation with female shame (Chapter 8), and of the life-cycle changes that are integral to female identity in growing toward and through adult maturity.

This is not to say that her discussion doesn’t raise questions that need further exploration by Christian readers, female and male. But we will probably already anticipate well enough that such sensitive discourse between men and women, boys and girls, is difficult enough within Christian marriage and in family life, let alone in a school setting or when a Christian congregational discussion is set up to address these matters.

So, I commend the challenge that Turner raises and affirm the imperative she places upon the reader; we need to be challenged in new ways to be open to truly hearing the woman’s voice. Thankfully, Turner has found her voice and has now documented her account of her Christian professional life and public contribution, along with the outlook that has inspired her pastoring within a Christian congregation.

Short-listed in 2021 for nomination as Australian Christian Book of the Year, Gordon Menzies' *Western Fundamentalism: Democracy, Sex, and the Liberation of Mankind* packs a punch, providing an entertaining and critical assessment of the turbulent neo-liberal world in which he has made a contribution as a social policy researcher, educator, and economist.

The book is Menzies' timely reflection upon the spiritual crisis of Western neo-liberalism. He also lays out his own story for the reader's consideration. We learn how he came to realize that liberal humanism, in maintaining its cultural dominance over more than two centuries, has now become encoded in what he calls "western fundamentalism."

He first came to realize how western fundamentalism is deeply rooted in our social life when he was shocked by the superficial approach of debaters at the highly esteemed Oxford Union. These highly intelligent, elite students nevertheless resorted to superficial dogmatic endorsement of three things: democracy, free markets, and sexual freedom. He became alarmed when he began to perceive how the "leakage" from an economic theoretical outlook that favored the de-regulation of free markets had become an integral part of the ongoing justification of the sexual revolution. (Others in Australia have begun to refer to the fundamentalist impositions of the "sexular society.")

The bar-code tells us that this book has been classified by its anonymous publishers as Political Science, and indeed, Menzies' extensive footnotes provide a basis for further research by erstwhile political theorists, particularly young Christian students wanting to engage meaningfully in the study of political science and political sociology, and thereby gain an appreciation of the arguments and the persistent superficiality of political debate. These references together detail what Menzies has been reading, and what has provoked his ongoing reflection. The footnotes could even become the database for a researcher's investigation of the west's culture wars. In that case, the volume could be considered a bibliographical essay.

The book provides information and identifies articles and books that would be good starting points for research that could extend to a *Christian* sociology of western fundamentalism.

As a Christian involved in the post-modern, market-driven academy, Menzies has realized the vital importance of probing deeply in an inter-disciplinary way if he is going to encourage effective intra-disciplinary discussion within his own discipline of economics. And as he has followed step by step along the path where this probing has led him, he has become convinced that open communication requires him to identify his own pre-scientific beliefs, what he calls his "fundamental beliefs." The corollary of this self-critical examination means that when he engages with colleagues, he also must recognize how they form their side of the conversation from their respective "fundamental beliefs."

And this has, it would seem, opened him up to consider intellectual contributions from all sides, majorities and minorities, mainline and deviant, to read widely and closely, to examine carefully social and cultural commentary.

Menzies claims to have found that in the West (if not across the "rest"), the market mentality has taken such a grip on people's overall outlook that marriage has become a

commodity subject to the rigors of an intuitive cost-benefit analysis by its participants. Marriage dissolves when, under the imperatives of this outlook, the costs are perceived to outweigh the benefits. For Menzies, that dissolution is not only tragic, it is actually a denial of what marriage is. Marriage is not a commodity that can be traded in or dispensed with when the cost-benefit calculus decrees, but a living betrothed relationship between husband and wife for life. The unpriceability of marriage is discovered in the unpriceability of the marital union for each of the marriage partners. This reviewer would have liked to read more of Menzies's views as to why marriage is a male-female union, normatively different with an unpriceability quite different from the unpriceability found in any and all friendships, whether they be male-female friendships or same-sex friendships.

Menzies has divined what we might call an inner connection between political life and the de-regulation of markets and with a further cultural connection that has been forged into taken-for-granted consciousness by the strident social justice demands for sexual freedom. He has written this book because the prevailing "politically correct" social commentary has ignored the inner connection between the de-regulation of markets and sexual liberation. There is potential here for further critical sociological analysis of the morally compromising interweaving of Western fundamentalist jurisprudence, ethics, and culture.

It is noteworthy that the notion of Western Fundamentalism arises from the effort of a Christian academic to do his job in the "commercialized, enterprise university"—such as it is these days—as a lecturer in economics who is nevertheless aware of his calling as a steward. As an economist, he knows his job, his "calling," is to assist his students with truthful understanding of the discipline itself. He therefore seeks to guide them as they seek to understand the (fundamental) beliefs upon which the economic-science-tradition (from Adam Smith to John Stuart Mill to the Chicago School) has been built, and upon which their own vocational integrity as economists is to be established.

The book has also come about because Gordon Menzies is part of an interesting development among evangelicals. He concludes his book by signaling his appreciation for the insights of John Stott (1921-2011). Appeals to Stott have also been published of late by John Anderson, the former Deputy Prime Minister of Australia and David Brooks, the US Newshour Commentator and *New York Times* journalist. Their appeal to Stott, like Menzies' appeal, is because of the Christian insistence of the vicar from All Soul's Langham Place, London on the need to both study God's Word as well as the world, as part of a meaningful and relevant Christian service to all neighbors.

The book's title is already indicative of Menzies' provocation, possibly generated by having been repeatedly incited by the taken-for-granted and uncritical "othering" use of "fundamentalism" by academic colleagues and those debating in the Oxford Union who would never ever see themselves as "fundamentalists." Menzies' effort in this book is to disabuse such superficial dogmatism by helping colleagues and neighbors identify the living and active fundamentalism that has been and still is driving their efforts, one that is integral

to Western thinkers who, like ourselves, argue dogmatically that we have a corner on the truth which we have captured by our own unaided genius.

But again, I have written this review not so much to assess the author's view of his academic discipline, or even to assess his political outlook. Suffice it to say that here is a book by an evangelical academic that is provocative in a political sense, and an upfront Christian political statement. Of course, more can be said. But we wait upon the development of the discourse that this book provokes.

This review has focused upon the volume as the fruit of Menzies' Christian professional reflection as to why his own thinking *as a Christian* not only intersects with the dominant traditions of Western science and scholarship, but is on a collision course with the various ideological strands that have come together in what he calls Western fundamentalism (especially in the economics of Ayn Rand's selfish economics which feeds off Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilism).

The book is highly relevant because of the devastating effects this ideology has had on the intellectual outlook fostered by Western universities, and through that, on our law-making, legal system, commerce, and public institutions. It is a work that can deepen our appreciation for the way sociology, as a science, must find its genuine path. Neo-liberal fundamentalism is an ideology that has made its impact upon Christian organizations amid churches, and we dare say our attempts to relate Christian faith to the science of society.

Both authors have previously published their contributions to promote informed theological reflection, especially by lay people, on contemporary issues in Australian society, seeking to bring Christian perspectives into public debate. These books are part of those ongoing efforts, and contribute to Christian public discourse like the *Journal of Sociology and Christianity* seeks to do for sociologists, scholars, and scientists across the disciplines and Christians wherever they are to be found.