

INTERVIEW

Interview with Os Guinness

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(February 19, 2020)

PETER LILLBACK: *Let me offer a prayer and then we will begin.*

Father, thank you for the joy of pausing for a moment and lifting our hearts to you and your glory and your goodness. Please hear our request for your guidance in this interview. We thank you for the fruitful labors and ministry of Os Guinness through the years; for the impact you have allowed his work to have. And we pray it might be abiding for generations to come. Bless this conversation now for the good of your people, and we are truly grateful that it is by your grace that we come together. We ask this all in Jesus's name. Amen.

OS GUINNESS: Amen.

PL: *For this issue of Unio cum Christo we have the joy of interviewing Dr. Os Guinness. He is extraordinarily well known around the world in the areas of apologetics and Christian leadership, with a particular concern for religious liberty. It is my joy to interview him, and I am grateful for his emphasis on public theology, the witness of the church in the public square, and the importance of defending the faith. Thank you, Dr. Guinness, for being with us. I would like to ask you to begin by sharing a bit about your life, including how you came to faith in Christ.*

OG: Well, I am a descendent of a well-known Irish family that produces beer but also many missionaries. My grandparents and parents were missionaries in China, and I was born in China. But I spent most of my teenage years back in England, with my parents in China under house arrest. So my journey to faith was at school, through a close friend, and through reading

C. S. Lewis, particularly *Mere Christianity*. There was a kind of a debate in my mind over two years between atheists like Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre, and my own hero on that side, Albert Camus, and on the other side, people like Blaise Pascal, G. K. Chesterton, and C. S. Lewis above all. And it was through reading *Mere Christianity* that I actually came to faith.

PL: *Well that is marvelous. So C. S. Lewis enjoys in heaven knowing that his labors impacted you! Let me ask you this question: L'Abri is part of your story, and you got to know Dr. Francis Schaeffer along the way. How did these experiences shape your life, ministry, and approach to apologetics?*

OG: I was at London University in the early 1960s, and we had wonderful teachers at the University, people like John Stott, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and Michael Green, but while it is fair to say that they gave us rich, deep, blocks of theology, it had absolutely no relation to culture, which was typical of Evangelicalism at that time. And there we were in what was called Swinging London, the counter-culture—the films of Ingmar Bergman, student radicalism, drugs, sex, and rock and roll—and there was no understanding of any of that. So it was really intriguing to me when a friend, Randal Macaulay, Schaeffer's son-in-law, introduced me to his father-in-law. My first three weeks when I went out to L'Abri after I graduated were incredibly revolutionary in my thinking. For the first time, I knew we were free to think about anything and everything under the lordship of Christ. While that was obviously less important than my conversion, it was practically more important because it launched me on an understanding of how we engage the modern world. So I owe a huge debt to Schaeffer, above all for his passion for the Lord, for people, and for truth. Though he was not a scholar, those three things outweighed any flaws he may have had. And I owe the world to him.

PL: *How would you describe his apologetic if you were to distill it?*

OG: Well, his apologetic was very personal and practical. People have often contrasted it with that of someone like Cornelius Van Til, which was much more philosophical and theoretical. In contrast, Schaeffer had an incredible way of talking to people. He would ask questions to get into their lives and then really explore what was the treasure of their heart. And if you watched him you could see that after a minute or two—he was not aware of it—his eyes would fill with tears because he was so empathetic with the story and the things people had gone through. He was remarkable. I have never seen anyone who was a better apologist one-to-one.



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PL: *You mentioned the distinctive approaches of Schaeffer and Van Til. They both appeal to a system that has sometimes been called presuppositional. How much of Schaeffer is Van Tilian presuppositionalism, and maybe where would be ways that would differentiate their approaches?*

OG: Well, my good friend and your friend, Dr. Bill Edgar, has explored the differences between them in much more fruitful ways.¹ But, for me, Schaeffer was so much more personal and practical. There was a great deal of evidential emphasis in his apologetics, and while he is known for pre-suppositionalism, my own apologetics—which grows out of his—combines both, and I do not think there is any ultimate contradiction there.

PL: *Through the years you have become known as someone who is focused on what might be called the sociology of religion. How did your interest in this area arise, and how has that impacted the way you have sought to defend the Christian faith?*

OG: Both Van Til and Schaeffer majored in the history of ideas—how ideas washed down in the rain, as Schaeffer used to say. But being a child of the 1960s, I saw that much of the impact on the church did not come from just ideas but the whole notion of modernity and its structures. When I read Peter Berger—I read *Facing up to Modernity* first—it just turned on all the lights for my understanding, not as an alternative to Schaeffer, but as a complement.² Now Schaeffer was brilliant on the history of ideas, and Peter Berger gave me an understanding of the sociology of knowledge or what you might call more simply, cultural analysis. There are so many things shaping us that do not come from thinkers at all. You could take the notion of “fast life,” 24-7-365 pressure, which we all know we live under. Where does it come from? It is not from a philosopher or sociologist or psychologist. It actually comes from clocks. You know the African saying, “All Westerners have watches. Africans have time,” and you can see that the clock has put a stamp on modern life. It is said to be the most powerful Western-invented machine. But you need sociology of knowledge or cultural analysis to understand that. That is true of a lot of things; this is why I try to balance the history of ideas with cultural analysis. But again, it is both/and and not either/or.

PL: *What do you believe to be the abiding impact of Schaeffer and L’Abri on the global stage of Christian thought today?*

¹ Cf. William Edgar, “Two Christian Warriors: Cornelius Van Til and Francis A. Schaeffer Compared,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57.1 (Spring 1995): 57–80.

² Peter Berger, *Facing up to Modernity: Excursions in Society, Politics, and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

OG: Well, sadly, things move so fast now that people are even saying, “Who was Francis Schaeffer?” and “Who was Billy Graham? Who was Carl Henry?” which is really quite appalling. However, as I look back over my life, and at 60 years since I came to faith in Jesus, Schaeffer’s great contribution was as a “door opener.” Evangelicalisms, certainly in Britain and much of the America, were pietistic in a good way: warm hearts, but not much of a sharp mind. So for many people, Schaeffer, for better or worse, gave them the freedom to move through the door, to think about anything—philosophy, art, culture, politics, you name it—within the framework of a Christian understanding. So even people who have been critics of his in various colleges would admit that he was the one who opened the door. They went through in different directions, but they owe that door opening to Schaeffer. Now for many of us who knew him, it has had a much deeper implication than all that we learned from him, the things I mentioned like his passion for God. For example, though he was not the greatest preacher I have heard, in almost every sermon at some point his voice would break. He was overcome by the immensity of the wonder of the truth he was proclaiming, and that sort of passion for the Lord was wonderful and inspiring.

PL: *Another area of your research and leadership has impacted the American story, including the Williamsburg Charter and your recent book, The Last Call for Liberty.³ As we look at those two works, first of all, how did your interest in this area arise, and what has happened between that first work on the Williamsburg Charter and your most recent book in the public political arena and issues of culture?*

OG: I have always been taken up with Augustine’s idea that if you want to understand a nation, you do not look at the size of its GDP, not that he talked that way, or the strength of its military or the size of its population. You look at what it loves supremely. There is no question that what America loves supremely is freedom. So I think the deepest way to analyze America is through the lens of understanding how it became a free country and where that freedom is today. That of course includes religious freedom. My work with the Williamsburg Charter (June 22, 1988) was almost providentially accidental.⁴ I wrote a single page on the genius of religious freedom and the First Amendment when I was at the Brookings Institution, and it fell into the hands of a senator’s wife who gave it to her husband. He called me and said, “I have just been appointed to the commission celebrating the

³ Os Guinness, *The Last Call for Liberty* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2018).

⁴ “The Williamsburg Charter,” *Religious Freedom Center of the Freedom Forum Institute*, <https://www.religiousfreedomcenter.org/about/charter/>.

bicentennial of the Constitution,” and added, “Would you like to meet the Chief Justice who is the head of the commission?” I had only been months in the country and I had lunch with Chief Justice Warren Burger. And he said to me, “I am embarrassed. We have millions to celebrate free speech, but almost nothing on behalf of religious freedom. What would you suggest?” Almost like Nehemiah as the cupbearer before the king, I prayed and suggested what became the Williamsburg Charter in June 1988. It was followed by the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in 1993. Looking back, we can see that those two events were the high water mark of 300 years of the American celebration and protection of religious freedom.

Since then, there has been a sea change that has cast a shadow over religious freedom. I call the villains the three dark Rs. One, the *reducers* who have reduced religious freedom to freedom of worship rather than the comprehensive right that it is. Second are the *removers*, particularly those after 9/11 who were horrified by the face of religion in public life and now see religious freedom as freedom *from* religion and not *for* religion. And third and most fatefully are the *rebranders*. Religious freedom used to be the first liberty, and it has now been rebranded as a code word for bigotry and discrimination. Today, you can see that religious freedom is under threat from the left as it has never been in the whole of American history.

PL: *That is a very powerful expression of our current milieu. Which raises the question, what do you believe are the biggest risks to religious liberty today? And should Christians really be concerned, given the divine promise of the survivability of the church and the all-encompassing character of divine purpose and providence?*

OG: Religious freedom is in essence the “freedom to be faithful.” That is why it is so important for us. It is obviously less important than faith in Jesus itself, but it is very important. If we look back over history, Christians were the pioneers: for instance, Tertullian in the second century and Lactantius, who was the tutor to Constantine’s son. But then sadly we were the perpetrators of some of the worst violations of religious freedom through the medieval times: “Error has no rights,” the Inquisition, and so on. Then with the Reformation, in Thomas Hywels and Roger Williams, we have the rediscovery of religious freedom. So, we Christians have a mixed record. We were the pioneers, we were the perpetrators of some of the worst deeds in history, and today, wherever people are persecuted, we too are persecuted.

I think there are many reasons why it is absolutely essential for the human future. It is the key to a civil society. It is the key to social harmony in a highly diverse world. And above all, it is the first liberty. When freedom of conscience and the civil public square—one is the inner forum and the

other is the outer forum—are guaranteed, you have the chance of a society that upholds freedom with justice. So it is incredibly important.

PL: *To those that would appeal to providence taking care of the matter and argue that it is not our concern, would you say that it is a misuse of the biblical doctrine? Or what would you counsel someone that says the church should just leave it alone and God will take care of our freedom?*

OG: I think that seems irresponsible. You know at the heart of faith and freedom is the notion of initiative and responsibility. Obviously, our brothers and sisters in the early church had very little room to move under the power of the Caesars, but we in the Western world, Europe and America, and many other parts of the world too, still have open societies. We are responsible as citizens to stand for these things, not just for our sake but for the human future; the passivity of saying we will just leave it all to God is terrible. The Lord is sovereign, but we are significant and responsible, so we are junior partners under him on behalf of freedom and justice.

There has been a sea change over religious freedom. Looking at the huge polarization in the United States at the moment, the deepest division I see is between those who understand America and freedom from the perspective of 1776 and the American Revolution, which was largely but not completely biblical from the influence of the Reformation, and those who understand America and freedom from the perspective of 1789 and the French Revolution and its heirs. Now the French Revolution only lasted ten years in France before Napoleon squelched it, but its ideas remain in some parts of the world through communism and the cultural Marxism of the progressive left. You see a fundamental threat to America that is deeper than anything America has faced. This threat is not external like communism during the Cold War or Hitler in World War II. Rather, it is internal. That is the greatest threat to freedom, and many are asleep at the wheel.

PL: *What is the church, broadly conceived, doing today to advance the gospel effectively or to blunt or diminish the clarity of the good news of Christ?*

OG: As you know well, the church is exploding in the global south. Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, where I happened to be born in north central China, are the epicenter of the fastest growth of the church in 2000 years. You see much of the fullness of the gospel, not only preaching but healing and deliverance and community, all sorts of dimensions that we have sadly long lost in parts of the West. And I would argue—and have done in a good many books, including *Impossible People*—that we are not only the victim of ideas that are against us—secularism, relativism, and various obvious ideas

—but we have fallen captive to some of the shaping powers of modernity in ways that are unfortunate.⁵ We therefore need a revival and a reformation and an awakening in the Western world.

PL: *Can authentic Christian intellectuals be simultaneously scientifically astute and maintain an historic Christian worldview as they engage debated issues such as creation and evolution, gender, and sexual identity?*

OG: I would answer with a grand “Yes, of course!” The West is a cut-flower civilization, looking nice but uprooted from its roots. We owe a lot to the Greeks and the Romans, but the main roots of our Western world come from the gospel and the Jews. Notions such as human dignity and freedom and truth and words, including the rise of modern science, arise from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Now what we are implacably opposed to, and they are opposed to us, is scientism or naturalistic science that views the scientific method as the sole way of understanding life, and that is simply inadequate. For example, the naturalistic scientists and the atheists—like Sam Harris or B. F. Skinner or John B. Watson—have a no better view of freedom than the ancient Babylonians, who believed in the stars, or the Greeks, who believed in fate, because they believe only in determinism. Naturalistic science is so reductionistic that it is a positive danger today, as it gives neither the values nor the foundations we need. I am from Oxford and am incredibly grateful to the Lord for people like Andrew Briggs, Lionel Tarassenko, and Ard Loouis, who are eminent scientists and professors in their fields, Francis Collins at the head of the National Institutes of Health, and all those who understand that a strong view of faith and a strong view of science go hand in hand.

PL: *What are the greatest opportunities for Christian influence and thought today as well as perhaps some of the greatest risks facing Christians?*

OG: I think it is time for Christians in the West to get off the back foot. We are on the defensive, which is a scandal. If you think of it, there are groups compared with us who are tiny. Take our friends the Jews. They are less than two percent of America, but they punch well above their weight intellectually, financially, and in the world of entertainment in Hollywood. We who are followers of Jesus are huge in numbers, and we are called to be salt and light, but our influence is puny. So it is time for us to re-explore the great

⁵ Os Guinness, *Impossible People: Christian Courage and the Struggle for the Soul of Civilization* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

foundational issues and move out into public life. Above all, not just to speak them out, but to live them out.

I mentioned, for instance, human dignity. We are moving from a post-truth world to a post-rights world. Not long ago, people were saying the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) was the “Bible of humanity” and would sweep the world. Not today. It is now described as Eurocentric or unfounded. But where did human worth come from? It came from Genesis 1:26 and 27. You can see that the Genesis declaration is quite literally the Magna Carta of humanity. So we need to explore all these things, as we have been forced to be defensive: words, civilities in crisis, truth, covenant, freedom, justice, and peace. We are the champions and the guardians of the greatest truths that made our Western civilization. It is becoming “a cut-flower civilization,” so it is up to us to stand for them for the Lord’s sake, not for the West’s sake.

PL: *As you look at your extensive writings, which works that you have authored should be the first for someone to read to understand your perspective and concerns, and which do you think is your most enduring in impact?*

OG: You could tell me better than I could! My bestselling book by a long way is *The Call*.⁶ It goes to the heart of our discipleship, an individual’s longing for purpose and fulfillment, and the breaking of a narrow pietism and engaging with life through our callings. So I am not surprised that that is by far my best selling, and maybe my most important book. But there are many that I love. I love my little book *Renaissance: The Power of the Gospel However Hard the Times*.⁷ It has not sold all that many but has the heart of things I think we need today. I have recently published two books on freedom. I have just finished a first draft of a third one, which is a more constructive view of Exodus and freedom. As I said earlier, I think freedom is the issue of the hour: certainly in America but also for the human future. I have no idea which ones will survive and which ones will not, but *The Call* is certainly my most important.

PL: *The first time I saw the name of Os Guinness on a book it was one called The Dust of Death. What caused you to write that book?*

OG: I never thought of being a writer, but I came to the United States in 1968: six weeks from the east to the west coast, and Berkeley and Harvard. I

⁶ Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling God’s Purpose for Your Life*, revised and expanded 20th anniversary edition (Nashville: Nelson, 2018).

⁷ Os Guinness, *Renaissance: The Power of the Gospel However Hard the Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

met Mario Savio, who led the Free Speech Movement in 1964, went to the Fillmore West and listened to Grace Slick and Jefferson Airplane. A hundred cities were ablaze, and that was the year that Martin Luther King was assassinated, and then Bobby Kennedy. Then you had the so-called police riots at the Chicago Convention. When I came back, I realized that what was happening in the US was of incredible importance, certainly for the West, but even wider. Then at L'Abri, I gave a series of ten lectures on the 1960s, and people came up and said, "You should write this." At first, I just shrugged it off. Then my old English teacher from my school in England came by, and he encouraged me too. So I thought, well, I will give it a try. L'Abri gave me six weeks off to write *The Dust of Death*, which I did.⁸ It did so well that it launched my writing, and I have enjoyed trying to do more since then.

PL: *So how many books in print total approximately are now bearing the name of Os Guinness?*

OG: I have absolutely no idea, and I do not particularly bother about the numbers. But it must be somewhere around 200 to 250 thousand. My books have sold far more in Korea than in my own home country, England.

PL: *Interesting. Well, what opportunities do you think Westminster Theological Seminary might have for the advance of the kingdom of Christ in the coming decades as you look at this school, which has enjoyed a long friendship with you?*

OG: I love Westminster Seminary, above all for its great faithfulness. That is the central issue of our time over against Protestant revisionism, the sexual revolution, and the progressive left. The central issue is Christian integrity and faithfulness. Beyond that, Westminster has a wonderful Reformed framework for thinking, so your graduates should be in the lead in terms of intellectual engagement with our modern world. Those are the two things that stand out for me. But if I could say so gently, Westminster is too often known for its little internal squabbles, which sadly blunt the incredible impact that it should be having.

PL: *Thank you for taking this time to interview with us. I want to conclude with an open-ended question. Are there any other issues that you might wish to clarify or comment on for our readers as we conclude our discussion?*

OG: Let me just comment on the challenge that Evangelicals are responsible for Donald Trump, they will pay for it, and so on. As I said, the polarization

⁸ Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death: A Critique of the Establishment and the Counter Culture, and the Proposal for a Third Way* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973).

we are facing revolves around the central issue that I identify in my book as being between Sinai and Paris.⁹ It has come down to us in terms of 1776 against 1789. However, I think we need to define the central crisis of our time more clearly, and then align ourselves more carefully in terms of that. I personally thank God for the wise things Trump has done, although he has a character that leaves a lot to be desired. Indeed, he has done an extraordinary number of good things for the country, but we have to show where we agree and where we disagree. Evangelicalism has now become conflated with him. When the coming reaction takes place, which is bound to happen, whenever he leaves office, after one or two terms, there is going to be a huge backlash, and society will probably lean more towards the progressive left. Unless we clarify where we are, we are going to be in trouble and just swept away as if we were merely conservative or merely political. Thus, we have to have a much better understanding of the reality we face, and a much clearer articulation of who we are and what we stand for. Along with others, I tried to state that in “The Evangelical Manifesto” in 2008, which in many ways prefigures the problems we face today as Evangelicals and points the way forward.¹⁰

PL: *Well we want to thank you so very much for your thoughts. You have given us a great deal to think about, and our prayer is that God would continue your fruitful labors for many years to come. Would you please conclude with a prayer that we can share with our readers?*

OG: OK, thanks, Pete.

Lord, thank you that you are sovereign over this fascinating, crazy, challenging world. You are Lord. And so we ask that you will give us wisdom and trust, obedience, and courage, that each of us in our callings and in our churches and communities may so be faithful to you that we may serve your purposes in our generation. We pray in Jesus’s name. Amen.

⁹ Guinness, *The Last Call for Liberty*.

¹⁰ Cf. Os Guinness, “The Evangelical Manifesto,” *Os Guinness*, 2020, <http://osguinness.com/publicstatement/the-evangelical-manifesto/>.