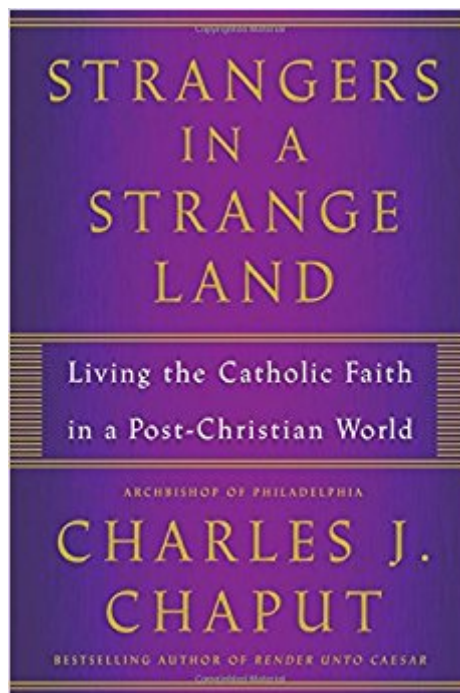




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Strangers In A Strange Land: Living The Catholic Faith In A Post-Christian World



Synopsis

A vivid critique of American life today and a guide to how Christians—*and particularly Catholics*--can live their faith vigorously, and even with hope, in a post-Christian public square. From Charles J. Chaput, author of *Living the Catholic Faith and Render unto Caesar* comes *Strangers in a Strange Land*, a fresh, urgent, and ultimately hopeful treatise on the state of Catholicism and Christianity in the United States. America today is different in kind, not just in degree, from the past. And this new reality is unlikely to be reversed. The reasons include, but aren't limited to, economic changes that widen the gulf between rich and poor; problems in the content and execution of the education system; the decline of traditional religious belief among young people; the shift from organized religion among adults to unbelief or individualized spiritualities; changes in legal theory and erosion in respect for civil and natural law; significant demographic shifts; profound new patterns in sexual behavior and identity; the growth of federal power and its disregard for religious rights; the growing isolation and elitism of the leadership classes; and the decline of a sustaining sense of family and community.

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Customer Reviews

"Erudite and eloquent...his book should be read by serious-minded people of whatever religious, partisan or intellectual inclination."—*The Wall Street Journal* "Strangers in a Strange Land is a thought-provoking depiction of a complex contemporary scene. As he fills in his canvas, the author cites a wide variety of sources: magisterial documents and Church Fathers (especially Augustine), historical figures, contemporary ethicists and social scientists, and even poets. Yet

throughout the book Chaput is much more than a cultural commentator; he is a pastor instructing souls. Although his message is challenging, the tone is always civil, conversational rather than controversial, and never preachy. In a non-academic way, with remarkable clarity and gentle wit, the author offers remedial lessons in Catholic morality and social doctrine for generations." "Catholic World Report" "Christians often disagree about how that hope should manifest itself in our public and cultural engagements. Chaput's book is a serious and thoughtful contribution to that crucial question." The argument of *Strangers* is level-headed and well-researched. The book itself is an inspiring act of public witness by one of the American Church's most prominent bishops. Crisply written, it is an accessible read in spite of the author's learnedness. • Public Discourse

Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, OFM Cap., was named archbishop of Philadelphia in 2011 by Pope Benedict XVI. As a member of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation, he was the second Native American to be ordained a bishop in the United States and is the first Native American archbishop. Chaput is the author of *Living the Catholic Faith: Rediscovering the Basics* and *Render unto Caesar: Serving the Nation by Living Our Catholic Beliefs in Political Life* as well as numerous articles and public talks.

Archbishop Chaput has written a lucid, sobering analysis of present day America's breakdown in moral consensus and the challenge it presents not only to Catholics but to ethically serious persons of all persuasions. The solutions he offers--personal spiritual renewal and a return to the best faith-based elements of the nation's imperiled moral consensus--are at once provocative and inspiring. This is an important book, to be read, discussed, and acted upon.

This is a self-help book. I don't mean it in the sense to be found in the bookstore under the sign "Self-Help," where people gather to remake their lives by unlocking the secret of costless auto-regeneration. Rather, this is a self-help book because it, like the famous Kitchener poster, points at the reader and says, "You there is a problem, and you are the solution." Of course, since the author, Charles Chaput, is a bishop (and an archbishop at that), and this is not Pelagianism, the reader is not expected to act in isolation, but with the guidance and help of God. He is to act nonetheless, and much hinges on what he does. There has been a spate of books in late 2016 and early 2017 focused on the theme of Christian regeneration. The theme is both

broader and narrower than that, really. Broader in that it encompasses not only Christians, but any group of people with a transcendent moral vision, compatible with the culture of the West, who believe in both objective reality and objective morality. Most, but not all, of these people are orthodox Christians, but they could be agnostic or pagan. Broader, also, in that it encompasses cultural renewal beyond the purely religious. Narrower, because its main focus is a subset of most of what people call or think of as "Christian." After all, what most "Christians" today profess bears little resemblance to the historical reality of Christian belief, which they either deny or ignore, in favor of something content-free, guilt-free, and reward-free: the Snackwells of religion, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. "Strangers in a Strange Land" is explicitly Catholic in its orientation and little focused on specific political issues. And it is suffused with hope—not optimism, as Chaput makes clear, but with a joyful hope and confidence. Nearly ten years ago, Chaput wrote "Render Unto Caesar," where he called for renewed Catholic (and Christian) activity in the public sphere. Since then, the juggernaut of left-liberal worship of autonomic individualism has ground onward, most recently in the Supreme Court's Obergefell decision rejecting the idea that standards of sexual morality can be based in anything other than malice, and like the original Juggernaut of Hindu processions, it crushes humans under its wheels. The space for Christian public participation is thus smaller now than it was then. But Chaput is the first to admit that it is not just our overlords, but our whole society, that has adopted a new definition of what it means to be human—namely, nothing in particular at all, except our own unfettered pursuit of whatever catches our fancy. Chaput, naturally, espouses the opposite view: that as humans, we are not always remaking ourselves, but that there is such a thing as "authentically human" and it is knowable. And, since his earlier book, what is new in society is that this position, always the position of our culture since the beginning, is now stigmatized and punished by both society and government, a trend Chaput believes will continue. Nonetheless, he still counsels hope and action—but with less focus on action in the public sphere, and more on our private action, by ourselves and in our communities. But, like I say, this is self-help book, and that implies each of us taking responsibility for where we are as well as where we are going. Chaput points the finger not so much at government as at us. He cites Augustine to the effect "it's no use complaining about the times, because we are the times." (In some ways, this book, and the genre, are perhaps too narrowly focused. As Chaput notes, Christianity is exploding around the globe, even in China, and it is not the desiccated, enervated faith found even in most Catholics in the West. But that

doesn't help our culture.) I think this is an excellent, valuable book. However, as a self-help book to solve the problems it identifies, it falls somewhat short. On the other hand, it succeeds as a book of informative essays about Christian regeneration and the role of Christians in our society as it is today. Moreover, it is an excellent introduction to a wide range of important thinkers, both secular (a very wide range, from Tocqueville to Tolkien) and religious (Chaput extensively cites both Pope Benedict and Pope Francis). As a self-help book the problem is that it is not unified enough – a real call to action pushes or pulls the reader through, each section either coming at the issue from a different angle or furthering conclusions from prior sections, so that the net effect is like John Henry's hammer. "Strangers in a Strange Land" sometimes feels a bit academic and disjointed – it is really a series of essays, and within each essay, sometimes it lacks adequate focus. For example, in an early chapter on how we got where we are culturally, and why we can't go back, Chaput jumps from the failure of immigrants to remain Catholic (or even Christian), to the costs of geographic mobility, to the costs of technology, to a discussion of the social differences between a society of production and a society of consumption in the thinking of Zygmunt Bauman – all in the space of six pages, ending the chapter. The next chapter is a rumination on home, pulling together the Bible, the Wizard of Oz, "The Magician's Nephew," "The Silmarillion," and much more, to serve the thesis that we are idol worshipers, of the false god of progress, for which we forsake recognition of a higher purpose of humanity. This is all very good. But each chapter does not follow from, or really fit with except in a general sense, any other chapter. Yes, someone interested in the theme of Christian regeneration can read all the chapters with profit. But the revivalist spirit of an outstanding self-help book is lacking. This book is also an entry in another, related genre – questioning whether the entire American political experiment is a failure, and was doomed to failure from the start due to the hidden poison in its premises. Prior to modern times, democracy was always held to be the worst form of government. The American founding combined a type of democracy with extensive personal freedoms and attendant structural limitations, to create a new type of government in the hope of limiting the vices inherent in previous forms. The American Republic seemed successful, but astute observers such as Tocqueville early predicted that the system would lead both to continual erosion of any limit on the individual's will, especially of limits that "create bonds and duties among citizens," and, just as importantly, to a concomitant rise in the power and despotism of the state, which would replace the organic structures of society with obeisance to the state, the power of which would be directed more and more against any who would suggest limits to

human freedom, especially religions. A line of thinkers, mostly cited by Chaput, has developed these thoughts, starting in the 20th Century with Robert Nisbet, but as our culture has decayed in the direction predicted, more and more thinkers have latched onto this pessimistic view. In this book, though, the focus is (naturally) more on religion than on political theory, but there are clear threads of this genre in *Strangers in a Strange Land*. The book is well written and easy to read. It has twelve chapters, each of almost exactly twenty pages. Chaput begins with an overview of the book, and then a chapter on the history of Christianity in America. He then turns to

“Why It Can’t Be Like It Was,” a corrective to those orthodox Christians (who are fewer now than they were) who think that all we need to do is get the right votes on the Supreme Court and we can have once again a society with a common, coherent moral vision. Here, as elsewhere, the examples and authors Chaput cites are well-known—not just Obergefell, but others such as the lynch mob that attacked *Memories Pizza*, joined by the media and egged on by President Obama, and, less recently, the changes in society wrought by easy birth control and widespread pornography. But

Chaput’s primary focus isn’t on sexual issues (although those are important because sex “is intimately linked to how we understand ourselves as human,” which is a key theme of Chaput’s book) • it’s on how very few Christians even know what a Christian life looks like, one shaped by an actual belief in a revealed God who requires certain actions, largely because we have failed to transmit those beliefs to our children for several decades. And this builds on itself—as the family erodes, since it serves as the main transmission of these beliefs, the problem compounds. The first several chapters are overview and analysis; the last several are a exhortation to hope and, to a degree, a call to action. Chaput’s basic point in the first section is, since our culture now recognizes no first principles (citing Alisdair MacIntyre’s 1981 “After Virtue” extensively), “The moral conflicts that permeate our public policy debates are endless and irresolvable because our culture no longer has a rational, mutually accepted way of getting to moral agreement. And, as a result, combined with an ever-more-extreme societal desire for atomized autonomic liberty, the government is now used to attack and destroy those who do not conform all public aspects of their personal morality to each latest moral degeneration, including by failing to adequately publicly celebrate it themselves. In the second section, Chaput focuses on hope, a core Christian virtue, and what it implies for Christian action in today’s America. He contrasts hope to its flip-side sins: despair and presumption. While he doesn’t say this explicitly, despair

is the besetting vice of today's American orthodox Christians, and presumption is the vice of today's go-along, get-along Christians. He finds neither appropriate. In another chapter, Chaput contrasts the rules of Saul Alinsky with the rules of another radical: Christ, in the Beatitudes. This is the section in which it comes through most clearly that Chaput is, after all, a shepherd, not a political advocate or the creator of a new philosophy to remake the world.

Speaking of the "mourning" of the Beatitudes, he notes that "this is mourning as witness, including that Christians should weep for the man in the homeless shelter . . . the gay teenager caught between promiscuity and condemnation." People conservatives sometimes forget, or if they don't forget, gloss over and fail to prioritize. Thus, hope in action is living the Beatitudes; it is growing in communion with our fellow believers. It is not, by implication, working for a specific political party or unveiling a new set of bureaucratic initiatives for the Church. It is living the Christian life to its fullest, in the way of the anonymous Second Century writer of the "Letter to Diognetus," who wrote a chapter on "The Christians in the World" at a time, much like ours, in which paganism was strong, though the idols today take largely different forms from that time (perhaps not that different: infanticide/abortion, sexual confusion, and euthanasia were common then too). Christians are to live in the world, "but in their own lives [] go far beyond what the laws require, showing that love for others remarked on by many non-Christian Romans. Chaput, therefore, rejects the option "to withdraw, to shake the dust from our feet and retreat to the margins." He rejects this because "the world will come after us. . . . The Church and Christian beliefs will be resented simply because they exist, they have life, and they move faithful persons to act." And, more importantly, "God calls us to be the soul of the world. As the 'Letter to Diognetus' reminds us, the task to which God calls us is to hold the world together. To that end, we need (citing Rod Dreher, ubiquitous in today's such discussions) "countercultural places that we make for ourselves, together." But doing that, we should be certain "we don't give up on the good still present in American society." And we should be politically involved to the extent necessary to protect what defenses we still have, and to "defend the truth of the human being." He cites Havel, who spoke of Communism, of course, but Chaput applies it to today's Christians: "The power of living the truth does not consist in physical strength or threats, but [as Havel said] 'in the light it

casts a shadow on the pillars [of a mendacious] system and on its unstable foundations. We should show ourselves, and evangelize, and uphold our beliefs and our culture in the public eye, while not entangling ourselves to the degree it prevents us from being “distinctly Christian and distinctly countercultural” (citing Dreher again). This means, as Chaput quotes Flannery O’Connor, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd. It is that oddity, in the eyes of the world, which it is necessary to make flourish. This is all good advice, it seems to me, but it is very close to being needle-threading advice. I think Chaput understates the degree to which, as Havel experienced, the iron fist of the state will oppose even the wholly private beliefs of Christians. And today’s state has both power and aspirations far vaster and far more intrusive than those of Rome or even of the Communists of the mid-20th Century. The range of today’s private sphere is vanishingly small, and Moloch is within the gates. For people like me, who, basically, want to view themselves as Hospitallers or Templars in a new videogame: “Call of Duty: Anno Domini 1120”, Chaput’s call, though certainly not wrong, seems a trifle anodyne. “That, in the end, is our calling as Christians: to make Christ known in the world. To hand on the hope that fills our hearts. To work for God’s justice in our nation, honoring all that remains beautiful and good in it. And always to do so knowing that we’re on a journey to our final homeland.” This is all true, but it is not a clear guide to concrete action. Maybe it is enough – but maybe we could use a bit more Pope Urban, and a bit less Pope Francis.

This is a thought provoking, serious consideration of contemporary culture. Archbishop Chaput is a learned, intellectually curious man of the Church and in this book he insightfully guides us through the technological, cultural, social, and political factors that explain this “strange land” and why Catholics and Christians are sometimes “strangers” in it. Drawing on an abundance of sources to illuminate and analyze current issues, he successfully synthesizes the vast reading of a holy and wise man. The endnotes illustrate the incredible breadth of sources for his observations and prescriptions -- from de Tocqueville, John Milton, Alasdair MacIntyre, and L Frank Baum from the Wizard of Oz through Leszek Kolakowski, Roger Scruton, Arthur Koestler, Robert Barron, Saul Alinsky, the Sermon on the Mount, Benedict XVI, St Augustine, and thinkers through the centuries. This vast array of wisdom from an eclectic group is presented in such an accessible way that it can’t help but leave a mark on a reader who seeks to understand the world and plan for an eternal

future."In the midst of the Church he opened his mouth, and the Lord filled him with the spirit of wisdom and understanding and clothed him in a robe of glory." Cf. Sir 15:5

Terrific information on what the Christian/Catholic will face in the coming years as they are always under attack. The good Archbishop writes in an informative easy to understand way with his profound insights as to how we will be able to deal with these issues facing the Church and all Christians. Highly recommended.

Extremely well written. Great insights. Full of Christian hope. We picked up copies for our children as well.

Excellent. A rich, engaging narrative packed with abundant observation, reflection, analysis and wisdom. I didn't want the book to end.

Amazingly good - sound conservative theology, excellent prose, and a sparkling sense of humor in a book that gives hope for surviving the current collapse of Western culture and manners. The good archbishop is writing for Catholics but all people of good will should find comfort in his perspective.

I enjoy Archbishop Chaput's thought. I have also read *Render Unto Caesar*. *Strangers in a Strange Land* is an accurate and realistic description of how the times we are living in are gnawing away at the pillars on which our country was founded, "equality of persons, natural rights and reverence for the law..." As the author states: "Candor is not the enemy of love and real hope begins with honesty." Archbishop Chaput gives us the knowledge we need to change things and the courage to try.

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