



**Life's
too
short
to
pretend
you're
not
religious**
David Dark

Life's Too Short to Pretend

You're Not Religious

Available February 2016

\$20, 192 pages, hardcover

978-0-8308-4446-3

Religion's not dead!

In his latest book, David Dark defines religion as the controlling story in which people are blessed and cursed to find themselves. He writes that your religion is what you do with yourself, your resources and your passions, and it matters deeply. *Life's Too Short to Pretend You're Not Religious* calls readers to become more fully aware of their religion, making it the story of our lives.

"Don't let an aversion toward that radioactive word dissuade you," says Sara Zarr, National Book Award finalist and author of *The Lucy Variations*. "*Life's Too Short to Pretend You're Not Religious* is a bracing manifesto for modern people and an optimism-infused love song to humanity. David Dark calls us to pay better, more generous attention to our own lives and the lives of others."

Dark examines such questions as

- Why does the word "religious" carry so many negative connotations?
- What can we do to change the underlying meaning behind words like religion and religious?
- Why do you write that "the good news about weird religious backgrounds is that we all have one"?
- How does your own "weird religious background" shape the person you are today and your reasons for writing this book?
- Why does the word "religious" keep us from forming meaningful relationships and developing strong communities?
- What makes you assert that we are all religious on some level?
- Wouldn't it be easier to just get rid of religion altogether?
- Is there such a thing as the secular/sacred divide?
- Why is the judgment and narrow-mindedness that is directed toward the word religious so problematic to our culture?
- In the beginning of the book you state that religion is both "violence backed by divinity" and "peace backed by divinity," among many other dichotomous statements. Can you unpack how those all work together?
- You write that "Like God and the devil, religion is in the details." Can you explain how and why the details matter with our religion?
- How do we find calls to worship outside typical church settings?



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That Pesky “Religious” Label

“No one doesn’t believe in God as much as I do,” a slightly intoxicated friend assured me as we huddled together in a busy restaurant one Saturday evening. I knew we were in for an extraordinary conversation. Sometimes this kind of thing comes up when I’m asked what I do.

When I could honestly call myself a high school English teacher, my responses generated less heat. Someone might recite Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” recall a beloved teacher or ask for a reading recommendation, but it rarely took a turn for the intensely personal. Now that I work with undergraduates, they want to know what it is I teach, exactly.

Religion.

But what classes?

Bible. World Religions.

And now we’re awash in the prickliest of questions—the existence of God. The moment my friend asserted his superlative disbelief in God did not come out of the blue. We’d been at it a while on the subject of weird religious backgrounds (his and mine), life after death, music, science and all the different things people say the Bible says. I suspect I surprised him a little when I noted that we read it badly until we learn to read it as a collection and that, wherever one lands on the question of the existence of God, the Bible’s likely as good as it gets when it comes to challenging everyday injustice.

He wanted to know if I believed it, and I assured him that I did. But I described my love for the Bible with so many seemingly diverse points of entry that he seemed a little taken aback: Kurt Vonnegut’s devotion to the Sermon on the Mount, the ethical momentum set in motion within human societies by the prophets, the vision of beloved community in the civil rights movement and my own dependence on the wisdom of my incarcerated students. Before we knew it, we were talking about the power of love, the joys and difficulties of true neighborliness and the long-haul work of human hopefulness. Who would want to be a hater when it comes to these things?

It was right about then that he felt understandably compelled to drop a clarifying word amid our escalating love fest: “Nobody doesn’t believe in God as much as I do.” Boom. Was it something I said? Can we still be friends?

I was pleasantly stumped and strangely excited. Why the rush to disassociate? Is there a problem? Did he think I was trying to sell him on something? I wasn’t looking to keep him on any kind of hook or ask him to sign a statement of belief, but I so didn’t want our commonality to end. I wanted him to know—and said so—that he was kin to many a psalmist, poet and pilgrim within the Bible who shared his disbelief. I wanted him to believe

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that there was still so much we could have a good time talking about. Was there a way I might playfully overcome this defensiveness? How might I keep the frequency open?

Here's what I'm up to. I come to you as one bummed out by the way people talk about religion. Be it an online rant, a headline, a news report or a conversation overheard, I feel a jolt of sympathy pain whenever someone characterizes someone else as religious. It's as if a door just got slammed. And in a subtle, hard-to-get-a-handle-on kind of way, it's kind of like someone's been told to shut up.

This is the way it goes with our words. When I label people, I no longer have to deal with them thoughtfully. I no longer have to feel overwhelmed by their complexity, the lives they live, the dreams they have. I know exactly where they are inside—or forever outside—my field of care, because they've been taken care of. The mystery of their existence has been solved and filed away before I've had a chance to be moved by them or even begun to catch a glimpse of who they might be. There's hardly any action quite so undemanding, so utterly unimaginative, as the affixing of a label. It's the costliest of mental shortcuts.

Of course we get to call it like we see it. What else can we do? But when we do so with undue haste, when we're neither remotely inquisitive nor especially curious in our regard for other people, we may find that a casual demonization comes to pepper our conversations. This is why it often seems to me that calling someone liberal, conservative, fundamentalist, atheist or extremist is to largely deal in curse words. It puts a person in what we take to be their place, but it only speaks in shorthand. When I go no further in my consideration of my fellow human, I betray my preference for caricature over perception, a shrug as opposed to a vision of the lived fact of somebody in a body. In the face of a perhaps beautifully complicated life, I've opted for oversimplification.

And so it goes with the application of that impossibly broad brush called religion. It's as if we can't even speak the word without walking into the minefield of someone else's wounds. Guards go up immediately and with good reason. It's the ultimate conversation stopper, an association to end all associations. Who would want to get caught anywhere near it? And in our day, could calling someone "religious" ever function as a compliment? It's one more label we use as a placeholder of persons and populations, as if we've somehow gotten to the bottom of who they are with an adjective.

I want very much to take this attitude aside and punch it lovingly in the stomach. I want good humor and candor and more truth between us than a label could ever afford. And if it's the case that mention of religion mostly shuts conversation down, I want very badly to somehow crack it open again. If we're open to it, the word need not always signal a dead end; it might even be a means to a breakthrough, a way of fessing up to the facts of what we're all up to.

— Adapted from the introduction, "Religion Happens"



David Dark, author of *Life's Too Short to Pretend You're Not Religious*

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An “Astute and Necessary Cultural Critic”

David Dark (PhD, Vanderbilt University) is a critically acclaimed author and teacher at the College of Theology at Belmont University and among the incarcerated communities of Nashville, Tennessee. He is the author of *The Sacredness of Questioning Everything*, *Everyday Apocalypse* and *The Gospel According to America*. He also contributed to the book *Radiohead and Philosophy* and has published articles in *Pitchfork*, *Paste*, *Oxford American*, *Books and Culture* and *Christian Century*.

His latest book, *Life's Too Short to Pretend You're Not Religious*, releases in February 2016 and is already garnering praise characteristic of Dark's insight and critique. Throughout this new volume, Dark combines wit and candor with sharp cultural observations, flipping the script on religiosity, arguing that “if what we believe is what we see is what we do is who we are, there's no getting away from religion.”

“David Dark is one of our most astute and necessary cultural critics,” says Jessica Hopper, senior editor at *Pitchfork*, editor-in-chief of *The Pitchfork Review* and author of *The First Collection of Criticism by a Living Female Rock Critic*. “His work gracefully opens new doors of understanding and breaks down barriers between secular and non-, and it puts a lot of old mythology out to pasture with a daring affirmation at the heart of his radical critique. *Life's Too Short* refreshingly ropes everyone in, insisting that we're all in it together. We forget that.”

A frequent speaker, David has appeared on C-SPAN's *Book-TV* and in the award-winning documentary *Marketing the Message*, as well as being featured at such conferences as the Calvin Festival of Faith and Writing, *Image Journal's* Glen Workshop, the Greenbelt Festival in England and the Reel Spirituality conference at the Directors Guild of America in Los Angeles.

He lives with his singer-songwriter wife, Sarah Masen, and their three children in Nashville.