

Gode: Alive and Well in Our World
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Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.
- Romans 12:2

William Romanowski says in his book, *Eyes Wide Open: Looking For God in Popular Culture*, "Born again adults spend an average of seven times more hours each week watching television than they do participating in spiritual pursuits... They spend roughly twice as much money on entertainment as they donate to their church... Considering how vocal some Christian groups are about the presumed negative influence of popular culture, I wonder why Christians aren't more interested in reading about how to evaluate movies, television shows, and music as Christians."

His book can be found on Amazon, but let me just say that he's not talking here about watching Disney cartoons or reruns of *Touched by an Angel*. Suppose there is a show on TV dealing with an emergency room. Romanowski would say it is worth watching if it is an honest representation of medical care, human emotions, and actions. Also if it shows the awful effects of sins, as well as the relational and ethical complexities of the situation.

Regarding music, Father Andrew Greeley once said that Bruce Springsteen "sings of religious realities – sin, temptation, forgiveness, life, death, hope." Many have said much the same about the music of Johnny Cash and others.

And when it comes to movies, the staff at Sandia was once renewed by the movie *Tortilla Soup*. In it a family – the father and adult daughters – continue to gather for meals. They have their problems, but we see them struggle to get along. One daughter even prays.

When Paul says, "*Don't be conformed to this world*": movies, TV programs, and music can help us understand the world in which we live and the various responses to the many situations. Or not, which is why it's helpful to be selective. Evaluate what we watch and hear.

Philip Yancey, who has written a number of books helping us live the faith, has an interesting insight about evaluation. He was taught growing up that everyone and everything outside his church was corrupt or at least suspect. He escaped this perversion of reality long ago, and one of the stories he tells is about a lady saying grace before a meal. She meant to say, "make us ever mindful of the needs of others," but slipped and asked God to "make us ever needful of the minds of others."

The more Yancey thought about it, the more he values her prayer. He says, "In my own pilgrimage, I have often looked outside the boundaries of evangelicalism (his tradition) for spiritual nourishment. Jews and liberal scholars best help me understand the social milieu in which Jesus lived. Catholics such as Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen enrich my faith; modern seekers such as Anne Lamott and Patricia Hampl enliven it. Vaclav Havel and Alexander Solzhenitsyn teach me more about politics and morality than most representatives of the Religious Right." In this manner Yancey follows the above scripture, "*but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.*"

Speaking of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, it's been awhile since I thought of him. He died in 2008 at age 90. But when he was 83 he wrote a prose poem called "Growing Old." It includes these lines:

"How much easier it is then, how much more receptive to death, when advancing years guide us softly to our end. Aging thus is in no sense a punishment from on high, but brings its own blessings and a warmth of colors its own... There is even warmth to be drawn from the waning of your own strength compared to the past – just think how sturdy I once used to be! You can no longer get through a whole day's work at a stretch, but how good it is to slip into the brief oblivion of sleep, and what a gift to wake once more to the clarity of your second or third morning of the day. And your spirit can find delight in limiting your intake of food, in abandoning the pursuit of novel flavors. You are still of this life, yet you are rising above the material plane... Growing old serenely is not a downhill path but an ascent."