

BOOKS THAT GO BOOM? The explosive effects of books.

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Be nice to your books. Or at least to the good ones.

Throughout history books have played a central role in the transmission of information, both for good and bad. But they have been especially important in the flourishing of Christianity. This is the main theme of a booklet by Klaus Bockmuehl called *Books: God's Tools in the History of Salvation* (Regent College, 1986). In referring to the importance of books, Bockmuehl goes so far as to say that “books make history—much more so than the wars we always hear about in the history books” (p. 9).

95 Theses, the book

Renewal movements within Christianity have been especially dependent upon books as an instrument for disseminating ideas and encouraging positive change. The Reformation itself provides a remarkable example of this phenomenon. “Luther made extensive use of the medium of pamphlets or short tracts. In each of them some urgent question of the day could be taken up and dealt with. We are to think even of the 95 Theses less as a piece of parchment nailed to the door of the castle church at Wittenberg, but rather as going out in the form of one of the most widely and rapidly distributed pamphlets of the time” (p. 10).

The spread of literature was a central feature in the success of the Reformation. This was true not only with respect to Luther, but also other important reformers.

Calvin provided hard-pressed fellow believers in France with the weapons of theological literature. Wherever he or his messengers would not be free to travel, his writings made their impact instead. Secular history has shrewdly observed that John Knox achieved the breakthrough for the Reformation in his native Scotland through a ‘pamphleteering campaign’ of six successive tracts. Here again one man, and from exile at that, reached the masses of a nation, bypassing the ruling class. The printed word turned out to be the lever with which the enemy was lifted from his saddle (p. 11).

Of course, books can also be used for bad purposes. Revolutionaries have utilized literature to spread their ideas and shape people’s thinking. In the eighteenth century, for example, French intellectuals relied heavily on the writing and publishing of materials to lay the groundwork for the Revolution of 1789. Communists in Russia did much the same thing in the early twentieth century,

setting the stage for the Russian Revolution of 1917.

For good or for evil

Books also contributed to the ultimate undoing of the Russian Revolution. Perhaps the greatest Russian dissident was Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Bockmuehl notes that Solzhenitsyn emerged as “a world force—through his books. Had he said all the things that he wrote, in the classroom or in the streets of the town where he was living as a mathematics teacher, the world would have heard nothing of it. But the fact that he wrote and that it was duplicated, printed and spread proves that, compared with the spoken word, the written word is—as it were—like dynamite” (p. 21).

Indeed, there is a great battle going on between Christianity and secular humanism. In this conflict, “books are carriers and communicators of ideas of the utmost importance. Not in vain do we talk of the ‘explosive effect’ of this or that book. Books are able to carry powerful ideas into the hinterlands of the spiritual enemy” (p. 33).

Bockmuehl compares books to “dynamite” and speaks of their “explosive effect.” He’s speaking figuratively, of course, but he’s trying to convey the dramatic impact on human life that can result from the publishing of certain books. Just think of the effect of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of the Species* on subsequent history, to note one significant example.

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So be nice to your books, at least your good books. Good books can contribute in important ways to human well being such as communicating spiritual and theological truth. That being the case, it’s easy to see the significance of publishing. Bockmuehl even states that he considers “the Christian publisher and bookseller a full-time worker for God’s Kingdom just as much as the preacher and pastor” (p. 32). Books are significant “weapons” in the spiritual war, and Christian publishers supply these “weapons” to the soldiers in God’s army. You should be nice to Christian publishers, then, too.