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How to Fight the Man

By **DAVID BROOKS**

A few weeks ago, a 22-year-old man named Jefferson Bethke produced a video called “Why I Hate Religion, but Love Jesus.” [The video](#) shows Bethke standing in a courtyard rhyming about the purity of the teachings of Jesus and the hypocrisy of the church. Jesus preaches healing, surrender and love, he argues, but religion is rigid, phony and stale. “Jesus came to abolish religion,” Bethke insists. “Religion puts you in bondage, but Jesus sets you free.”

The video went viral. As of Thursday, it had acquired more than 18 million hits on YouTube. It speaks for many young believers who feel close to God but not to the church. It represents the passionate voice of those who think their institutions lack integrity — not just the religious ones, but the political and corporate ones, too.

Right away, many older theologians began critiquing Bethke’s statements. A blogger named Kevin DeYoung [pointed out](#), for example, that it is biblically inaccurate to say that Jesus hated religion. In fact, Jesus preached a religious doctrine, prescribed rituals and worshiped in a temple.

Bethke responded in a way that was humble, earnest and gracious, and that generally spoke well of his character. He also basically folded.

“I wanted to say I really appreciate your article man,” [Bethke wrote to DeYoung in an online exchange](#). “It hit me hard. I’ll even be honest and say I agree 100 percent.”

Bethke watched a panel discussion in which some theologians lamented young people’s disdain of organized religion. “Right when I heard that,” he told *The Christian Post*, “it just convicted me, and God used it as one of those Spirit

moments where it's just, 'Man, he's right.' I realized a lot of my views and treatments of the church were not Scripture-based; they were very experience based."

Bethke's passionate polemic and subsequent retreat are symptomatic of a lot of the protest cries we hear these days. This seems to be a moment when many people — in religion, economics and politics — are disgusted by current institutions, but then they are vague about what sorts of institutions should replace them.

This seems to be a moment of fervent protest movements that are ultimately vague and ineffectual.

We can all theorize why the intense desire for change has so far produced relatively few coherent recipes for change. Maybe people today are simply too deferential. Raised to get college recommendations, maybe they lack the oppositional mentality necessary for revolt. Maybe people are too distracted.

My own theory revolves around a single bad idea. For generations people have been told: Think for yourself; come up with your own independent worldview. Unless your name is Nietzsche, that's probably a bad idea. Very few people have the genius or time to come up with a comprehensive and rigorous worldview.

If you go out there armed only with your own observations and sentiments, you will surely find yourself on very weak ground. You'll lack the arguments, convictions and the coherent view of reality that you'll need when challenged by a self-confident opposition. This is more or less what happened to Jefferson Bethke.

The paradox of reform movements is that, if you want to defy authority, you probably shouldn't think entirely for yourself. You should attach yourself to a counter-tradition and school of thought that has been developed over the centuries and that seems true.

The old leftists had dialectical materialism and the Marxist view of history. Libertarians have Hayek and von Mises. Various spiritual movements have drawn from Transcendentalism, Stoicism, Gnosticism, Thomism, Augustine, Tolstoy, or the Catholic social teaching that inspired Dorothy Day.

These belief systems helped people envision alternate realities. They helped people explain why the things society values are not the things that should be valued. They gave movements a set of organizing principles. Joining a tradition doesn't mean suppressing your individuality. Applying an ancient tradition to a new situation is a creative, stimulating and empowering act. Without a tradition, everything is impermanence and flux.

Most professors would like their students to be more rebellious and argumentative. But rebellion without a rigorous alternative vision is just a feeble spasm.

If I could offer advice to a young rebel, it would be to rummage the past for a body of thought that helps you understand and address the shortcomings you see. Give yourself a label. If your college hasn't provided you with a good knowledge of countercultural viewpoints — ranging from Thoreau to Maritain — then your college has failed you and you should try to remedy that ignorance.

Effective rebellion isn't just expressing your personal feelings. It means replacing one set of authorities and institutions with a better set of authorities and institutions. Authorities and institutions don't repress the passions of the heart, the way some young people now suppose. They give them focus and a means to turn passion into change.