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WHERE'S WALDO?

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Where's Waldo? is a wonderful game to play with children. And yes, many adults like it too. The lanky and goofy Waldo is hiding in plain sight amidst some busy scene. Once you locate Waldo, you are amazed it took so long to spot the cheery cartoon character.

In the same way, Ralph Waldo Emerson hides in plain sight. His far-reaching influence on us Americans is undeniable, but many of us are unaware of him.

For many years, I have taught on various challenges posed to the Christian faith in nineteenth-century America. In one section for the course, Ralph Waldo Emerson and other writers receive special attention.

Nineteenth-century America was littered with gifted writers. F.O. Matthiessen dubbed it the “American Renaissance,” which was also the title of his important work.

A Giant among Giants

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a giant among giants during this period. In 1837 Emerson gave a Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard called “The American Scholar.” Poet Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., called it America’s “Intellectual Declaration of Independence.”

When Emerson gave the lecture, he was already troubled by institutionalized religion. He had previously parted ways from his pastoral ministry among Boston’s Unitarians. Emerson would help launch a movement of sorts called transcendentalism. Emerson’s views can come across as fragmentary and partial. One reviewer said Emerson’s style in his essay *Nature* was “injured



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C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE

DAVID GEORGE MOORE

WHERE'S WALDO?

by occasional vagueness of expression.”¹ A Unitarian minister added that Emerson’s writings had “beautiful thoughts, beautiful passages, but no well-rounded, comprehensive philosophy of religion or life.”²

Without getting into all the various ways transcendentalism was understood, we can safely say that the individual supplanted religious traditions and institutions. The “divine self” was given permission to assess *and* access truth on its own. Religious institutions, especially those promoting the importance of doctrine, had to be sloughed off. Calvinists living in Boston would be exhibit A for what was wrong with religion. For Emerson and many others, Unitarian belief was not much better. Emerson agreed with Orestes Brownson’s assessment of Unitarianism as “negative, cold, lifeless...and all advanced minds among [them] are dissatisfied with it, and are craving something higher, better, more living and life-giving.”³ Anything that stifles the self from discovering its own truth is not worthy of having followers.

Emerson’s influence on America’s self-identity is huge. I’ve heard historians say that Emerson and Twain are indispensable for understanding the uniqueness of the American spirit. Emerson is everywhere. Not his name per se, though it does crop up from time to time even in popular culture. Reebok, the maker of running shoes, used to feature quotes from Emerson’s essay *Self-Reliance* in one of its commercials.

Roger Lundin makes a strong case for why we Christians are foolish to neglect Emerson:

The flowering of unbelief in the last decades of the nineteenth century was in many respects a natural outgrowth of a spirit of religious indifference that had been sown on the cultural winds several decades earlier. This indifference appeared specifically within the history of American Protestantism, and when we track its origins, we find that many of the most



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DAVID GEORGE MOORE

WHERE'S WALDO?

heavily traveled paths lead to and from the early career of Ralph Waldo Emerson.⁴

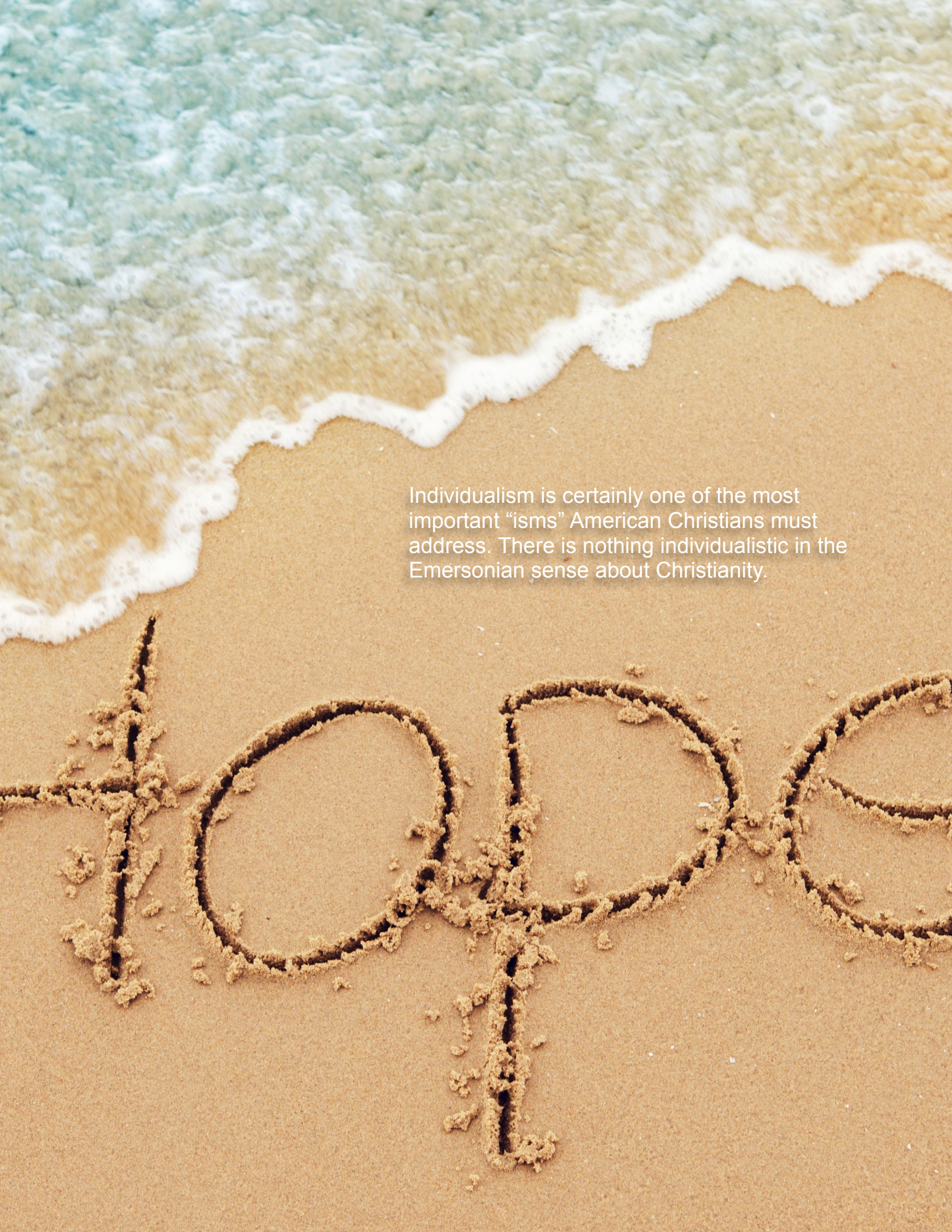
Emerson's work isn't well known among Americans, but his influence on our lives is incalculable. All this got me curious about how we American Christians have sought to deal with the trumpeting of the self that Emerson made chic.

Where Are the Christian Responses to Emerson?

I reached for three of the most widely used apologetic books to consider how Christian writers of this genre interacted with Emerson. These included *The Reason for God* by Timothy Keller, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* by Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, and *Reasonable Faith* by William Lane Craig. I also looked at three of the most popular "Christian worldview" books: *Universe Next Door* by James Sire, *Total Truth* by Nancy Pearcey, and *Understanding the Times*⁵ by David Noebel. Even though I was familiar with all these books, I had forgotten how they interacted with Emerson. I was stunned by what I discovered. There was absolutely nothing said about Emerson in any of these books. How could a thinker as formidable as Emerson be so widely ignored? No one who knows American history doubts that Emerson is a major figure we should reckon with.

Learning from Heretics

Before we consider various responses to Emerson, it is necessary to check our motives. Are we defensive and angry? Yes, there is a godly anger, but it can so easily devolve into the unrighteous type. Furthermore, do we believe there is anything we can learn from critics of Christianity? One well-respected Christian scholar believes that we Christians have some important things to learn

A photograph of a beach with waves crashing onto the shore. The sand is a light brown color, and the water is a mix of green and white foam. The words "for people" are written in the sand in a simple, hand-drawn style. The word "for" is on the left, "people" is in the middle, and "people" is on the right. The text is centered horizontally and vertically in the lower half of the image.

Individualism is certainly one of the most important “isms” American Christians must address. There is nothing individualistic in the Emersonian sense about Christianity.

for people



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DAVID GEORGE MOORE

WHERE'S WALDO?

from the likes of Freud, Nietzsche, Marx, and by way of extension, Emerson:

To read Marxian atheism for Lent is not to find some way to dismiss or discredit him. It is rather to let ourselves, individually and collectively, be cross-examined so as to uncover the ways in which we are self-deceived about the social function of our piety. It is well to remember that the German Christians lent their support to the Nazi regime by their own anti-Semitism, whether it was vocally overt or silently complicit. (Lord, I thank Thee that I am not like those Germans.)⁶

Richard Mouw agrees:

I have visited Authors Ridge [Concord, Mass., cemetery where Emerson is buried] a half-dozen times. Some of my favorite heretics are buried there. I think it is a good thing for a Christian to have some favorite heretics. Not that I am convinced that the world is a better place, all things considered, because heretics have existed. That is a question of theodicy that I have not settled in my mind. But heresy is a fact of life, and given that there are plenty of heretics to choose from, one might as well have a few favorites.

One can disagree strongly with someone and yet find it helpful to wrestle on a regular basis with the particular challenges that this person poses to one's own way of seeing things. That is how I feel about the writers buried on Authors Ridge. I disagree with the thoughts they set forth, but I find it profitable to keep thinking about why I so strongly oppose what they have written. When I walk among their graves, I find myself experiencing both awe and sadness.⁷



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DAVID GEORGE MOORE

WHERE'S WALDO?

Suggestions for Fruitful Engagement with Emerson

True Freedom

Emerson believed that greatness lay solely within the individual person. He closed his famous essay, *Self-Reliance* with “Do not seek yourself outside yourself.”⁸ Emerson was leery of anything or anyone who would seek to restrict the individual. The “self as *individual*” is an interesting idea. It has a relatively short history. It describes a person who is completely sufficient and in need of no one or nothing bigger than oneself, which certainly would include the need for religious traditions.⁹ Emerson’s self-focus took on epic proportions, “A great man is coming to eat at my house. I do not wish to please him; I wish that he should wish to please me.”¹⁰

Individualism is certainly one of the most important “isms” American Christians must address. There is nothing individualistic in the Emersonian sense about Christianity. Even a cursory read of the Bible reveals that the Christian faith is about God calling out *a people* to be His own. Granted, God calls individual persons. In a very real sense, we are all called individually by God on our very own “Damascus road.” However, individuals are not called to be individualists but to be part of the community of God. Too many American pastors seem to believe that crude media and corrupt politicians are the biggest culprits attacking Christian belief. I believe we would do much better to address the worship of the self that Emerson brought into the mainstream of American culture.

It is common to hear today that we can *recreate* or *reinvent* ourselves. Remaking yourself, a “do over” of one’s image, is also a popular way of saying the same sort of thing.

According to Emerson, since you are autonomous, you, and you alone, hold the keys to the promised land of changing your

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we can safely answer, "everywhere."





C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE

DAVID GEORGE MOORE

WHERE'S WALDO?

identity. Congratulations! You can be whoever you deem to be, which is far better than the pathetic person you now face in the mirror every morning. It's a sexy proposition. As a result, many of us get snookered into believing that this is in our power. Remaking the self is big business in America, because the marketplace is amply supplied with gullible guys and gals who gladly buy the latest workout equipment, make-up, head to some exotic locale, or, best of all, receive some artificial manipulation of body parts. Great effort coupled with high hopes — all in the service of finding the better me.

As Christians, we have good news to share here. We believe God wisely created us with a particular, even unique, personality. We are not only created in His image (which gives us worth and dignity no matter what we can produce), but our *individual identity is fixed*. And fixed is not a bad thing. Fixed actually is liberating. Instead of the frenzied pursuit to remake our identity, we are freed up to discover how best to use the specific identity God has bestowed on us. Christians don't need to be exhausted by the never-ending treadmill of remaking themselves. God has made us a certain way, and that uniqueness reminds us of our value. Not only are we created in His image, but there really is just one of us.

The Emersonian philosophy looks attractive to Americans who love the idea of remaking the self. But the road on which Mr. Emerson takes us is a cul-de-sac, a veritable dead end for restless idealists who desperately think the self can be remade.

Say What You Believe, Believe What You Say

Emerson had little patience with ministers who blathered on about their religious platitudes. On one occasion, Emerson contrasted the beauty of a snowstorm with the pointless musings of a preacher:

A snowstorm was falling around us. The snowstorm



C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE

DAVID GEORGE MOORE

WHERE'S WALDO?

*was real, the preacher merely spectral, and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him into the beautiful meteor of the snow. He had lived in vain. He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it.*¹¹

Elsewhere Emerson wrote that people will only “drink” what we say when they are convinced it is an authentic message.¹² It is sad that Emerson did not seem to be exposed to compelling Christian communicators.

The Puritan Richard Baxter would have agreed here with Emerson. Baxter famously said, “Men will not cast away their dearest pleasures upon a drowsy request of someone who does not seem to mean what he says.”¹³

Conviction about the truth is crucial, but so are creative methods. The great reformer and educator, Hannah More, has much to teach us here. More modeled and sought to persuade fellow teachers to teach “in a way which shall interest their feelings, by lively images, and by a warm practical application of what they read to their own hearts and circumstances.”¹⁴

Christians who communicate with conviction, creativity, and joy are compelling. Wolfhart Pannenberg was one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century. Growing up he was a devotee of Nietzsche, but then something, rather someone, completely changed the trajectory of his life:

I became interested in studying Christianity because our teacher in German literature, though a Christian, did not fit the picture of Christian mentality which I had received from Nietzsche. Contrary to my expectations,



C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE

DAVID GEORGE MOORE

WHERE'S WALDO?

*this teacher obviously enjoyed and appreciated the fullness of human life in all its forms, which he was not supposed to do, according to Nietzsche's description of the Christian mind. I decided that I had to find out about this.*¹⁵

What a motivation! The model of a compelling Christian life can truly cause others to take notice, even someone out of the Emersonian mold.

The Christian Story Organizes a Lot of Reality

Emerson did not believe in the Christian view of sin. Light, rather than darkness, is what Emerson believed resided in the human heart. As a result, no religious authority had anything of real value to offer Emerson.¹⁶

What does the Christian story have to offer someone like Emerson? The short answer is the same thing it offers to all human beings. However, since all humans embody different types of resistance to the gospel, we must be shrewd like Jesus (Matt. 10:16; John 4:1–42) in how we communicate. At the end of the day, the gospel is scandalous, but let's work hard to ensure that it is the scandal of the gospel people reject rather than our superficial, sound-bite presentations soaked in bumper-sticker platitudes.

I've had opportunities to write about the ideas of sin and redemption for secular newspapers and magazines.¹⁷ It is possible to speak truthfully about the gospel and show how it relates to every person, even the most famous and self-sufficient.

Just like all of us, Emerson could not escape the tough stuff of life. He experienced devastating loss. The death of Emerson's first wife shook his world. His grief translated to daily visits to her grave, even opening Ellen Louisa's coffin as if to convince him that his beloved bride was indeed dead.



C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE

DAVID GEORGE MOORE

WHERE'S WALDO?

Christians have much to offer here. Christians can honestly face the ugly and uncertain realities of mortality. Jesus has delivered us from the fear of death (Heb. 2:15). Christ's resurrection gives us a hope-filled harbinger of our own resurrection (1 Cor. 15:16–20).

Remember Mr. Emerson!

Like Emerson, transcendentalism may no longer be in the lexicon of most Americans, but its influence lives on. Whether we know it or not, Emerson broke the dam, and we Americans now swim in Emersonian waters. The water is refreshing to hyper-individualized American which sadly includes many of us Christians.

Transcendentalism lives on in the ways in which we see Christianity experiencing its present challenges. One example would be the “nones,” that new moniker for a growing group of Americans, many of whom still claim orthodox Christian beliefs. They just no longer affiliate with a local church. There are many reasons for this, and some of them are understandable, as in cases of abusive or autocratic church leaders. For other “nones,” there simply is not enough room for gathering with other Christians because the “self,” as Walker Percy memorably put it, is “stuffed with itself.” What Percy found troubling, Emerson deemed virtuous.

Emerson's ghost indeed still prowls our fruited plains. In answer to the question, “Where's Waldo?,” we can safely answer, “everywhere.” America is more haunted by him than you possibly thought. ■

This article expands on a previous work that was published in the March 2017 online issue for *The Gospel Coalition*. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/wheres-waldo>



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WHERE'S WALDO?

NOTES

¹ Quoted in Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 92.

² Ibid., 93.

³ Ibid., 97.

⁴ Roger Lundin, *Believing Again: Doubt and Faith in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 107. Emphasis added.

⁵ I was pleased to see that the newest edition of *Understanding the Times*, now with coauthor Jeff Myers, interacts some with Emerson.

⁶ Merold Westphal, "Atheism for Lent," *The Other Journal*, February 28, 2008 at <https://theotherjournal.com/2008/02/20/atheism-for-lent/>

⁷ Richard Mouw, "The Women at the Concord Tombs," *Books & Culture*, January–February 1999: 34.

⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 203.

⁹ For a helpful discussion, see Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 90–93.

¹⁰ Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Selected Essays*, 185.

¹¹ Emerson, "An Address Delivered before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge," in *Selected Essays*, 118–19.

¹² Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Selected Essays*, 97.

¹³ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor: A Pattern for Personal Growth and Ministry* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1982), 97.

¹⁴ Karen Swallow Prior, *Fierce Convictions: The Extraordinary Life of Hannah More—Poet, Reformer, Abolitionist* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2014), 27, see also 157.

¹⁵ Quoted in Fred Sanders, "The Strange Legacy of Wolfhart Pannenberg," *Christianity Today*, September 28, 2014, at www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/september-web-only/strange-legacy-theologian-wolfhart-pannenberg.html.

¹⁶ Emerson, "The Over-Soul," *Selected Essays*, 223.

¹⁷ See David George Moore, "Which of Us Can Cast the First Stone at OJ?" *Austin American-Statesman*, op-ed piece, August 16, 1995; David George Moore, "Tiger's Biggest Challenge: Looking Within," *The Huffington Post*, March 10, 2010.



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DAVID GEORGE MOORE

WHERE'S WALDO?



Obedience is the road to freedom,
humility the road to pleasure, unity the
road to personality.

— *C.S. Lewis*



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WHERE'S WALDO?



1

The article notes that Ralph Waldo Emerson closed his famous essay, *Self-Reliance*, with “Do not seek yourself outside yourself.” How would you critique this based on Scripture?

2

To what extent have you been influenced by what the author calls “the worship of self that Emerson brought into the mainstream of American culture”, and what specific steps might you take to counteract that influence?



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DAVID GEORGE MOORE

WHERE'S WALDO?

RECOMMENDED READING



Roger Lundin, *Believing Again: Doubt and Faith in a Secular Age* (Eerdmans, 2009)

In *Believing Again* Roger Lundin brilliantly explores the cultural consequences of the rather sudden nineteenth-century emergence of unbelief as a widespread social and intellectual option in the English-speaking world.

Lundin's narrative focuses on key poets and novelists from the past two centuries – Dostoevsky, Dickinson, Melville, Auden, and more – showing how they portray the modern mind and heart balancing between belief and unbelief. Lundin engages these literary luminaries through chapters on a series of vital subjects, from history and interpretation to beauty and memory. Such theologians as Barth and Balthasar also enter the fray, facing the challenge of modern unbelief with a creative brilliance that has gone largely unnoticed outside the world of faith. Lundin's *Believing Again* is a beautifully written, erudite examination of the drama and dynamics of belief in the modern world.