**David George Moore**

**Study Guide for:**

***How to Think: a Survival Guide for a World at Odds* by Alan Jacobs**

“But in among all this is also a problem of a loss of confidence in *reason* in our contemporary world. By that I don’t mean a loss of confidence in rational procedures so much as a loss of patience with argument, real mutual persuasion; a loss of the idea that by mutual persuasion and careful argument we might have our minds enlarged to receive more of the truth. Our intelligence is not in a very good state, it seems, either in or out of the Church. And we have devised a number of quite successful ways of pretending there isn’t a problem.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Rowan Williams

Former Archbishop of Canterbury

“Perhaps the most undervalued quality of a great mind or, at least, an awakened mind, is the willingness to abandon cherished ideas that cannot stand up to new evidence. John Locke possessed such a mind.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Joseph Loconte

Professor of History, The King’s College

**Introduction**

I anticipate that there will be too many things to discuss during our time, so feel free to pick and choose what you desire to interact over. And by all means add anything that this study guide left out.

**Page 12:** Do Christians have an advantage in addressing self-deception (see Ps. 19:12; Heb. 3:13)?

**Page 17:** In light of what Jacobs wrote about thinking “troubling us,” how big an impediment is that among the various things that keep people from learning?

Consider this quote:

The ancient Greeks saw it as axiomatic that to learn was to suffer, and they reduced that conviction to a maxim: *mathein pathein*. Why that connection? *Learning* demands *suffering* because it is painful to open the mind and the heart to new truth. Pain is the symptom of a system in disequilibrium…Pain likewise results from the need to stretch mental muscles around new ways of viewing the world.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Page 18/footnote:** What are some things that might motivate one to pause and consider before speaking one’s mind? See pages 109-10 as well.

**Page 22:** How can we keep from being immobilized by the sheer amount of data?[[4]](#footnote-4) Also, how can we better separate out what may be true but trivial, from what is true and meaningful?

**Pages 25-26:** Robert Bellah and his colleagues came up with the term “lifestyle enclaves” to describe groups of people who don’t really want community.[[5]](#footnote-5) Rather, they desire to be part of a group that is like them. All of us are guilty of wanting to spend time mainly/exclusively with those who share the same values and interests. How can we better step out of our own “echo chambers”?

**Pages 26-27:** How big of a problem is RCO?

**Chapter 1: Beginning to Think**

**Pages 33-34:** One of our great cultural critics, Neil Postman, reflected on the power of probing questions:

What will happen if a student, studying history, asks, “Whose history is this?” What will happen if a student, having been given a definition (of anything) asks, “Who made up this definition? Are there other ways to define this thing?” What will happen if a student, being given a set of facts, asks, “What is a fact? How is it different from an opinion? And who is the judge?”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Good questions can cut through the confusion of mushy thinking. How can we better frame our questions so as to make “knowledge acceptable” (see Prov. 15:2)?

**Pages 40-44 (cf. 84-85):** In his brilliant and idiosyncratic manner, G.K. Chesterton observed that “the madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason.”[[7]](#footnote-7) (I was delighted to see that Jacobs uses this quote by Chesterton later on in his book. See p. 88.)

Do we tend to overstate the role reason plays with respect to thinking?

**Chapter 2: Attractions**

**Pages 52-54:** What would it look like to see this kind of “debate” in our local churches when it comes to secondary doctrinal matters?

**Pages 55-57:** Consider Prov. 23:1-3 in light of what Jacobs writes here.

**Page 58 and footnote:** What do you think about smart people having the tendency to rationalize just about anything? What do you think the effects are of sin on everyone else in this regard?

**Pages 58-60:** How does a healthy church “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3), yet steer clear of a destructive groupthink?

**Pages 65-66:** Offering pushback and critique from within the group is usually a surefire way of being ousted or at least marginalized. Peter Vardy said, “It takes courage to stand up to your enemies. It takes more courage to stand up to your friends.”

How can organizations foster an environment where critique (properly given) is welcome? Are any groups worth staying in that don’t allow for healthy critique? Be careful at offering a quick “no” to this question. This would eliminate long-standing places of employment for many.

**Chapter 3: Repulsions**

**Pages 76-77:** Can you think of someone who you do not like or respect, yet has character in area(s) you don’t?

**Page 85/footnote:** How does Damasio’s embodied brain help you better understand Rom. 12:1,2?

**Chapter 4: The Money of Fools**

**Pages 91-93, 95-96:** How do we balance our call as Christians to compel all people to know Christ, yet maintain the integrity of the faith which includes certain vocabulary? For example, “sin” is integral to the gospel message, yet outsiders may find such language foreign and feel like outsiders?

**Page 108:** Have you seen anyone who does what Robin Sloan describes with respect to the “Long Now Foundation”?

**Chapter 5: The Age of Lumping**

**Pages 114-16:** How can we navigate between healthy and unhealthy “lumping”?

**Pages 119-21:** In light of Jacobs’s take on John Calhoun what would you recommend about monuments and statues to Robert E. Lee?

**Pages 121-23:** What have you found most helpful for countering stereotypes?

**Chapter 6: Open and Shut**

**Pages 126-29:** What gives you confidence that some of your deeply held beliefs are generally correct?

**Pages 137-38:** Marshall McLuhan famously said that “the medium is the message.” Do social media have an inherent inability to be a venue for thoughtful discourse?

**Afterword: The Thinking Person’s Checklist**

**Pages 155-56:** What three or four suggestions do you find most helpful?

**My Own Eclectic Bibliography for Themes Related to *How to Think***

Benson, Bruce Ellis. *Pious Nietzsche: Decadence and Dionysian Faith*. Bloomington Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008.

This book corrected some of my faulty notions about Nietzsche. Bruce models how to deal honestly with those who hold different views. My *Patheos* interview can be found here: http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2014/09/13/pious-nietzsche-an-interview-of-bruce-ellis-benson/

Chang, Curtis. *Engaging Unbelief: a Captivating Strategy from Augustine and Aquinas*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007.

Sadly, this gem of a book is not well known. Chang brilliantly shows how Augustine (with *The City of God*) and Aquinas (with *Summa Contra Gentiles*) sought first to understand the “worldview” of the people they were seeking to reach with the gospel. Doing rigorous work to understand opposing views can and should be a mark of our love.

Chesterton, G.K. *Orthodoxy: the Romance of Faith*. Many editions are available.

One of my favorite essays ever (“The Maniac”) is in this terrific book. If more people “reasoned” like Chesterton, we would have more “reasonable” *and* happy people!

Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2012.

In a recent time teaching at Wheaton College I told my professor friend that this should be required reading for all students there.

Levin, Yuval. *The Great Debate: Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and the Birth of Right and Left*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2013.

Lewis, C.S., *Surprised by Joy: the Shape of My Early Life*. Various editions are available.

Showcases the intellectual honesty of Lewis in seeking the truth and eventually embracing Christianity. His is a model worth emulating.

Newbigin, Lesslie. *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt & Certainty in Christian Discipleship*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995.

Newbigin’s book showed me how so-called “liberal” and so-called “conservative” Christians make the same error when it comes to understanding faith and knowledge. This is a short book (barely over 100 pages), but packed with far-reaching implications for better understanding faith and reason. And it offers help with human beings as well!

Noll, Mark A. *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

Brilliantly shows why Christians in the North and those in the South talked past each other when it came to slavery. A cautionary tale.

Pascal, Blaise. Pensées. Trans. by A.J. Krailsheimer New York, NY: Penguin, 1995.

Is this the greatest Christian book on apologetics? I’m tempted to say it is.

Plato. *The Great Dialogues*. (many editions are available).

Learn the art (and sometimes annoying habit) of asking questions from Socrates.

Here is a terrific example of what Socratic questioning looks like (start at 24:45): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCrn-1jUOP8

Smith, James K.A. *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014.

I have some disagreements with Smith’s “cultural liturgics” trilogy, but this book is terrific.

In *How (Not) to Be Secular*, Jamie Smith brings the intellectual cookies to a lower shelf, but don't be fooled, serious thinking is still required. Smith respects his readers by providing an accessible, yet thoughtful distillation of one of the most consequential books of our day.

Since I am not a dispassionate reader on the subject of doubt (I know the struggle to believe firsthand), I am grateful for the insights on living in this unusual climate of secularism.

The author is careful to understand his subject matter. A good example is the compassionate assessment of the troubled genius, David Foster Wallace. Smith does not offer a glib critique of Wallace's writings. Wallace is looked at seriously, even one could say, sympathetically. To be sure, Smith does not agree with Wallace's overall philosophy, but Smith does a good job of showing how others have missed salient features of Wallace's approach.

Smith clearly appreciates Charles Taylor's overall project in *A Secular Age*. However, that does not impede Smith from offering important pushbacks and critiques.

Both Smith and Taylor understand that a silly, sentimental, and Sunday School-ish type of faith is hardly enough to stave off the onslaughts of secularism. Smith does a good job of showing how foolish it is to abandon the Christian faith for the "mature" position of materialism. Rather, we ought to abandon the trivial or superficial beliefs of American Christianity.

Stott, John R.W. *Your Mind Matters: the Place of the Mind in the Christian Life*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972.

Short and wise reflections that offer a gentle corrective to many faulty notions Christians have about the critical role of thinking.

Taleb, Nicholas Nassim. *The Bed of Procrustes: Philosophical and Practical Aphorisms*. New York, NY: Random House, 2016.

Contains quirky, provocative, and many times brilliant insights. I certainly don’t agree with everything in it, but Taleb helps me think outside my own “echo chamber.”

Taylor, Daniel. *The Myth of Certainty* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986).

Don’t misunderstand. Dan believes you can be confident in the Christian faith. However, our confidence in the Christian faith entails seasons (perhaps a lifetime) of questions and struggle. This book and Dan’s wonderfully conceived, *The Skeptical Believer: Telling Stories to Your Inner Atheist* (St. Paul, MN: Bog Walk Press, 2013) are highly recommended.

1. Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016), 24-25. Emphasis his. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Joseph Loconte, *God, Locke, and Liberty: the Struggle for Religious Freedom in the West* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Luke Timothy Johnson, *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1999), 61. Emphasis his. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is hardly a new problem. See Michael Dirda, “Review of Ann Blair’s Too Much to Know, the Evolution of Reference Books,” *The Washington Post*, Jan. 12, 2011. Internet edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Robert N. Bellah, et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Neil Postman, *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy: the Romance of Faith* (New York, NY: Image Books, 1959), 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)