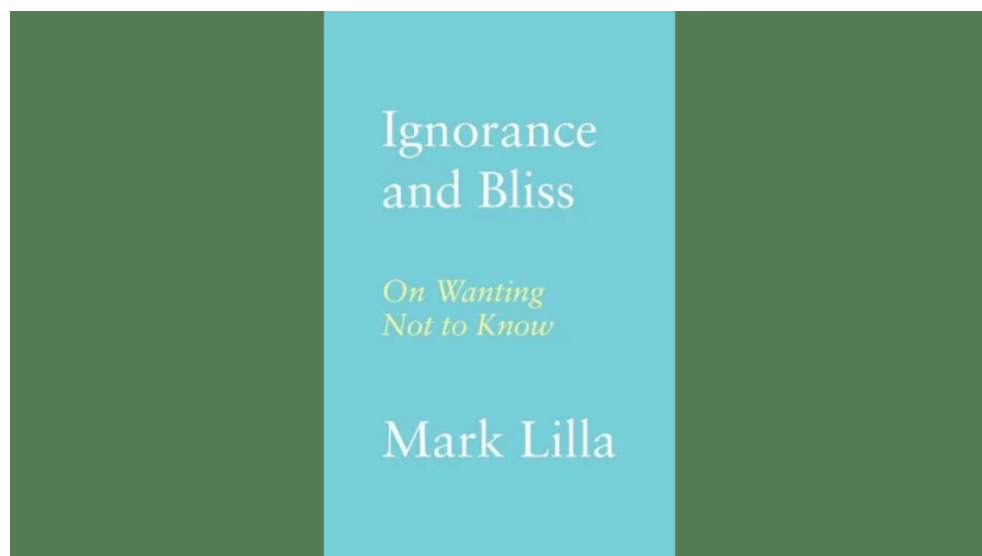


BOOK REVIEWS**Ignorance and Bliss: On Wanting Not to Know**

From a misattribution of the story about the boy Jesus in the temple to the gospel of Matthew to his handling of Paul, (Mark) Lilla seems more interested in pique than in substance. — Rev. Dr. Rocky Supinger

BY **REV. DR. ROCKY SUPINGER**

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By Mark Lilla

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 256 pages

Published December 3, 2024

Wanting Not to Know is a thoughtful meditation on the human propensity for self-deception and self-delusion. Mark Lilla draws from Scripture and the history of Christian theology (particularly Augustine) to present abundant citations and insights that feel relatable to Christian readers. Yet in the end, faithful readers may conclude that the author understands their faith less well than he ought to for such a damning thesis.

Lilla takes quite a long time to arrive at this thesis. In the closing pages, we read “what a powerful and destructive force the will to ignorance can be,” but by that point, we have been lulled into a meditative mood with quotations from the likes of Socrates and Dostoyevsky. These citations are thorough and on point, but they leave a less destructive impression that Lilla seems to think they do.

For example, the second major division of *Ignorance and Bliss* is devoted to taboos. Through four sub-chapters, Lilla employs allusions to giants of the Western literary and philosophical canon (he is, after all, a humanities professor) to wonder aloud about the psychological and cultural function of various veils, that is, implements humans construct to protect ourselves from knowledge. And so Prometheus supplied humans with fire, as well as with “all the important arts and sciences: astronomy, mathematics, writing, animal husbandry — even prophecy and dream interpretation,” and Zeus punished him in return. The history of interpretation, then, is divided between those who view Prometheus as one who got what was coming to him and those who see in his liver-pecked sentence a martyr for human enlightenment. Lilla’s allegiance is clear, though we strain to grasp it when he notes that Prometheus was “arming allies” and not “multiplying loaves and fishes.”

On the whole, *Ignorance and Bliss* will reward careful and repeated reading. Lilla’s effort to break down ignorance into distinct expressions is rewarding to contemplate. In addition to taboos, ignorance also involves outright evasion (Oedipus), emptiness (think mysticism, including the Pauline variety — It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me (Galatians 2:20) — which Lilla dubs a “dangerous potion concocted for spiritual tyrants,” innocence and nostalgia. He probes these at various levels of experience, from the individual to the collective. Hence the danger of the willed ignorance of nostalgia: “When an entire nation or people or faith begins searching for lost time, darker emotions and fantasies emerge.”


Outlook readers who take up Lilla’s book will, however, be frustrated with his appropriation of the Christian Scriptures. From a misattribution of the story about the boy Jesus in the temple to the Gospel of Matthew to his handling of Paul, Lilla seems more interested in pique than in substance. He muses that the early apocalyptic Christians were effectively abandoned, once the Second Coming was delayed, by the gospels’ simple moral precepts about turning one’s cheek and being “innocent as doves.” But he fails to reckon with the

apocalyptic historical context of those gospels' composition, namely the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. It simply doesn't occur to him that the simplicity of Jesus' teaching is precision-tailored to times of disorientation, that there's a difference between ignorance and simplicity, and that some of history's most egregious political calculations—including those of "Christian" institutions—have been too clever by half.

Ignorance
and Bliss

*On Wanting
Not to Know*

Mark Lilla

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