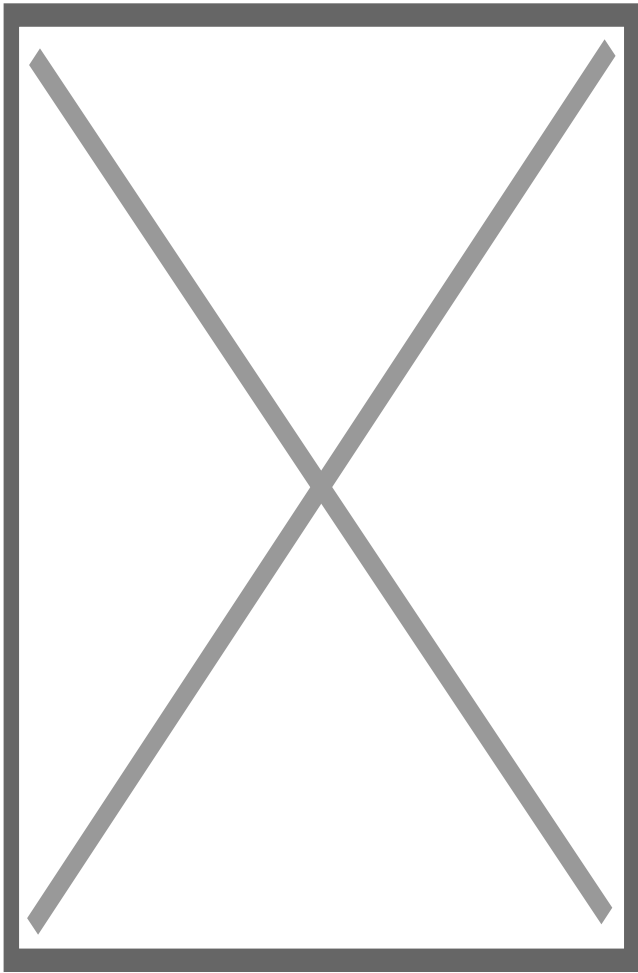


Punk disciples

Theologian Robert Cady Saler considers Death to the World, an Eastern Orthodox movement that is both thoroughly Christian and thoroughly punk.

by [Thomas R. Gaulke](#) in the [November 2025](#) issue
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In Review



“Death to the World” and Apocalyptic Theological Aesthetics

By Robert Cady Saler
T&T Clark

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

I've been a fan of Robert Cady Saler for a long time. But the announcement of "*Death to the World*" and *Apocalyptic Theological Aesthetics* hit my heart in a special way.

Like many in my generation, my teenage search for truth and belonging took me to punk shows and Pentecostal youth groups. Middle fingers. Altar calls. Baptismal renunciations. All promised a truer way of life, a rejection of systems and worlds that harm, and a community for those who had trouble finding belonging elsewhere.

Whatever truth we stumbled upon there, however, we soon learned their vocabularies of exclusion as well. Punks, more senior and much cooler, labeled us young converts as poseurs. Purity cultures and glossolalia that never arrived cast doubts on our status as saved. Authority and authenticity were always in question. Punk or Christian, each scene shouted *unity* while acting as a sieve that separated wheat from chaff, faithful from lapsed, dust from silver and gold.

Dynamics such as these are familiar to the punk-Orthodox movement *Death to the World*, a scene that is both thoroughly Christian and thoroughly punk, and which is the subject of Saler's book. Founded by doom rocker turned monk Justin Marler and his monastic colleagues at the St. Herman of Alaska Monastery in Platina, California, the movement is known for its punk aesthetic. It produces zines, online content, and merch for seekers hungry for less gray and more definition in their religion. *Death to the world. Embrace Orthodoxy. Are you with or against us?*

The result is an unavoidable question: Who decides? Who's in and who's out? Who's for or against? And, most importantly, in the middle of it all, how do I know if I'm nothing but a no-good, low-down poseur?

Lucky for us, Saler has engaged questions like these before. In *Between Magisterium and Marketplace* (2014), Saler observed that the sheer vastness of possibility produced by the marketplace as new theologies, while liberating to many, can be the abyss to others. In this context, the anxiety of choice manifests as something of a repulsion coupled with a turn to a centralized, less dynamic authority (a magisterium) for stability. Seekers are left with a choice: To whom shall we go? The authors of the catalogs or of the church?

Death to the World embodies a similar tension. Though the magisteriums that Saler engaged in his earlier work do not find an easy parallel in Orthodoxy, *Death to the World* nonetheless picks up the task of resisting "the world" and consumer cultures while asserting a counter-authority of its own largely through the mechanisms of the market.

And it does so artfully. Black-and-white text. High-contrast scans of skulls. Cryptic symbols whose meaning must be unlocked. Birthed as a tool for outreach, *Death to the World* is much more. Here is both testimony and catechesis, edification and an enticement into the dualistic frame that produced the movement and that it represents.

Among adherents, the adoption of the aesthetic itself becomes something of a mark of discipleship. Consumption, presentation, and social media shares become acts of piety, binding the faithful together even as they harden the line between the unfaithful and themselves. To belong is a blessing here, even as being a poseur poses eternal risk.

And yet, as he approaches, Saler neither romanticizes nor dismisses. He names apparent dangers—reduction into kitsch, collapse into paranoia—but insists that we also find the beauty there: a power to spark the interest of seekers, to transmit tradition, and to demand radical seriousness about faith in a world where it is in short supply.

In *Between Magisterium and Marketplace*, between the alleged anarchic impulses of market dwellers and the perceived authoritarianism of those who would have us bowing low, Saler proposes an alternative for the sake of theological clarity. The creeds and canons of the church should not be regarded as closed insofar as that closure would create limits for belonging. Rather, they should be regarded as testimony, the faith of Christians who came before. So also, Saler argues in this earlier book, the emergence of new theologies should be regarded neither as contradiction nor as threat, but rather as contributions of the Spirit—through whichever means have been made available. Ultimately, Saler concludes, “the flourishing of incompatible theological discourses . . . is a gift to be cherished rather than a problem to be solved.”

A gift rather than a problem. So should *Death to the World* be perceived for those within Orthodoxy (or the magisteriums of the larger church) who may wish to doubt the worthiness of its contributions. Neither a manual nor a final authority itself, “*Death to the World*” is a vivid case study in the way authority, aesthetics, and authenticity convene.

In a world of factions competing for fidelity, Saler returns to the questions, Where is the Spirit at work? Where is church taking place? In this book he invites us to consider that perhaps *Death to the World* is one answer. In this way, Saler serves as something of a guide himself, demonstrating what it might look like to enter into renunciation and death—by middle finger or by font—and to come out the other side.