Judith Merkle has written an ambitious, thought-provoking book that seeks to answer the most basic yet incredibly complicated question that Christians must revisit in every age: What does it mean to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ today? Merkle argues that question cannot be answered without being attentive to context. Christians are called to put Christ at the center of their lives, but “living in Christ is not done in spite of the world, but in this world” (7). As such, how we relate to the world in which we find ourselves takes on great importance.

Secularity and fragmentation are the most important features of the American and European context for which Merkle is writing. That world is marked by a profound absence of faith where belief, religion, and God are all seen as private or unnecessary. Culture in the sense of a shared set of meanings has been lost. Many Christians find themselves adrift—detached or even alienated from the Church and its structures of religious meaning. This book explores what it means to be faithful in a context marked by secularity, unbelief, and fragmentation where people find themselves with divided allegiances and multiple, overlapping forms of belonging.

The first half of the book could serve well as a text for a course in fundamental Catholic moral theology. Merkle discusses the nature of sin (personal and social), grace, the fundamental option, conscience, the relationship between the church and the world, and more. Her treatment of these topics is not a pedagogical aside, but rather is well-integrated into her overall effort to unpack fully the implications of secularity and fragmentation for Christian moral life.

Clearly Merkle is also writing for fellow moral theologians. The second half of the book is quite innovative and would be of particular interest to that audience. Merkle draws upon the work of Mary Douglass to map four patterns of relationships that define different contexts or ways of being in the world today. One axis charts the extent to which people belong to a group that has clear structures of authority and which demands some level of conformity and obedience. The other axis tracks “grid” experiences—forms of organization that are more informal but which nevertheless sometimes exert influence or even control. Merkle explores how to be faithful in each of four different quadrants. For example, in the “strong group, strong grid” quadrant, Merkle considers the lives of people who have strong family life and strong connections to the institutional church. In contrast, the “low group” and “low grid” quadrant describes people whose lives are marked by extraordinary detachment who are more inclined to mystical forms of spirituality. The point of Merkle’s inquiry is not to name the “best” quadrant but to investigate
how people might be challenged to grow in faithfulness in these different contexts. No context is hopeless and all of them should be engaged by the Church.

Merkle’s framework of analysis is interesting and illuminating. It is especially useful for helping readers imagine how various contexts open up different ways of being a faithful Christian today and how context shapes a person’s approach to moral questions. It is less helpful for explaining how to adjudicate among the multiple belongings and moral commitments that are typical for many people today. Nevertheless, Merkle has written a rich account of how secularity and fragmentation necessitate revisiting how Catholics understand sin, freedom, and the moral life. She has taken us several steps forward in our understanding of how cultural and interpersonal context must be taken into account as the Church attempts to be an efficacious sign of God’s love in the world. This book is recommended for graduate students, theologians, and ministerial professionals who are interested in thinking through how to call to faithfulness different groups of people whose connections to the Church range from deep commitment to alienation.