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Educated as an artist in Romania, Donikian emigrated to Queens, NYC in the early 70s. Queens then became his artistic subject. In a style that ranges from the realistic to the surrealistic, Donikan paints Queens as an urban place of quiet, ordinary life but overwhelmed and overlooked by dramatic, endless metropolitan infrastructures.
The Hard Part

First things first. Readers of this journal will find, following these remarks, a long response by Edward McGlynn Gaffney to Charles Vandersee’s column in the April Cresset. It is long because Ed has a lot of criticism to make, and it is all here because I am disposed to think that if The Cresset has offended, it should attempt to make amends. Speaking for myself, I would only say two things. The first is to apologize fully for the smart-alecky title, “Dissing the Dinosaurs”; that was entirely my doing, and—what is worse—I was quite pleased with it at the time. On re-reading, I think that it gives a tone to the column which might have been read differently if headed by the words “Let Him Who Is Without Sin...” for instance.

The second point is more in the nature of an appeal. People who know me would, I think, never accuse me of being (Gaffney’s term) a “Roman Catholic-basher.” Not only are some of my best friends Romans, my daughter has married one. But I am characteristically hard on the Church, as institution, and especially on its hierarchies, apostolic as well as bureaucratic. Therefore this episode—and the damage done by my careless and ill-considered assumptions that my criticizing will always be understood as the voice of a restless but nevertheless faithful daughter of that Church (the catholic, apostolic one)—has gone to my heart. As a person, I do ask the pardon of those brothers and sisters in the faith who were offended. As an editor, I hope that readers will be disposed to make judgments about The Cresset on the basis of its over-all merits, and to forgive what they take to be its offenses.

Dean Gaffney’s Comments:

Professor Vandersee’s latest letter from Dogwood (The Cresset, April 1993) is painfully disappointing. It fails to describe things in my faith community very accurately, it fails to further the goal of the renewal and reform of the church, and it fails as an attempt in humor. Since Vandersee is usually a deft and sensitive critic who is often funny, for him to be nondescriptive, insensitive, and unfunny is to miss the mark pretty badly. This column bombed.

First, it is not very descriptive either of the current ecumenical discussion or of the incredibly rich diversity that exists within the Roman Catholic communion. The letter contains a remarkable distortion of Jaroslav Pelikan, a leading proponent of the need for Lutherans to understand themselves as fully evangelical and fully catholic. To cite Pelikan as though he, too, were a Roman Catholic-basher is a deep disservice to one of the most distinguished Lutheran theologians in the world who has long been committed to the search for the full unity of the church. Mainly, though, this column is wide of the mark in describing the Roman Catholic communion as though Cardinal Ratzinger were the only theologian who matters, and as if Catholics United for the Faith (CUF) were the best barometer of lay understanding of the faith in my religious community these days.

As for the members of CUF, ever eager to turn in anyone they suspect of unorthodoxy, I too am befuddled that the folks in Rome give them much play. But I would at least note that we have also found room in our communion for Teresa of Calcutta and Dorothy Day of the Bowery, for Peter and Peggy Steinfels or Joe and Sally Cunneen of New York, or Tom Shaffer of Notre Dame and John Noonan of Berkeley, or Lisa Sowle Cahill of Boston College and Margaret Farley of Yale and Mary Ann Glendon of Harvard, and for thousands of lay leaders like them committed to the Gospel of Christ and to living it profoundly, that is, with rigorous intellectual honesty and complete integrity.

Yes, yes, I know that the powers that are within my church have inflicted pain and suffering on outsiders, Jews, Turks, Lutherans, and other “infidels.” But we have done public penance for our sins of this sort, and have been solidly committed to the principle of religious freedom at least since the days of Vatican II. And yes, I am aware that some of the patriarchal hierarchs to whom Vandersee makes reference have been less than kind to insiders too, like Leonardo Boff, Charlie Curran, Hans Kung, Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, and countless women who feel alienated from the church. In a former generation that list included Yves Congar, Henri deLubac, John Courtney Murray, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and my namesake, Edward McGlynn. But their suffering at the hands of ecclesiastical bureaucrats does not cancel out the fact that it is their work which lives on in my communion, not that of their clumsy censors.

It is instructive that in the face of the manhandling
(lots of room for feminist deconstruction there!) of our theologians mentioned above, they typically replied to their troubles by writing as deLubac did in his famous chapter “Ecclesia Mater” in The Splendour of the Church. This is not to justify the infliction of such pain in the name of a pseudo-spirituality that is only a mask for masochism, any more than I would want to justify the anger of Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor at the reappearance of Christ. But it does tell us that, even after the painful realities that Professor Vandersee points out, there remains the task of getting on with real renewal. As Jesse Jackson (or was it Martin Luther?) once put it, “The Lord isn’t finished with me yet.”

None of this complexity is reflected in Vandersee’s reduction of my faith community to a business enterprise run with an iron hand by a bunch of bozos in Rome. Perhaps C.V. is unaware that his central metaphor was stated in nearly as crude a way by the Know-Nothing in the nineteenth century and by the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920’s. I doubt that so erudite a scholar as Vandersee would really want to keep company with such ignorant louts, but if he really doesn’t understand how close he is to their way of thinking, he could read about them in Gustavus Myers’ now classic History of Bigotry (1940) or in many other volumes on the theme that appear to have escaped his notice. In short, Vandersee’s critique of my communion is not fresh; it is just old bigotry rendered cute.

Second, Professor Vandersee’s piece purports to advance the goal of church reform, but strikes me as a botched job that actually impedes that goal. Assume for a moment that Vandersee got it right on optional celibacy of the clergy, the inclusion of women in all forms of ministry, and on the desirability of contraception at least between committed spouses. Assume further that not all Christians agree with one another about these matters. Does either assumption warrant the reduction of those with whom we disagree to objects of scorn? I think not. In fact, from what we know of rhetorical theory, it is massively insensitive to the probability that winding the feelings of others by engaging in shaming behavior—note that Vandersee’s style is not much different from that which he decries and literally mimics—will provoke a defensive posture from those others and thus produce a siege mentality rather than an openness to change. Change of mind and heart usually occurs when the truth is discovered in a relatively “safe place,” (e.g., within one’s own community when it is honest). In other words, reform is typically an inside job. When outsiders lob their barbs, it is almost certainly calculated to impede reform. Although there should not be a priori rules against criticism of any institution, especially the church, that does not mean that criticism need not be focused or fair. As Paul Baumann recently noted in Commonweal “lofty sentiments, soak ed in arsenic, rarely persuade.”

The Editor of this journal has offered another reading of Vandersee’s piece. On this view, the religious body to which he refers is really not the Roman Catholic community in a sectarian or denominational sense, but the whole church universal, with all its competing convictions, policies, shapes and sizes. Never mind that it strains the meaning of the term “Roman” that appears frequently in Vandersee’s piece (as well as the specific list of things that C.V. would reform), let us assume for a moment this reading. Even so, there are severe flaws in the argument. For example, the commitment to ecumenism—one I am most happy to acknowledge as my own and that of my ecclesial communion, again at least since the days of Vatican II—does not imply an escape from responsibility for the scandal of the ongoing division of the followers of Christ throughout the world and our pathetic inability to give more effective witness to the Gospel in the world around us. On the contrary, it means that we must all work patiently to understand one another and to blend our own garments at our own failures, not to tear the fabric of the communal life of others by holding it up to ridicule. Reconciliation is achieved not by the hurling of smart-alecky edicts at the others, but by showing oneself to be trustworthy. That generally occurs not by inflicting wounds, but by becoming vulnerable.

Thus one who truly loves the church understands its flawed and sinful character, but does not yield to the temptation of hubris and smugness. Familiarity with church history invites a complicated understanding of the psychological dynamics that will render the axiom “eclesia semper reformanda,” a goal devoutly desired by millions in today’s world, not a tribal slogan from the past cherished only in order to feel superior to others.

Third, Vandersee is not very funny. Humor can be essential in enabling growth and change, so it is well for all of us to lighten up. But as any comic knows, the time, place, and manner of humor matters. For example, a clown falling down on cue at the circus is funny; seeing your own mother trip and fall is not. Bruce Berne“s “The Commons Scrolls” in the March issue of The Cresset is funny; Vandersee’s letter is not. And this was not an April Fool’s Day issue of The Cresset, but the Easter issue adorned with Wendy Brusick’s “Resurrection Crown” on the cover. Even as a spoof, Vandersee’s piece is flat. Even if he thought it funny and meant it that way, it caused pain to several of my fellow religious believers exposed to more of the same old anti-Catholicism that we thought had dissipated by now. The fact that he would have never written a similar attack on Judaism only reminds me of Peter Viereck’s famous comment forty years ago that “Catholic-baiting is the anti-Semitism of the liberals.”

In his wonderful essay, Exiles from Eden, Mark Swenek frequently cites the golden rule of hermeneutics proposed by literary critic Wayne Booth (“Read as you would have others read you; listen as you would have others listen to you”). Perhaps Mark repeated this rule in his book because we academics—for whom his book is primarily intended—have become so politicized that we readily demonize our adversaries. But I note that most religious journals these days do not emulate that style. Thus the
Editors of *America* or of *Commonweal* would never open their pages to so crude an attack on the LC-MS, the ELCA, Pan-Lutheranism, or Protestant Christianity. As a matter of fact, I doubt that the Editors of *The Christian Century* or of *Christianity in Crisis* would ever print so cheap a shot on Catholic Christianity in their journals at any time, let alone at this most joyous season.

I trust that the Editors of this journal will accept this rule as one of the norms governing the selection and publication of articles in this journal. If so, we will be spared such poorly reasoned and insensitive stuff as the latest letter from Dogwood. As for you, C.V., I believe that this letter was a momentary lapse rather than a free fall. Come back at us with the deft, sensitive and often funny criticism I have come to expect as your characteristic style.

Edward McGlynn Gaffney, Jr. tries to keep a sense of humor while serving as Dean of the Valparaiso University School of Law. Before the law bug bit him, he served as a translator for the guests of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity during Vatican II, and as an ecumenical officer staffing the Lutheran-Roman Catholic bilateral conversation in this country.

Professor Vandersee replies:

Professor Gaffney proposes that the text "purports to advance the goal of church reform," while I myself struggle unsuccessfully to find either reform or ecumenism as a mission of that essay. It does seem that the Dogwood writer, a speculative "outsider," was interested in intimations of change in the Roman Catholic Church in our time, and saw the Church as in some respects like other very large organizations making uncharacteristic changes in our time. Analogies can allow for playfulness here and there, and though from here the essay doesn't look like "bashing," Professor Gaffney as a deeply involved "insider" has clearly felt a wound inflicted, and for that I am sorry. The outsider infers that the Church, like all institutions, is subject to change (some of the changes may be seen, from inside or outside, as "reforms," and some might not). Thus the thrust in the essay seems to be on the elusive issue (to the outsider) of what the Church as institution "thinks" about change, and *how* the Church thinks—matters as influential, I would have thought, as the visible "work that lives on" among its diverse laity.

The Easy Part

Running through this issue are a number of things to help us ponder cities. It is not *Cresset*'s job to provide investigative journalism to uncover the specifics of urban problems, but rather to provide imaginative and artistically sensitive occasions for our thinking about them. Such occasions abound in this issue, beginning with the covers, by New York artist Simon Donikian. Our regular columnists Edward Byrne on film and Jim Combs on popular culture have written their pieces this month specifically on the topic of cities in their areas, and both are filled with provocative and useful thought on the subject.

The two larger pieces, one by Rick Barton and the other by Gary Fincke, certainly rise from other subjects than cities. Or do they? Very fundamentally, they concern the ways people fit their personal values into the scheme of community known as America, and the ways in which the community known as America responds to those values. Both essays mark certain failures—failures of systems, failures of community. But writing makes something out of failure, and helps us, as it probably helped the writers, to think beyond them.

For this reason, I've put Warren Rubel's Chapel meditation on the City first. With the Koresh disaster fresh in our minds, the text from Revelation dazzles both with its remarkable oddness and aptness. Professor Rubel's homily leads us to understand the yearning within us for the perfect city, which makes us so mournful for what might be and isn't.

Peace,

GME
The Biblical writers offer mixed perspectives on the city. Just a week ago we heard the prophet Jeremiah consoling those sent from Jerusalem to Babylon, "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." Almost seven hundred years later, in today's apocalyptic vision from Revelation, that Babylon-Rome has become the supreme dwelling place of demons, dark with foul and hateful birds and beasts, the fornicating capital of all nations, the proud heap of people and merchants piled high as Babel in luxury and lechery. And God remembers her iniquities.

When Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill collaborated on a song-ballet about the seven deadly sins in the modern world and when W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman translated the libretto for American audiences, they set up equations between those sins and our great cities: New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, New Orleans, St. Louis—each city characterized and caricatured by pride or gluttony or avarice, sloth, lust, anger, envy. I remember driving over George Washington Bridge, just skirting New York City, some months back and being astounded at the resemblances between the city and Batman's Gotham, between that bridge, below which I had picnicked with friends some forty years ago on pleasant banks bordering the Hudson, and the nightmare realities of Robin Williams in The Fisher King.

Or one remembers Albert Camus' brief essay, "Helen's Exile," on how the modern city, with its streets and its perpetual change severs us from what is permanent and beautiful. The city, both appealing and appalling, glittering in its night beauty, obscene in its darkness. "Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues," cries the voice from heaven in our text.

The conflict, the struggle, the agon is always there. Yet we know and feel in the rapid and sometimes slow moments of our lives, that there is another perspective on the city that absorbs and transforms the

After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was made bright with his splendor. And he called out with a mighty voice, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! It has become a dwelling place of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit, a haunt of every foul and hateful bird; for all nations have drunk the wine of her impure passion, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich with the wealth of her wantonness." Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, "Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped..."
understandable and more than moral vindictiveness that informs the apocalyptic vision. And that perspective translates our desire and need for doom and judgment, for destructive and purifying fire, to another vision. Like the writer of the book of Hebrews, who urges his listeners and readers to remember and to repent because Jesus the pioneer and perfector of our faith has brought us “to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,” the book of Revelation, just a few chapters ahead, finds the writer heaping analogy on precious analogy to describe the beauty and transport of the New Jerusalem, the city set on a golden hill, with its symmetry and proportion, its radiance and distinctiveness, with its precious stones and with its center in which there is no sacred space, no special temple, because its center is the Living God and the Lamb.

To that kind of center we come and go even now in a deeper need and desire than we sometimes wish to confess. Our human voices cry to one another, “Come back, come back to the community, to festal assembly, to the promised city of everlasting joy, where our human songs join in praise with the labors and rest of the saints.” Our human voices cry, we say, but only because we hear the divine voice in the song of the saints.

Perhaps it was coincidental, but I couldn’t help noticing this week that Zubin Mehta is preparing the New York Philharmonic to perform that strangely and profoundly Christian work of composer Olivier Messiaen, Illuminations. A complex and moving piece, taking as part of its program the final apocalyptic visions from the Revelation of St. John, the work brings together the songs of birds, the constellations of stars swirling in their morning song, with the vision and hope and faith we have in Christ, our King, the deep light of paradise. There, we might say, the worshipping angels place the seal or sign on the foreheads of the redeemed, God in his tenderness wipes away all tears from human eyes, and the future and the past collapse where time ends in a city of praise.

Warren G. Rubel

high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. Render to her as she herself has rendered, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double draught for her in the cup she mixed. As she glorified herself and played the wanton, so give her a like measure of torment and mourning. Since in her heart she says, ‘A queen I sit, I am no widow, mourning I shall never see,’ so shall her plagues come in a single day, pestilence and mourning and famine, and she shall be burned with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.” Revelation 18: 1-8
A Brown Study

"Grandpa had brown hair?" My nephew, seven and too savvy to be duped, squints at the photo and at me. Maybe that wide-eyed, close-mouthed infant ignoring proffered food is his aunt, but how can that man with a full head of chestnut-colored hair be the grandpa whose remaining fringe of gray disappeared months before he did?

In the photo, my left-handed father—whose tongue appeared at the corner of his open mouth whenever he signed insurance forms or checks (rare because my mother was the bursar of their marriage)—gapes as he concentrates on not spilling mashed carrots on his mother's armchair. He's profiled and I do not see his tongue but I believe it's there.

My nephew holds the 1959 photo next to my cinnamon-brown hair and shouts, "Hey! Your hair is the same color as grandpa's!" I blink as though the flashbulb's blue eye delayed until now its scorching wink into ash-gray blisters (still hissing with heat), blinding me with fireballs whirling in its wake. My father's chestnut hair will gray again; his tongue will appear in corners of my poems.

Regina Lederle
My father-in-law died last year.

A man of 71 at his death, he embodied, I think, an approach to living that may be waning as we near the end of the second millennium. My father-in-law was a perfectionist at the time such a term implied something commendable rather than neurotic. He never asked how little can I get away with, but rather, always, how much can I do. I admired him greatly, and I miss him tremendously. In the fourteen months which have passed since his death, the intensity of my grieving has eased. But there are still almost daily moments when I think of him and am forced to blink back tears. That reaction will also pass, I suppose. But this I know: I know that I will miss him for the rest of my life.

The thoughts which follow here are composed in his memory. In part they are a eulogy, in part a first-hand report on American health care in the last decade of the century, in part a meditation on death's lesson for the living.

I first met my father-in-law in 1962 when his daughter and I had our first date. He scared me practically witless. I thought, of course, that he was displeased his daughter would choose to go to a movie with the likes of me. And it was years before I discovered the rich sense of humor and profound benignity that lay behind his stern visage.

His many friends and family knew him as Peter—Peter M. Dombourian. But he was born on March 24, 1920, with the same name as his father, Mampreh Bedros Dombourian. The elder Mampreh Bedros immigrated to the United States in 1905 to escape the Holocaust being perpetrated on his fellow Armenians by their Turkish conquerors. Mampreh and his mother had survived the orders of Turkish Sultan Abdul Hammid who presided over the 1895-96 massacre of more than 300,000 of Mampreh's countrymen and the forcible conversion to Islam and the enslaving of 200,000 more. In the following twenty years many Armenians placed their hopes in the rebellious, so-called Young Turks, who opposed Hammid and secured widespread Armenian cooperation in toppling him in 1908. Unconvinced by the promises of the Young turks, though, Mampreh had made his way to the United States three years earlier. And his skepticism was sadly prescient, for in 1915 the new Turkish regime issued explicit orders to "destroy completely all Armenians living in Turkey, however criminal the measures taken may be and without regard to either age or sex." Over 1,500,000 Armenians perished during this infamously ill-remembered second Turkish pogrom. History proved so indifferent to the fate of these Armenian multitudes that upon issuing his genocidal orders against Poles, Jews and Gypsies in 1939, Adolf Hitler remarked flippantly, "After all, who remembers today the Turks' extermination of the Armenians?"

In his early years in America, Mampreh worked as a laborer in Massachusetts, later Ohio, finally in New Orleans. He toiled and he saved, and through the combination of sustained effort, ingenuity and the hospitality of a
young nation still generous with its possibilities, Mampreh prospered. He brought his mother, Markarid, to live with him in New Orleans and a bride, Zartouhi. By the time his third son, Mampreh Bedros, Jr., was born in 1920, the elder Mampreh had established himself as the proprietor of an oriental rug store on Royal Street in New Orleans' French Quarter. By the time of his death in 1950 he had become a man of some standing in our city, and he had provided a college education for all four of his surviving children.

To distinguish him from his father, Mampreh, Junior was called by his middle name, Bedros, but to his peers in the school yard and on the Uptown New Orleans playgrounds, he soon was known as Peter, a name that became accepted as well in the Dombourian home. Peter more or less made the Americanized version official when he signed his World War II enlistment papers Peter Mampreh Dombourian.

Mampreh Bedros Dombourian made his living and his reputation in commerce. Peter Dombourian would make his in education and the arts. Peter graduated from Louisiana State University in 1941 with a bachelor’s degree in music. He served in Europe during the Second World War, first as an enlisted man, later as an officer. When the war ended, he returned to L.S.U. for a master’s degree in music education. In 1947 he began his long employment as a music teacher, band director and administrator with the Orleans Parish School Board.

It would be wrong, I suppose, to claim that Peter Dombourian was a great man. But he was certainly a man of considerable gifts and impressive accomplishment. His three-column obituary article was featured as a sad news story in our daily paper, The Times-Picayune. Our local CBS television affiliate ran a breaking news bulletin about his death on the day he died. The NBC affiliate followed with a lengthy retrospective on Peter’s life the next day. And WWL-TV station manager Phil Johnson remarked in an editorial on the occasion of Peter’s death that his place in New Orleans music could never be filled.

Peter was born with perfect pitch and took up music before attending first grade. Early on he preferred the violin, later the flute. Finally he settle on the viola as his principal instrument. Music was both his calling and his livelihood, and through his music he showed every bit as much industry as his businessman father before him. School teachers in Louisiana have long been among the nation’s most poorly paid. As late as 1960 Peter’s salary as band director as Fortier High School was still less that $5,000. So Peter supplemented that meager income by playing viola for Mardi Gras balls and other fancy occasions of the New Orleans social elite, from which his ethnicity always barred him entry. In the mid-1950s he helped found The New Orleans Pops, an organization he served as conductor until 1990. In the mid-1960s he discovered a new love in musical theater when he began a twenty-year tenure as musical director at our city’s famed Le Petit Theatre du Vieux Carre. In the mid-1970s he took up his baton as director of the New Orleans Civic Symphony, a posting he maintained for a decade. And to the day he died, Peter retained his position as director of the New Orleans Concert Band, a volunteer group of accomplished but non-professional musicians who performed through the years for charitable events and on countless civic occasions. Despite his unflagging industry, Peter Dombourian never became a wealthy man. There can be little doubt, however, that his initiative to create opportunities for himself and his energy to work the long hours those opportunities required enabled him to provide a far more comfortable life for himself, his wife, Joyce Gretchen, and his two daughters, Joyce Markrid and Zartouhi.

Peter achieved his primary prominence as a band director. He became a national officer of the American Bandmasters Association, and his national and international reputation was such that he was invited to guest conduct such prestigious bands as the U.S. Marine Band, the Sony Band in Tokyo and the Prefecture of Police Band in Paris. But whatever his personal capabilities as a director, Peter’s most important legacy lay in the realm of teaching. I asked him once what distinction he was proudest of. I expected that he might choose from among such accolades as his honorary doctorate from the University of New Orleans, or his selection as one of America’s ten most outstanding band directors, or his selection to the Music Educators Hall of Fame. But he answered me without a moment’s hesitation that his proudest achievement was teaching music at Fortier High School.

Peter was reputed to be a demanding tyrant in the music room. He was said to push his most talented students relentlessly toward the fullest realization of their gifts. He was a man widely known not to suffer fools gladly. Some of his students have said that he was the teacher they most feared, whose fury at their mistakes remained among their most memorable moments of high school. But in their adult years many of those same students say that he was the teacher who most shaped their future lives, whether they became professional musicians or music teachers or doctors or lawyers. He taught them a regard for excellence, they say, that has served them in whatever their lives’ subsequent endeavors. Peter’s students’ abiding regard for his influence on their lives was such that nearly two decades after he left Fortier High School they raised over $5,000 in personal donations to commission a special band composition by Armenian composer Loris Chobanian to honor Peter’s 70th birthday.

The Cresset
As his son-in-law and friend, I am obviously proud of Peter Dombourian's achievements; I am warmed by the intense loyalty he commanded from his students. In an Esquire Magazine profile, multiple Grammy-winning trumpeter Wynton Marsalis cited Peter as an influence on his career second only to that of his famous pianist father Ellis. But I miscommunicate if I imply that this essay is composed because of any specific thing or cumulative group of things that Peter achieved during his life. It is, rather, composed as a way for me to embrace my friend still one last time. It might well be composed, in other words, not by me in Peter Dombourian's behalf, but by my colleague Libby Arceneaux in her father's behalf or by my friend Ed Uehling in memory of his mother or by any reader who is joined with us in the unwanted bond of grief.

Given that his father was an immigrant who arrived in this country with nothing more than the shirt on his back and a full storehouse of will, Peter Dombourian lived well. He would say, I am sure, more than well enough. And he lived a long time. But I would say, and he would argue, not long enough. His dying began in the spring of 1988 when his legendary appetite suddenly waned. Peter was a big man and one who was well suited to living in a town where the quality of the restaurants is central to civic pride. Peter loved good food and rich desserts and both in large quantities as his life-long battle of the beltline attested. So when his appetite disappeared he knew he had a serious problem. The problem was renal cell carcinoma: kidney cancer.

It if is detected in time, kidney cancer has a more hopeful prognosis than many cancers. Treatment requires the removal of the afflicted kidney, but if the other is unaffected, it can perform the requisite cleansing of the body's metabolic waste by itself. And survival after successful surgery can be indefinite. If, on the other hand, the cancer has extruded through the kidney wall and into surrounding tissue, the prognosis is very pessimistic indeed. Survival in such cases averages less than eighteen months. Peter's situation was made more complicated by the fact that he had, not two kidneys as normal, but a single, large, so-called horseshoe kidney. And when the surgery was performed, the news for Peter was bad. The surgical team was successful in dividing the horseshoe kidney into two parts and removing only the cancerous right portion. But the renal cell carcinoma had indeed grown through the kidney wall. It was found in the fatty tissue housing the organ. More ominously, it had wrapped itself around the ureter, the duct that carries urine from the kidney to the bladder.

The doctors did what they could. The surgeons removed what cancer they could see. And as soon as he had recuperated from surgery, Peter underwent a rigorous program of radiation therapy in hopes that any cancer the surgeons hadn't cut away could be killed. But radiation therapy is a guesswork science, of course. And it's only fitfully successful, especially on renal cell carcinoma. Who's to know how much good it did in Peter's case? The radiation made him sick for months. But then for over a year he seemed cancer free. His appetite returned. And he resumed his part-time duties as music teacher at Benjamin Franklin High School, a position he'd taken on a forty-percent-time basis when he formally retired as Supervisor of Music for Orleans Parish Schools in 1979. Once the radiation therapy was completed, Peter and Joyce Gretchen even managed a trip to Europe.

But early in 1990 Peter's condition worsened. He began running a fever and was unable to shake a day-long feeling of ill-being. Blood tests suggested that the cancer was resurgent. Peter's oncologist ordered exploratory surgery, and when the surgeons opened him up they found renal cell carcinoma rampant throughout the organ cavity. This second surgery was particularly brutal. To expose his insides to the knife, the doctors laid him open like a sliced melon. And then they pared away at tumorous tissue wherever they could cut without doing damage to something vital. The operation was so lengthy and so radical that the surgeons fastened Peter back together with staples rather than stitches and it seemed he would never heal. Days after surgery, he sneezed and split himself wide open.

But this I know: he was a fighter; Lord, he was a fighter. He was nearing seventy now. But his will to live was so intense that he agreed to an experimental chemotheraphy. A hole was bored into Peter's upper chest. A shunt was inserted, and a pump, which he wore on a belt around his waist, was attached. And then the pump, geared to his biorhythms, squeezed cancer retardants into his bloodstream for two weeks every month. The chemicals made his nauseated for the entire fourteen-day treatment—half his life now. The plastic tube in his chest chafed his skin and pinched with every move. But despite the fact that every wave of his baton must have been felt like a stab, Peter returned to teaching his music classes at Ben Franklin, and returned to directing the New Orleans Concert Band. In the fall of 1990, Peter and Joyce Gretchen made one last trip to Europe, and at Christmas that year Peter directed the New Orleans Concert Band in a challenging performance at Songs of Ararat, which the composer Loris Chobanian had written in Peter's honor.

Time was running out, though. Peter could no longer escape the nausea, even during the two weeks a month when he was off the chemo. He began to lose weight badly. And two months before the end of the 1990-
91 school term, he could no longer muster the energy to teach his classes. He put all his waning resources of strength into the Concert Band, directing performances in the late spring and on the fourth of July. He made rehearsals as often as possible, but seldom managed to stay longer than an hour. Secretly he was driving himself to conduct one last time at the Christmas concert, the organization's biggest and best-attended performance each year.

But the Friday before Thanksgiving he collapsed. At the beginning of a phone conversation that morning, he told his daughter Joyce Markrid, my wife, that he felt dizzy. By the end of the conversation Joyce Markrid had become concerned enough about his mental faculties that she left her office to visit him at home. She found him at the bottom of the two-story steps leading to his front door. He had tried to go out to run an errand but hadn't been able to make it off the block. Joyce Markrid called me at our home two blocks away where I was grading papers. By the time I got there Peter was suffering from an advanced state of confusion. He couldn't walk, and he couldn't remember any of our names. I carried him up to the porch, and Joyce Markrid called an ambulance. By the time the ambulance attendants got him to Southern Baptist Hospital, about three miles away, he was completely incoherent.

Miraculously, though it was a very short-lived miracle, Peter rallied once again. The doctors reduced the morphine dosage which they'd been using to address his omnipresent pain, and they gave him many units of red blood cells. He regained lucidity and expressed both curiosity and some embarrassment over his collapse. He even went home for a couple of weeks in December where once in the morning and once in the afternoon he tried to walk the long hall that ran from the front to the rear of his house. "I need to build my strength," he confided to me, "if I'm going to direct the Christmas concert." But a family council decided that letting Peter go to the concert was a bad idea. He wasn't strong enough, we felt. He didn't argue with us very strenuously. But in hindsight, I can see that we were wrong. Even if he'd been able to stand for only a single number, he's at least have been able to do one last time that thing he'd devoted himself to for a lifetime. Two days later he was back in Baptist Hospital. This time he would not make it home again.

The cancer had invaded Peter's colon and was causing internal bleeding. The doctors no longer knew what course of action was best. Whatever they did, his life expectancy was now measured in weeks, months at the outside. Finally the doctors recommended another surgery to remove the intestinal blockage. This last procedure required a colostomy, and for reasons our family has never explored, resulted in a seemingly improperly implanted bowel drain that leaked from the moment Peter returned from intensive care to his room in post-op.

Peter made one last gallant attempt to rally. Several days after surgery he got up and walked his hospital corridor. But that exhausting effort emptied his energy reserves. He did not leave his bed again. It took him two painful weeks to die. For a while he was able to talk to us. And even after speech had deserted him, he could still communicate with his eyes and through the pressure of his magnificent large hands. I would like to remember that his passing was peaceful, but it was not. His suffering was eased only by unconsciousness, and even in sleep he writhed in persistent agony. As I waited bedside for the end with the members of our family, Joyce Gretchen, Joyce Markrid, Zartouhi and her husband Jeff, I prayed repeatedly for the truth of Flannery O'Connor's observation that suffering is one of very few gifts a man may carry into death to give his Maker.

In these early months of 1993 with a new President in the White House and health care reform a major priority of his administration, I cannot help but reflect on the things I witnessed as Peter Dombourian lay dying. I have stated that Peter never became a wealthy man, and he did not. But he was a careful man, and he came to his disease-marred last years well prepared. His coverage through Medicare was supplemented with private medical insurance and proved more than ample to provide him the best possible medical attention. Peter's illness caused fleetingly few financial burdens for his family. And it seems likely that the various treatments he endured from 1988 through 1991 did indeed lengthen his life and provide him with additional opportunities to travel and teach and play and conduct music.

And yet at the end I do not think medical science served Peter very well. Whatever Flannery O'Connor's wisdom, I think Peter's suffering through the last two months of his life was far greater than necessary. I think the last surgery was unwarranted, and yet I don't think either he or the members of our family were ever given enough information by his doctors to have opted against it. Doctors today are so petrified by the prospect of a malpractice suit that they regularly take measures I suspect are counter to the best interests of their terminal patients, who, at some point, need to be allowed to die as quickly as possible. Despite the fact that Joyce Markrid is an attorney, we are not a litigious (?) family; we have not considered legal action against Peter's doctors, nor would we ever. We do not understand why the bowel drain was so badly installed in Peter's side. But it certainly occurs to us that his cancer
was so advanced by the time of his last operation that his flesh simply would not tolerate the intrusion. Whatever, we would have appreciated far more candor from a team of doctors who seemed to confide pieces of information to us as if they were precious jewels.

Furthermore, we found infuriating those of the medical team's decision that prolonged Peter's life beyond the point where there was any hope of recovery. Like the other members of our family, Peter signed a "living will" several years before his first cancer surgery. In that statement he asked the no extraordinary measures be taken should he find himself terminally ill and close to death, and never during his nearly four-year battle with cancer did he renounce that position. It was against Peter's wishes, then, that his doctors placed him on a water and nutrition drip after it became clear that he would never go home from his last surgery. That drip served the sole purpose of extending his suffering by days, perhaps over a week, maybe closer to two. But once the tubes had been attached, no protest by the family short of court order could succeed in having them removed. While the Clinton administration is planning ways to provide adequate health care for the needy, it should discover ways to protect a terminal patient's right to die with as little suffering as possible.

Among the things I learned while watching my father-in-law die is how little attention even the best medical insurance actually buys. Peter was fully covered. He was able to have his surgery at one of our city's finest hospitals. Our family was even affluent enough to buy him a private room for his convalescence. And yet for describing his hospital stay after surgery, the term "neglect" was at least as accurate as the term "care." During the short period that he regained full consciousness after his last surgery, he would sometimes have to lie for as long as an hour after calling a nurse to change a full colostomy bag. And because the drain did not work properly, that meant being forced to lie in his own waste. I arrived at his hospital room just after he complained about this experience to hear one of his nurses rebuke him for being insensitive to her needs. Her need at the time, it developed, was to complete a personal phone conversation. Peter was catheterized after he lapsed into his final decline. But he was so uncomfortable and twisted about so in his suffering that he repeatedly pulled the catheter out. Thus on more than one occasion he soiled himself with urine as well as feces. These are horrible memories, of course. Even today I reflect that if dying can be such a nightmare in a fine private hospital, what must it be like in our nation's corps of public medical institutions?

Not long after Peter's last surgery, the members of our family, Joyce Gretchen and Joyce Markrid in particular, began to provide the kind of care for Peter that we had all expected would be provided by professionals and covered by insurance. But outraged as I was and remain about what care for the dying really means in this country, I learned something during this time. I learned something about loving. Loving means a lawyer's acquiring the know-how and the will to change and clean her father's colostomy bag. Loving means a college professor's acquiring the grit to lift his incapacitated father-in-law's penis to the lip of a bedpan so that he may urinate without wetting himself. One's religious attitudes fluctuate wildly during the time of a loved-one's dying. There is much praying for a miracle that doesn't come. There is much hostility for suffering undeserved. But as Peter lay dying I found myself thankful for this much at least: I found myself thankful that he had a wife and two daughters and two sons-in-law who loved him enough to provide him the care that medical science wouldn't.

For all my liking and admiring Peter Dombourian, he and I weren't much alike. A good Southern liberal during the sixties, he had grown more conservative as he grew older. And maybe I found this irksome because I hadn't any answers for his complaints that our schools were so much poorer and our city so much more dangerous than when Joyce Markrid and I were children. Peter was tempestamental and faintly irascible. And because of that I frequently denied him the performance of what should have been a reasonable sonly duty. Peter wasn't athletic and came to liking sports only in his advanced years. As a result he possessed little grasp for the subtleties of most sports, least of all professional football. Still, by the time Joyce Markrid and I bought our home just two blocks from him and fell into the habit of eating Sunday dinner with Peter and Joyce Gretchen, Peter had become a rabid New Orleans Saints fan. But as anyone who follows the NFL knows, being a Saints fan is an exercise in masochism. For years the Saints were professional football's laughingstock. Lately they've become just good enough to wait until the playoffs to humiliate their fans. Peter always wanted me to watch the Sunday afternoon games with him. At first I did. But since he suffered fools so poorly, he was forever snapping off the television and announcing that they were the sorriest bunch he'd ever witnessed while I, a more hopeful masochist, would find his behavior thoroughly irritating. After a time I always arrived for Sunday lunch with an excuse to depart that could put me in front of my own TV by at least the beginning of the second half. Peter was always disappointed, I think, that I wouldn't stay to watch with him. But this I know: somewhere he understood; somehow he forgave me.
Peter and I were also different in our religious views. Several years ago in a Cresset article titled “Rowing to Sweden,” I tried to explain my own unorthodox faith as a process of Christian existentialism. In contrast, Peter was a thoroughly conventional and devout Southern Baptist. He was a life deacon at the St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church in New Orleans where he faithfully attended services his entire life. Peter wasn’t a deeply intellectual man, and so like many Baptists he wasn’t very solidly grounded in theology. He had read the Bible, though, and he took its teachings seriously. In addition, he took seriously such old-time Baptist prohibitions as those against drinking or going to movies on Sunday. What I admired about Peter so much was his ability to hold himself by those old verities without passing judgment on a son-in-law who inevitably ordered a Scotch when we all went out to dinner and spent far more Sunday mornings in a movie theater than in a church pew.

Nor did Peter pass judgment on me for committing what was surely the gravest of my sins in his eyes. For I have been deliberately misleading in the pages above. I have referred to Joyce Markrid Dombourian as my wife and therefore Peter Dombourian as my father-in-law. Technically this isn’t true. Joyce Markrid and I have cohabited since the 1970s. We own all our property together, including our home. We have received the blessing of our radical preacher friend Will Campbell who has pronounced us absolutely married in the “eyes of God.” But, children of the 1960s, Joyce Markrid and I have never stood before a church altar or in a judge’s chambers to be married in the eyes of the law. And this is a fact that troubled Peter all the long years of my relationship with his daughter. Early on he would be almost struck dumb when he had to introduce me to an acquaintance. Later, I was flattered when he settled on the introduction “our friend,” the emphasis underscoring that I was his friend as well as Joyce Markrid’s. Peter spoke to me about my relationship to Joyce Markrid on two occasions. When we first moved in together, he called me back into his den and informed me firmly, if without rancor, that he disapproved. Years later, after he’d gotten sick, he told me he still hoped that we’d get married some day, that the idea of our legally wedding was very pleasing to him.

But as Peter expected both times when he talked with me about his preferences, Joyce Markrid and I did not do as he wished. We went our own way, were true to our own sense of what was best for our relationship. And though our lifestyle violated his traditional sense of values, Peter accepted our decision. More, he made full room for me at his familial hearth. When the family picture was taken every Christmas, I was always included. When family dinners were shared, I was always invited. When family decisions were to be made, my voice was always heard. This was true because Peter Dombourian understood something crucial about the teaching of the New Testament, namely that of all the traits Jesus would have us acquire, “the greatest of these is love.”

And this I know: Peter Dombourian loved me. He loved Joyce Markrid and whether or not I earned it or deserved it, he loved me. I know this because of the countless things he did for us through the years, whether the donation of his time to help me with electrical and plumbing problems in our new house or the endless donation of his money buying us things as ephemeral as fancy dinners on the town or as enduring as elegant brick steps for our home. He bought the television sets, stereos, video cassette recorders and compact disc players. When our cars were broken down, he got them fixed. When our cars were old, he gave us money to help buy new ones. He gave us his worry, and he gave us his advice. And when we dismissed the first and ignored the second, he gave us his acceptance.

Whether or not I deserved it or earned it, I know Peter loved me. He told me so. And that is not the kind of thing that Southern men of either his generation or mine ever speak aloud. But he did speak it aloud. To me. He was lying on his bed at Baptist Hospital. The nurses had just told him that he would shortly be taken to the operating room for his third cancer surgery, the one from which he would not recover. The members of the family each stepped to his bedside to embrace him and wish him well, first Joyce Gretchen, then Zart, then Joyce Markrid, then Jeff, finally me. When I bent to let him put his arms around my neck, to place my cheek next to his, he whispered in my ear, “I love you, Rick.”

And fourteen months after he died, this I know: Peter Dombourian is in heaven where the music is sweeter than it ever was before. God has so far spared me the suffering that Peter took among his gifts to his Maker. But this I know too: Peter’s love is among the few shiny coins in the slim purse with which on my own judgment day I may be allowed to purchase mercy.
"Troops Home Alive Now" is printed in white letters on the grainy cement surface of the pagoda, whose appearance, for anyone who has seen photographs of the National Guard firing at the students on May 4, 1970, at Kent State University, is unmistakable. It's January, 1993, however, so right away I think this message was scrawled during the Gulf War. And then, reconsidering, I start listing other choices, including the current one of Somalia.

It's a remarkably warm day in January for Northeast Ohio. If the wind would let up, I could be comfortable without a coat. Freakishly, it's almost as warm as it was on May 4. I've brought along a map with arrows which show the paths taken by different units of the Guard that day. It's been over 22 years, after all, and the point of my visit is to reconfirm memory for my novel-in-progress. Now, I find I don't need it, that even with the physical changes—the practice field where the Guard first knelt and pointed their weapons is gone, for instance, a gym annex spreading into the space on my right—I'm as sure of these locations as I am of where baseball players will align themselves when they trot out of the dugout to play defense.

This trip is part of a personal, delayed debriefing. In the summer of 1970, less than six weeks after the killings, I returned to school and took courses in Victorian Literature and The Romantic Era. One was taught by a near lunatic who berated the government every afternoon and accused each member of the class of being an FBI agent. The other was taught by a man who believed you could understand the nuances of Wordsworth and Coleridge by studying posthumous psychological biographies. I never missed a class, and I attended, in August, the Scranton Commission hearings, listening to officials defend themselves and a woman from town say she feared for her safety each time someone with hair over his collar approached her on the street.

I played golf every Monday and Thursday afternoon on the university course. Its most distinctive feature was the railroad track which ran the length of the eighth fairway, forming a unique and difficult rough from which to play. In 1970 I occasionally slammed my short irons through the gravel of the track bed, scattering stones and scarring my garage-sale clubs in order to save a penalty shot, and twice I huddled under trees during thunderstorms in mid-round, disregarding the possible penalties of another sort of hazard. The second time lightning struck a lone tree much like my oak one fairway from where I was as sheltered as all of the world's foolish. Never again, I had the chance to say, and I never went back to Taylor Hall, the pagoda, or the parking lot site of slaughter during that summer or the twenty-two years which followed. "When you're good and ready, you'll go," my father would say, and here I am at last.

Gary Fincke, whose poetry has often appeared in The Cresset, is teacher and tennis coach at Susquehanna University, where he is also Director of the Writers' Institute. Coffee House Press will publish a collection of his stories For Keepsies, and Yardbird Books is publishing his novel The Inadvertent Scofflaw this month.

May 1993
the sidewalk to the parking lot as a sightline. I take a
stance like a rifleman; I step to my right and forward and
extend my arm, crouching, like the Guardsman with a pis­
tol your eye goes to in the firing sequence photographs, and
then I tell myself “enough” and start walking away
from petty fantasy as if I’d purchased it at a porn shop.

I swing down to the Victory Bell, the campus rallying
point in the spring of 1970. Someone rang it just before
noon on May 4, attracting perhaps 200 activists and a thou­
sand passive spectators. “Pigs off campus,” was the most
common chant, meaning the National Guard, and even
that wasn’t sustained very long until the troops started their
much-chronicled sweep.

I stand on it to take pictures—fixing what someone
would see if he were using it for footing in 1970. 1253, I
think is embossed just below the bell, but I run my hand
over it and perhaps the 1 was a 7 originally, the numbers
worn like a grave marker date. I think about pulling the
handle, letting loose a peal or two, and I get as far as lifting
it, the first stroke like beginning to pump for water, and
then I stop, reach inside instead and discover the clapper is
shaped like an anvil. When I tap it slightly against the bell,
I’m certain the sound carries far enough for the nearest
person to mark me down as the sort of tourist who would
pick flowers in a conservatory. Or the kind of man who
would pretend he was in the National Guard.

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It’s time to climb the hill back to the pagoda; it’s time
to retreat the way students did inside the tear gas, walking
to prevent panic from setting in among the crowd. I crest
the hill and start down the other side, stop beside the large
steel sculpture where someone might lean to watch the
skirmish. The sculpture, when I look at it closely, says 67-
DRUMM. In 1970 it seemed as if it were always here. I’d
begun taking classes in 1969, so for me, at least, it had.

Even now I’m not certain whether it was meant to be
representational. Certainly, the National Guard didn’t
search for significance, finding expressionistic birdhouses
or a looming symbol for chaos. But I notice, from here,
that the tree behind the pagoda is dramatically bent away
from the direction the Guard fired, and then I remember
the pagoda itself was a student project, that it had been
completed just in time to appear in photograph after pho­
tograph taken on May 4. I’m beginning to see nature as
symbolic, constructions as metaphorical; I’m turning so liter­
ary and dreamy I understand it’s time to march down the
hill into the parking lot beside Prentice Hall and put my
1970 point of view back under my feet.

I’m right about that, because as soon as I turn around
and face the pagoda, everything in front of me seems to
loom and threaten. Taylor Hall, for instance, seems omi­
nous and crypt-like, and from the parking lot, I remember
at once how far it seemed from the Guard to where I’m
standing. I’m trying to think like a character, but I’m so
close to this subject, it’s difficult. I could have written this
novel long ago, after all, and now I’m thinking, even as a
man in his mid-40’s who should know better, that it’s safe
this far from rifles. The tree I’ve come to, already curved
by the prevailing wind in 1970, is over 300 feet from the
pagoda—I’ve paced it off. It’s a foolish trust, I know, but in
1970 I thought you could stand behind somebody and be
safe—like someone, otherwise unarmed, with a hostage,
believing the trained snipers will refrain from shooting.

Anyone who’s read a book about Kent State has seen
one of those maps numbered to show where the victims
fell: #’s 1-4, the dead; #’s 5-13, the wounded. Those numbers
should remind even the inflexible that the dead students
were, loosely speaking, a football field’s length away from
the Guardsmen who fired.

Try this experiment. Stand in one end zone and give
someone a hefty rock to carry to the opposite end of the
field. Have that person stand under the goal post and
heave that rock your way. See if you even flinch, if that
rock gets within fifty feet of you. Find twenty people then
give them all rocks; move forward to the fifteen yard
line, about as far from them as the nearest dead student
was to the Guard. See if you’re worried about any of those
missiles as they rainbow through the air.

Not a very exact simulations, of course, since it dis­
gards emotion and fatigue and a dozen other mitigating
circumstances, but I am thinking like this even as I try to be
objective, surprising myself by so suddenly stepping into
the past.

For a while, in the 1970’s and early 1980’s, each time
I applied for a new job somebody would see the Kent State
dates on my resume and say “Were you there?” My stan­
dard answer, after a while, was “I was around,” which, for
most people, including myself, seemed evasive, unsatisfac­
tory, and dishonest.

Now, though, stepping onto the grass beside the park­
ning lot, I think I was telling a general truth. I wasn’t any­
where that day but “around”; regardless, nearly all of the
questioners knew what they expected to hear and my
unwillingness to specify was one way to keep near strangers
from concluding I could illuminate or reinforce the sec­
ond-hand platitudes they swallowed each time the
headache of uncertainty settled in behind their eyes.
And when I take my position beside a tree halfway back in the lot, I’m standing where the narrator of my novel-to-be is loitering when the Guardsmen fire. He doesn’t drop and cover. He turns sideways behind this tree, looking back over his shoulder like all of those movie gunfighters who press themselves against the hollows in buildings, seeking safety. Now, when I shift my weight and rotate, I see at once that this tree provides as much protection as blankets pulled over your head when you hear intruders outside your door.

I notice a security phone, something they didn’t have in 1970—who could I have called? I notice, for some reason, the three tiers of opaque glass in the center of Prentice Hall’s rows of clear windows. The bathrooms, of course, and I know those windows are difficult to see through because the glass is layered and dimpled to prevent light from flowing through in any sort of coherent way. Who will I ask in order to give that glass its proper name?

On the third floor, to the left of the privacy glass, 101 DALMATIONS is strung across a window in paper letters. On the window next door are paper letters which spell REVOLUTION—MALCOLM X. Underneath that message are three additional X’s. Just to make sure, I think, but below that window, on the second floor, someone has printed, inside a traditional heart, MELISS + CAT, and, finally, below that, one window says MERRY CHRISTMAS in green and red letters. Immediately, I wonder whether it’s the window of the Resident Assistant, whether she’s been encouraged by the administration to paste up a message which might somehow be infectious.

Within a hundred yards of where I’m standing are two verifiable illustrations of the decision-making of administrators. The gym annex which covers part of the Guard’s May 4 route was constructed on schedule despite student protest “to delay”; the “official” May 4 Memorial which sits on the crest of the hill beside Taylor Hall had its construction delayed for years despite student protests “to proceed.”

Such stories bind us with their reminders of shared frustrations, and, I tell myself, in writing this, of shared self-righteousness. For nearly twenty years, I discarded every mailing from Kent State University, regardless of its point of view. I’m putting this all behind me, I said, employing my best Pontius Pilate voice. Such a posture, I’ve come to understand, comes from fear, whether your excuses follow from having a weapon in your hand or from being an accidental witness.

Whatever has been barking in my ears for the last hour has finally shut up. There is a silence speaking to me now from the pavement of the parking lot. It could be the second or two immediately after the last shot was fired, an expectation forming so quickly in the air it could have roiled up like the tumbling gases and swirling debris of an enormous explosion.

I recognize in myself the sort of feeling that forms the expressions I’ve seen lately on the faces of televised veterans at World War II sites. Fifty years since this; fifty years since that. And I feel uneasy and embarrassed for such a comparison, as if I were being confronted by my two uncles, both of them veterans of World War II, who said to me in 1970: “What the hell do you think you were doing?”

A couple of times a year now I play golf with one of those uncles. He pays for the cart and occasionally gives me tips about the subtleties of sidehill lies or wet sand in traps near the green. He may or may not remember that he added, in 1970, “They should have shot you too while they had the chance” to his short speech to me about how disappointed he was to hear me complain about the government.

Inside Taylor Hall, which houses the school of architecture, I look for someone to answer a few questions. I need to know whether or not the interior of the building was configured the same way in 1970 because I want a character in my novel to enter and leave, and I have to know what he would notice as he passed. I talk with four secretaries and receptionists. None of them have worked here more than five years. Finally, I reach the chairman’s office. His secretary tells me he could help me because he’s been here for a long time. The professor smiles. Through the windows I can see into the parking lot, the side where my character is standing when the shots are fired. “I’m researching for a novel,” I say.

“May 4?” he says.

“Yes.”

“I’ve been here twelve years,” he says, “not long enough to help you out.”

May 1993
allow myself to look at things which weren't there in 1970. 

The first memorial sits at the base of a tree in a grass cut-out in the parking lot. "In Living Memory of," it says, the names of the dead in alphabetical order carved into what could only be described as a tombstone. Dedicated in 1971; rededicated in 1975—despite its simplicity and sentiment, there is something about its size and shape and unremarked location that speaks of official disapproval.

Already I am annoyed, but then I go up the grade on the other side of Taylor to where one part of the Guard stood their ground without firing. C Company—they are the soldiers who you see guarding the body of Jeff Miller shortly after the shooting stopped. The men who fired—A Company and G Troop—retreated almost at once to the burned out ROTC building from where they'd begun their march into history. The new memorial is built into the hillside here, and I think at once of the Vietnam Memorial, although these slabs of marble are spaced differently, and there are no names on the walls.

Bruno Ast—Architect, I read, Dedicated May 4, 1990. Twenty years of wrangling and foot dragging. Something like the negotiations for the end of the Vietnam War. I remember the squabble about the shape of the negotiating table, the merits of rectangle, square, triangle, and circle. A generation of college students has come and gone before this memorial was realized.

Four slabs of marble surge in size from nearest to farthest from the center. Whatever they are supposed to represent to the visitor—the four dead, most likely—I think of walls to hide behind in case of salvos.

And to my left, there's a pedestal with a glass front and a handle on a fold down door. It's like a dispenser for newspapers, but I open it without inserting any coins. Inside, there's nothing, though I think there is supposed to be a candle, one of those perpetual mourning symbols. Vandals, carelessness—or perhaps I'm reading more into this than intended. Maybe there is only supposed to be a stack of fliers describing the memorial, something to tuck into a purse or a back pocket to read in the car while you're driving back to Pennsylvania.

Eventually, I discover the location of the inscribed names. Here the wounded are listed as well as the dead. "Respectfully remembered," it says, and I read the less familiar names, recalling that Dean Kahler was permanently paralyzed, that, as far as I knew, the other eight recovered. Planted on one side of the plaque is holly, on the other, rhododendron—something that keeps a sense of green year round.

Nearly all of us bleach stains of one sort or another from our lives. We're lucky if they turn undetectable to the casual looks the world ordinarily sends our way. But what we see matters less than how we feel about it. This matters. And that. And the accuracy with which we carry it to those who might listen.

For a few moments I let myself lock the fingers of my hands together behind my head and stare through the bare trees toward where the ROTC building stood gutted in 1970. A year years before that day I would walk with my hands interlocked in this position, trying, after every race, to let as much air back into my lungs as possible after sprinting a quarter of a mile for my high school track team. The coach had told me it was the quickest way to recover, and I'd never questioned whether or not he was right.

I haven't come to record anything about the memorial for, after all; it can't be in a novel, which ends in December 1970. But suddenly I open my hands and start jotting these things down—the shape of the stones, how they look from this angle and that and then, how angry I am. I anticipated sorrow or wistfulness or even the sentimentality of nostalgia—but here I am wanting to start taking down names. If you've seen any photographs of the crowd of students who gathered shortly after the shootings, you'll see that the National Guard, in the aftermath, finally had an honest-to-God mob to contend with. And here I am too breathless with asthma to sustain a sprint down the hill and across the commons to where the Guard stood near the burned-out ROTC. On the other side of Taylor, twice as close to the Guard as I am here, I could still make it before my lungs talked back and refused. Over there, either then or now, I could sprint without being breathless, but on May 4 it would have been like Gallipoli if the crowd had surged forward. It would have been the slaughter of trench warfare, the technology of the human wave against the indifference of guns.

Not only has my memory stayed intact, so have my emotions. It is reassuring and unsettling, though now, busily writing, I look down and see, at my feet, the words INQUIRE LEARN RESPECT engraved in the marble floor, and I know, for certain, there is no reason to reload the camera. I'm not going to forget any of this.
Review Essay

CAN THE BIBLE TELL US HOW TO BE?

Michael G. Cartwright


What these three books share in common may be as important as their differences. All three are published by the same company. All three are written by established scholars—persons who have not only made important scholarly contributions to their fields but who also are experienced teachers—whose experience in church and academic (collegiate and seminary) settings spans more than two decades. All three authors are “Mainline Protestants” who teach in church-related colleges or seminaries. All three writers presume that their readers lack essential knowledge necessary to put together the puzzle of Scripture and ethics. Betsworth is concerned that Christians in America do not understand the “cultural narratives” which constitute them as persons and which keep them from grasping “the biblical story” in its most radical dimensions. Birch is concerned that Christians in America do not understand the Old Testament’s contribution as a “source” for Christian ethical reflection. Sleeper is concerned that Americans simply do not know the Bible at all, and therefore find themselves ill-equipped for making judgments about the use of the Bible in various social poli-


Given these commonalities, the differences between the three works, and the ways they propose to deal with the relationship of Scripture and ethics are instructive. Interestingly enough, the differences are most strikingly displayed in the three approaches that they take to “filling the gap” between technical studies of Scripture and ethics and the interests of the general audience. In the process, the three writers demonstrate the difficulty of writing books for a general audience in a time in which the “cultural capital” of the Bible and of Christianity itself is progressively being depleted.

There are good reasons why Bruce Birch is the first American biblical scholar of his generation to attempt to interpret the relationship between “the Old Testament, Ethics, and the Christian Life” in his book *Let Justice Roll Down*. The degree of difficulty for a project like the one he has undertaken is very high. His previous study *What Does the Lord Require? The Old Testament Call to Social Witness* (1985) addressed “the problem” that pastors and laity have in using the Old Testament to inform their social witness. Here, Birch attempts to address a more gnarly set of problems within church and academy, the combined effect of which is to make his task more difficult. Within the academy, there is the contemporary struggle between purists who would force the analysis of the Hebrew Bible into one or another methodological mold—historical critical analysis, history of religions analysis—and those scholars who, nurtured by the latest wave of post-structuralist or deconstructionist analysis, question either the necessity or viability of dealing with the canon of Christian Scripture as such.

Within contemporary churches, another set of problems exacerbates the difficulties. Despite several decades of scholarship defending the integrity of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, Marcion continues to find numerous adherents in the waning years of the twentieth century. Given this continuing problem, one is tempted to think that what appears to be a willful disregard of the Old

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Old Testament is a matter of “invincible ignorance”—to recall the medieval diagnosis of the problem posed by those who refuse to learn what is laid before them. Ironically, some of the same scholars who have sought to liberate the Hebrew Bible from its second-class status as “Old Testament” in the life of the typical American congregation (Catholic or Protestant), have more often than not succeeded only in evoking a reaction from their students—not uncommon in contemporary seminaries—the net result of which is an “informed” rejection of the Hebrew Bible as a resource for Christian ethics. Thus, having won the battle against successionist misappropriations of the Hebrew Bible, biblical scholars have lost the war insofar as we have convinced pastors and laity alike that it is too difficult to mine the texts for the wisdom of God.

To his credit Bruce Birch has carefully reflected on (at least some of) these problems, and he has clearly indicated which of these problems he intends to address and which are not part of his project. Rather than attempting to offer a study of “Old Testament ethics,” a “descriptive history of moral systems reflected in the different periods and settings discerned in the literature of the Old Testament” (19) or “the ethics of the Old Testament”—the attempt to discover a single coherent moral system—Birch attempts something which is at one and the same time more modest and—if done well—arguably more difficult, than either of the aforementioned tasks. While Birch does not, strictly speaking, disavow either of these options, it is clear that he is more sympathetic to the first than the second, insofar as the second often involves the imposition of a “system” upon the diverse genres of the Old Testament.

Importantly, Birch declares that his study is “consciously Christian and confessional in character” (20). In keeping with this orientation, Birch announces that, although he will be drawing upon the “exegetical approaches” of the historical critical method, he “no longer believe[s] that it is possible or desirable to achieve objectivity in the exercise of this method” (21). He proceeds to acknowledge that the “theological and moral commitments which I bring with me will be visible in the dialogue with the text” of the Hebrew Bible. Among those commitments that Birch announces is his ecumenically minded Protestant identification.

Having noted these commitments, Birch is equally clear about the topics his audience may hunger to see addressed but which will not be addressed: “This book is not intended to address topical issues in the life of the church” (20). Thus, while he is “committed to values of inclusivity with regard to gender, race, class, and age” (21), Birch has no desire to enter the frays where particular claims are being made about “what the Old Testament says” on a variety of issues ranging from capital punishment to the ordination of homosexuals. In keeping with this set of concerns, and with the awareness of the limits of the project that he has undertaken, Bruce divides the book into two sections. Part One of Let Justice Roll Down focuses on “Method and Approach.” Part Two of the book discusses the “Old Testament Story as Moral Resource.” Here the chapters are largely arranged according to genre and/or historical loci: creation, exodus, covenant, kingship, prophets, exile and return, and wisdom.

In chapter one, “The Role of the Old Testament in Christian Ethics,” Birch draws heavily—sometimes at the cost of stylistic awkwardness—upon the book The Bible and the Christian Life (Minneapolis: Augsburg, rev. and expanded edition, 1989) that he co-authored with Larry Rasmussen. Birch chooses to focus on the “received canonical shape” of the text. Thus, while critical scholarship about particular texts will be taken into account, at the end of the day Birch insists, “we must still ask ourselves what it means to find the text in this location” (21) in the canonical shape that we have received. Similarly, Birch argues that to take the canonical shape of the text seriously means “confronting and acknowledging unharmonizable tensions” in the text (22). Yet, as he indicates in the epilogue of this study, the canon should be regarded as the means for continuity with the past.

If we are truly to claim the Old Testament as a resource for Christian ethics, then we must understand that the text of these ancient Israelite witnesses are in continuity with later religious tradition, Jewish and Christian, and not in discontinuity. The end of this volume, and of the Hebrew canon itself is misleading because God and God’s people, Israel, continue their journey beyond the ending of the canon. (355)

One wishes that the problem of continuity and discontinuity with respect to the use of the Old Testament in Christian ethics was as simple as Birch would like to make it. But as Geoffrey Wainwright has warned, the absence of an Old Testament lesson in the eucharistic liturgy of both East and West for over a millennium (prior to the 1960s) is a problem that requires ecclesiological as well as hermeneutical and liturgical assessment. (Doxology, 1980, 172-174).

In the midst of retracing the continuities between the Old and New Testaments, we cannot act as if the discontinuities that have emerged over the course of Christian history can simply be ignored.

This point leads to a final set of criticisms of Birch’s book. First, by and large, Birch seems to be unaware of the selectivity inherent in his description of canonical diversity. There is one important exception to this observation. At the very end of the book, Birch expresses his “serious regret” that he could not make his study “more fully in con-
version with the New Testament trajectories of its themes" (356). Here again, he simply assumes that continuity is more significant than discontinuities, but without substantial discussion of the issues involved this kind of assumption is misleading.

Second, throughout the book, Birch repeatedly points out the diversity of theological perspectives without noticing the various kinds of hermeneutical diversity contained therein. This is particularly true with respect to the way Birch handles the conflicts of interpretation found within the Old Testament. For example, although Birch provides extensive discussion of Jeremiah's prophecy, he does not seem to grasp one of the most important lessons of the conflict between Hananiah and Jeremiah is when "the character, practices, and habits of the people of God become distorted, there is little that a more refined interpretive method can do to enable them to hear the word of the Lord aright." (see Stephen Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, Reading in Communion, 96). In other words, Birch does not take seriously the possibility that Protestant and Catholic communities of faith in American culture may be so turned in on themselves that they do not read the Old Testament as a moral resource.

Finally, in a time when the tradition of Jewish appropriation of the Hebrew Bible is having to confront its own conflicts of interpretation—including those claimants like the Ethiopian Jews and Black Hebrews which reject the tradition of Talmudic interpretation which has given post-biblical Judaism its center, and Lubavitcher Hasidic messianic claims which also suggest a very different hermeneutical construal of the Hebrew Bible—it is ironic that an American Protestant biblical scholar would seek to resolve issues of interpretation by appealing to canonical diversity of the Old Testament, as if one could find within the canon of Hebrew Scripture itself the necessary resources for adjudicating contemporary conflicts in the use of the Old Testament in Christian ethics.

The most important problem with Birch's study, however, is not simply that he fails to see that his conception of canonical diversity cannot resolve our most important hermeneutical issues, or that the conception of comprehensive pluralism that he employs lacks the kind of supporting argument necessary to ground his claims about the use of the Old Testament canon. Rather, the most critical issue is that Birch has failed to address the most haunting problems that plague contemporary American Protestantism—the primary audience of his book. For example, nowhere in the index of this book does one find any reference to Genesis 9:18-22, the basis of the racist conception of "the Curse of Ham" that for much of the nineteenth century underlay American Protestant and Catholic racism. Similarly, nowhere in Birch's study will one find any reference to Psalm 68:31, the text which African-American Christian interpreters used to subvert the Curse of Ham reading of Genesis 9-10 in the tradition of African-American scriptural interpretation that Gayraud Wilmore has dubbed the "Hamitic Hypothesis." In other words, Birch's book represents yet another attempt to discuss the question of the use of Scripture in Christian ethics in isolation from the traditions of biblical interpretation that constitute Protestant and Catholic Christianity as well as various the "cultural narratives" that inform American moral traditions.

This same criticism cannot be made of Roger Betsworth's book. Betsworth approaches the task that he sets for himself in his study of Social Ethics from the combined perspective of American history, ethnography and narrative ethics. He proceeds by helping his readers identify the four dominant "cultural narratives" in relation to which Americans perceive themselves as moral actors in the world. In addition to the various versions of the "Gospel of Success" (or the Enlightenment narrative of "Progress"), the "Mission of America", and the "Story of Well-Being", Betsworth identifies the "Biblical Story" as having a very important role in shaping the moral identity of Americans. In fact, Betsworth argues that the biblical story is the only story powerful enough to resist our inveterate tendency to self-deception.

The problem with this notion of the "biblical story" is that American history is filled with examples of religious figures and/or groups which have appropriated the narratives of the bible within their own cultural narratives. Betsworth goes some distance toward taking this fact into account in his chapter on "The Outsiders"—women and African-Americans. But here the notions of "covenant" and "biblical story" are stretched to the breaking point in the process of trying to combat the corrosive effects of the narratives of progress and well-being. This tension is most prominently displayed in Betsworth's contention that "the biblical story differs from any other framework of inherent excellence in that the story itself works against those who would settle down in the story and allow it to handle experience" (184), a claim which he attributes to Michael Polanyi. Betsworth's argument at this point is tantalizing, but it is also sharply qualified by the various historical appropriations of the Bible by Christians in America through which women, African-Americans and others have been constructed as "outsiders."

This legacy puts Betsworth in the awkward position of having to claim that Puritan and later mainstream Protestant "distortions" of the biblical story are instances of self-deception but that nevertheless there is a real "biblical story" that—when understood in its fullest sense and not in the partial and self-serving versions that have characterized
American Protestants and Catholics—has within itself the resources to resist this kind of mis-reading of the text. At the end of the day, Betsworth's conception of the narrative character of self-deception is stronger than his analysis of the problems of identity faced by women and blacks in American culture, and one of the primary reasons for the weakness of the latter discussion is Betsworth's implicit argument that "the biblical story" can be grasped apart from the presence of ongoing communities of moral discourse (church, synagogue) which embody the stories of God's way with Israel and the church. As Michael Goldberg and other "narrative theologians" have recently argued, there is no way to eliminate the contested character of Jewish and Christian construals of the biblical narratives. While this does not mean that Betsworth's own conception of "the biblical story" is necessarily illicit, it does suggest that Betsworth needs to be more forthcoming about the particular Christian traditions (e.g. mainline Protestant) in relation to which—and for which!—this construal of the Bible makes sense.

This set of criticisms notwithstanding, readers will no doubt appreciate the way that Betsworth goes about disentangling the role of biblical narrative (25) from the more complex versions of "the biblical story" “as interpreted by the Puritans' emphasis on covenant” that have proved to be formative influences in the creation of American cultural history. Betsworth's discussion of the Deuteronomic conception of covenant, the subsequent "formulac" versions of the covenant that seemed to guarantee prosperity, and the refutation of that reductionistic conception in the Book of Job are presented in a way that is clear and accessible to the introductory student in Christian ethics. More importantly, Betsworth's retracing of the Jubilee tradition (Deut. 15, Lev. 25) through the Old and New Testaments (Luke 4:18-22) serves as a good reminder of the way moral traditions can continue to reassert themselves in the contexts of ongoing efforts to sublimate them—a phenomenon which deserves more analysis by biblical scholars and ethicists alike.

One has to wonder, however, whether Betsworth himself could have provided this kind of provocative reading of "the biblical story" if American Mennonites such as John Howard Yoder had not called it to the attention of mainline Protestants like Betsworth. Yoder's book, *The Politics of Jesus* (1972), was the first American study to uncover this tradition in twentieth century scholarship. In other words, it is not the case that "the biblical story" is obvious to anyone who takes the trouble to read the text closely. Rather, various construals of the biblical story are presented from within particular narrative depictions of the identity of God's people. Therefore, given the history and experience of the Black Church tradition, it should not surprise us to discover that the jubilary theme should crop up in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speeches and sermons. Nor should it surprise us that this theme rises to prominence in those traditions that John H. Yoder identifies as "free church" traditions, or that James William McClendon, Jr. describes as churches of the "baptist vision." Ultimately, Betsworth's book leaves unanswered the question of how mainline Protestant and Catholic Christians in America continue to misconstrue the Bible in such a way as to avoid the prominence of the jubilee tradition. This question, in turn, raises other questions about the relationship of ecclesiological narratives to the interpretation of what lies at the heart of "the biblical story".

The kind of problem evoked by Betsworth's discussion of "the biblical story" also pops up in Freeman Sleeper's study of *The Bible and the Moral Life*, a work that is notable both for what it acknowledges about the situation of teaching students in church-related colleges, and also for what the author fails to acknowledge about his own orientation to the pedagogical task. Sleeper is quite candid that as an instructor he faces a pedagogical situation which is much closer to a tabula rasa than to anything like a student body which has been formed by a thick tradition of reading Scripture. In fact, Sleeper annually administers a [cultural] "literacy test" to his students to determine what they know about the Bible, as a way of determining how he needs to "pitch" his courses. As Sleeper states: "In all my years of teaching biblical courses, I am constantly amazed by what students do not know" (4).

Much of the first part of Sleeper's book could be said to be an attempt to address the problem of cultural literacy, or "biblical illiteracy" by introducing the reader to the various "biblical styles" of moral reflection—law, prophecy, apocalyptic, and wisdom. In this respect, Sleeper's approach is not unlike that of Bruce Birch, although the summary terms Sleeper uses are more global and less precise than those invoked by Birch in *Let Justice Roll Down*. A key difference between the two works should also be noted: Sleeper's book contains 38 sections entitled "Exercises" or discussion questions interspersed throughout the chapters to be used either for group discussion, or student reflection.

The second half of *The Bible and the Moral Life* attempts to address the question of how to use the Bible in "church social policy". Sleeper is no doubt correct to say that "the Bible does not give us a blueprint for contemporary social policy" and that in the wake of this recognition, we must take seriously the fact that "the primary use of Scripture is to help form the ethos or life of the church" (158). But Sleeper then proceeds to describe the character of that ethos in a way that is peculiar to contemporary Mainline Protestant churches without explaining why it is
that “Christian responsibility” should serve as the clarifying conception of what the “ethos” of the church should be. This problem, in turn, raises the question of the narrow framework of Sleeper’s analysis of the problem of the use of Scripture in Christian ethics, and the even narrower criteria—see the discussion of “Sleeper Rules” (117-118)—to be used in formulating social policy statements by churches.

Although it is abundantly clear that Sleeper intends to be ecumenical in the scope of his study, it is not at all clear that the author has done the kind of spadework he would need to do to create a foundation for the house that he wants to erect. Claims such as “The Bible lends itself more readily to the language of ‘values’ than to that of ‘rights’” (152) suggest that the author is assuming much more than he is acknowledging in his discussion of the use of Scripture in ethics. Moreover, on the one hand, Sleeper appears to take seriously the diversity of Christian traditions of biblical interpretation, but on the other hand, he appears to invoke the notion of a “tradition” of biblical interpretation only to dispose of it with a vague appeal to the notion of “story” that lacks the concreteness of Betsworth’s conception of cultural narratives.

We approach the Bible by some traditional way of understanding it, and that idea of tradition is rooted in the Bible itself. A more contemporary way of making this point is to say that we have a “story”, which is not just the story in the Bible but also the way it has been told and retold. (160)

While Sleeper does say that “Protestants have developed their own tradition of biblical interpretation” (160), the book that he has written does not appear to take seriously the ways in which traditions of biblical interpretation have shaped the very questions that we ask in our “dialogue” with the Bible.

This concern, in turn, points to a final problem with Sleeper’s book: he seems to think that the question of the use of Scripture in Christian ethics can be solved if we simply educate people to the contents of the Bible without taking into account the very different traditions of use of Scripture that exist both within and outside of Protestantism. However, it is not simply that we need to learn to “listen to tradition” (103) as Sleeper suggests, nor is it that the church must choose between “speaking to itself” and “talking to the world”; the problem is that Protestants and Catholics alike need to come to grips with how the very ways in which we talk about the Bible shape our uses of it. If this latter point is not taken seriously, then the strongest aspects of Sleeper’s discussion of the use of the Bible in Christian ethics will end up reinforcing another variant of the “comprehensive pluralism” that marks Bruce Birch’s discussion.

At the end of the day, Freeman Sleeper’s study of The Bible and the Moral Life is disappointing for several reasons. First, the author fails to acknowledge the degree to which his study is determined by the “interests” of mainline Protestant problems with respect to the Bible. Second, the author seems to be largely unaware of the fact that much of what drives this book is opposition to Fundamentalist uses of the Bible, as if all that mainline Protestants have to say about the use of the Bible in Christian ethics is: “we are not Fundamentalists.” But in point of fact, a large part of the Mainline Protestant conundrum derives from the lack of a sense of having a tradition of biblical interpretation; as a result what we say about interpretive issues tends to be reactionary and oppositional, and not constructive. Third, and finally, one might have hoped that someone who began his career by writing a book on Black Power and Christian Responsibility (1968) would have included treatment of the Black Church tradition’s very different pattern of the use of Scripture in Christian ethics, but there is no such discussion. No mention of the Black Church can be found in Part One, where various questions of interpretation and exegesis are considered. Nor is there any consideration of the Black Church in Part Two, where various examples of social statements (Protestant and Catholic) are taken up for assessment. This kind of omission not only illustrates the limits of Sleeper’s conception of ecumenicity, but also the range of exemplars that must be investigated if we are to grasp the limited framework of our own conception of the problem of the use of Scripture in Christian ethics.

It would be simple to say that the three books demonstrate the need for a more comprehensive approach to introductory level scholarship in the area of Scripture and ethics. What is needed is serious attention to the narrative traditions of biblical interpretation as these arise in and/or are perpetuated by different ecclesial traditions. Although Betsworth’s discussion of "the biblical story" is useful, it can also be very misleading in so far as it can leave students with the impression that there is one "biblical narrative" when in fact, as Betsworth’s discussion of the appropriation of the Bible by "outsiders" such as women and African-Americans clearly shows, the appropriation of the Bible by Americans is irreducibly diverse. What it would mean for various ecclesial traditions to have serious "dialogue" about the ways in which they read "the biblical story" is a task that is only now beginning to come into view. Betsworth’s concern about how we might take more seriously the concerns of the "outsiders" offers an important clue for how we might go about that task.
The Way a Plane Takes Off

Each dawn stalk blind alleys. Rhythms easy as a stroll can’t hurt. Sometimes, words slouch together, a sullen, faceless mob. Beat it, the poet! one yells, and ideas scatter. Off! Police in rubber masks call out, Get off the streets! I duck into school yards I remember, up fire escapes to roofs of buildings bombed,

burned-out from other drafts. I snap my fingers madly for ideas. Suddenly I’m taxiing on tarmac. Cessnas and jets are taking off, exotic rendezvous. Hours strapped in a cockpit of words are gifts, risky as flight. Years ago, wind rose and I was alone and climbing, lashed to wings over Georgia,

stunned by the roar of an engine tuned as one flame. I stared at a maze of gauges—this way for up, this switch to call for help, this swinging compass home. I tucked the stick tight to my thigh, a sassy roll, the thrill of thrust, corkscrewing up at the sun, the wild blue. Safe landings come after trusting wholly unstable air. Sometimes the wind is music, sometimes it’s only wind. I hear the clatter and whirr of disk drives and wonder who’s in control. Alone with words, without a voice or radar, what can flesh do but go wherever thrust takes you, believing curved wings will lift you. Years ago when my wife and I went flying,

we found our way by feel into the air. I can see her leaning now, as I close the canopy, a cockpit of words. Shoving the throttle, I feel the shudder of pistons and line up gladly for takeoff, rolling at last down a runway, slowly at first, then roaring, thrusting somewhere on words.

Walter McDonald
CINEMA, CITIES, AND DEMOCRACY

Edward Byrne

"I'm the bad guy? How did that happen?"

—D-Fens (Michael Douglas) in Falling Down

In Daniel Boorstin's latest chronicling of intellectual history, The Creators, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian declares it was inevitable that in the twentieth century "the new public art of film, in curious ways, would re-unite the community that millennia before had seen ritual transformed into drama on the slopes of the Athenian Acropolis." Boorstin suggests that "emerging and flourishing in America, land of conquest of space and time, film art was newly democratic and popular in the very age when literature was newly arcane . . . . The art of film showed a novelty appropriate to the democratic New World, a reach and a versatility unlike any art before."

As Boorstin points out, in the twentieth century the art of film has become "vastly public"; indeed, the movies could boast "the public as its patron." Particularly in their earlier years, the movies fulfilled their potential as democratic works of art by expressing the optimism and opportunities most Americans found in the nation's cities. Repeatedly, throughout the century's middle decades, Hollywood filmmakers appeared to be answering the plea, once offered by Walt Whitman, for artists who celebrated the cities—the seats of American democracy—and their people. Whitman lamented in Democratic Vistas, "Beholding the crowds of the great cities . . . I feel, with dejection and amazement, that among our geniuses and talented writers or speakers, few or none have yet really spoken to this people."

Even those films displaying the darker side of urban existence, from Dead End (1937) to On the Waterfront (1954), eventually ended with upbeat messages. In modern cinema, as in modern art, the city was championed as the center of civilization and culture, the magnet that drew the best and the brightest. As Alfred Appel observes in The Art of Celebration: Twentieth-Century Painting, Literature, Sculpture, Photography, and Jazz, his recent collection of reflections on Modernism, works like The City, Fernand Leger's famous 1919 Cubist painting, contain elements of symbolism that "stand for growth and hope of all kinds." However, in today's Post-Modern era, this period of the exaltation of cities appears to be over.

Nearly ninety years back, in his book, The Battle with the Slum, Jacob Riis noted the precarious position of the American city, stating that "as long ago as the very beginning of our republic, its founders saw that the cities were danger-spots in their plan. In them was the peril of democratic government." More recently, in Steven Schlossstein's intriguing examination of current American economic and political concerns, The End of the American Century, the author concludes that in the latter half of this century "America's big cities gave way to a more transparent, though arguably less efficient, political system dominated by national television . . . and the broad middle class that had been their base moved out of the city and into the suburbs. As America's demographic center of gravity shifted westward, the city, once the barometer of American politics, became its coffin."

As a result, contemporary art readily mirrors the swift deterioration evident in this country's cities over the last few decades. Whereas earlier poets like Whitman and Carl Sandburg wrote nobly or optimistically of the
productive and constructive activities in America's cities, today's pop-culture street poets—rappers like Ice Cube and Sister Souljah—often glorify the violence and criminal behavior destroying the nation's urban areas. Similarly, contemporary movies concerning the sad realities of 1990s city life seem light years from those festive mid-century films that displayed the comparatively secure grandeur of city living in the '40s and '50s.

The cover story for a recent issue of Time investigated the conditions found in major cities and declared that "in return for the highest combined city and state taxes in the U.S., residents of New York City get deteriorating bridges and roads, racial tension that frequently ignites violence, schools in which students must worry about gun battles erupting in the hallways, subway stations that double as public urinals, and streets full of panhandlers." The New York Times reports the most popular property improvement for residents in the city has become the purchase of razor-ribbon coils that create fortifications reminiscent of prison yards: "front porches once used for socializing have given way to caged-in entryways; bricked-up windows keep out both intruders and sunlight, and miles of razor ribbon lace more and more gates."

A Northeastern University study reveals that homicide rates for large cities are ten times that of small towns and are increasing at a pace nearly twenty times as fast. The National Research Council recently disclosed that almost ninety percent of AIDS cases "cluster in large urban areas." Consequently, demographic data indicates that an increasing number of Americans are giving up on America's major cities, convinced that they have deteriorated beyond any hope of renewal. In the 1992 Presidential election, for the first time a majority of voters lived in suburbs. Throughout the last decade, millions of jobs have moved from the nation's major urban areas. The malling of America has redistributed the country's shopping patterns and lessened possibilities of economic growth in the cities.

Perhaps the most convincing argument outlining the blueprint of a new United States is proposed in Edge City, Joel Garreau's fascinating study published last year. Garreau explains that new population centers, "edge cities" consisting of suburban housing developments surrounding industrial parks and shopping malls, are spreading across the land, replacing the citizens' dependency on decaying downtowns. Garreau postulates these shifts fulfill the prophecy of architect Frank Lloyd Wright that "skyscraper-by-skyscraper" urban congestion would lead to a "gravestone of... centralization." Garreau concludes that "Wright viewed as interchangeable the concepts of individualism, freedom, and democracy. He yearned for a system in which men fled the evils of big capital, big authorities, big cities."

Throughout the last half dozen years a number of films have displayed the evils inherent in contemporary American cities, including Colors (1988), Do the Right Thing (1989), Bonfire of the Vanities (1990), Boyz N the Hood (1991), New Jack City (1991), and Grand Canyon (1992). However, few have explored middle-class frustrations with urban existence and exploited the average American's desire to strike back the way Falling Down, the surprising box-office hit of the first half of 1993, has been able to do. Reports of exuberant audience reactions in movie theatres across the nation provide evidence of the extent to which this film has triggered, literally and figuratively, an emotional release for many.

Written by Ebbe Roe Smith and directed by Joel Schumacher, Falling Down presents all-American actor Michael Douglas as a laid-off defense worker, separated from his wife and daughter, who is forced to move back home with his mother. Having lost everything important to him, he more readily challenges the ordinary outrages and irritations of everyday life in the city: traffic jams, muggings, territorial gang disputes, drive-by shootings, racism, impersonal consumerism, government corruption, price gouging, pushy panhandlers, the indifference of the privileged, etc. In a recent interview, Smith described his script as inspired by real news items and arising from "the frustration of looking at the city and looking at the world and seeing all the rage we're directing at each other." The main character, Bill Foster (identified throughout most of the film as "D-Fens" because of the lettering on his license plate), is viewed by Smith as "someone who bought the American dream, and it's blown up in his face."

Ironically, this box-office success was at first turned down by every major Hollywood studio as politically incorrect. In fact, one studio reportedly responded to the script by saying "not only will we not make this movie, but we hope no studio will make it." Likewise, Caryn James, film critic for The New York Times, assail Falling Down as "the last big Bush-era movie." However, others believe the opposite may be true. Some regard Falling Down as an antidote to the rash of films—like Academy Award nominees Scent of a Woman, The Crying Game, A Few Good Men, and Unforgiven—recently praised and categorized by The New York Times' Frank Rich as "Clintonian Cinema," movies sanctioned by Hollywood as politically correct, in which "their definition of an ideal man—pacifistic except in self-defense, misty-eyed, in touch with his feminine side—is a central-casting call for the new President, who escaped the Vietnam draft and makes empathy an art."

In any case, many in Hollywood and the media have been shaken by the enormous popularity of Falling Down. As if to deny the film's legitimacy as a voice for middle-American moviegoers, defenders of Hollywood's liberal ideology have gone on the offensive. Some critics have charged the film's makers with using the tiresome litany of racism, homophobia, and sexism. Caryn James accuses the film of being "custom-made for the rabidly conservative Rush Limbaugh crowd that sees social blight as proof that
America is lost in a liberal wilderness." Others, like Terrence Rafferty of New Yorker, believe the movie "evokes the self-pitying 'silent majority' rhetoric of the Nixon era: that appalling sentimentality about one's beleaguered and underappreciated virtue." A recent Newsweek cover story even attempts to dismiss the middle-class backlash evident in audiences' reactions as merely "White Male Paranoia." Indeed, one almost expected a condemnation of Falling Down among the list of political grievances intoned by presenters at the latest Academy Award ceremonies.

This refusal to acknowledge that most of Hollywood and the media are out of touch with what middle America really values has been amply chronicled by Michael Medved in his best-seller, Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values. Medved states "it may come as news" to Hollywood, but "traditional values are alive and well" in most of America. Indeed, despite the scorn of Hollywood and many in the media, it is not coincidental that Rush Limbaugh's The Way Things Ought To Be was the number one best-selling non-fiction hardcover book for 1992, and that ratings results show he continues as the most popular political commentator in the nation today. Even the April issue of The Atlantic reaffirms the basic belief in traditional values shared by most Americans by sporting a provocative and persuasive cover story entitled "Dan Quayle Was Right."

Nevertheless, whether or not one agrees with the critics on either side, there is no denying the visceral reactions caused by Falling Down's populist, in-your-face bluntness—as opposed to the annoying coyness often contained in many critics' favorites like The Crying Game. The popularity of Falling Down seems to support Daniel Boorstin's evaluation of audiences' response to film as "newly democratic and popular," every bit as much a barometer of American sentiment as any Ross Perot town hall meeting. A March USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Poll confirms the movie's legitimacy as an indicator of public sentiment. The American citizens' trust in government has sunk to an all-time low: only 18% of Americans believe in their Congress, only 21% trust the media. The poll reveals that despite last year's election of a liberal President, Americans still consider themselves conservative rather than liberal by a ratio of much more than two to one. In addition, few Americans hold little hope for the future of the nation's cities.

Some critics have tried to dismiss Falling Down as a 1990s version of the Charles Bronson Death Wish films that appeared in the '70s and '80s. Terrence Rafferty calls it "a crude vigilante picture disguised as social satire" in which the filmmakers "give the audience exactly what they imagine it wants: not cold irony but a big hot dinner of violent wish-fulfillment fantasies." However, if this film has any precedent, it must be Martin Scorsese's masterpiece, Taxi Driver (1976). Michael Douglas's D-Fens shares some of the traits and attitudes demonstrated by Robert DeNiro's taxi driving character, Travis Bickle, who believed the city "is like an open sewer full of filth and scum," and who hoped that "someday a real rain will come and wash the scum off the streets." In both films, the main character is pushed to violent action by the ever-present oppressiveness of urban decay and declining morality. Commenting on the script for Taxi Driver, Scorsese acknowledges: "I realized that was exactly the way I felt, that we all have those feelings, so this was a way of embracing and admitting them." Scorsese is convinced that his character, like D-Fens, "really has the best intentions; he believes he's doing right, just like St. Paul. He wants to clean up life, clean up the mind, clean up the soul."

Ridley Scott's Thelma & Louise (1991) is another film with which some may find similarities. However, unlike the Death Wish films or Thelma & Louise, Falling Down ultimately rejects violent retribution as a solution, and indicates such action is, itself, anti-social. Also, unlike Thelma or Louise, D-Fens is stripped of his status as a hero and a martyr. Throughout the film, like Scorsese in Taxi Driver, director Schumacher inserts hints of his character's insanity. Therefore, Scorsese could have been speaking of D-Fens when he once said of Travis Bickle: "I instinctively showed that the acting out was not the way to go, and this created even more ironic twists to what was going on." However, most unnerving about Falling Down is that its main character is not Travis Bickle, the stereotypical shell-shocked Vietnam-vet loner cooped up in a fleabag hotel recording in a diary his plans to assassinate a Presidential candidate, but a nondescript middle-class American who followed all the rules and is simply caught in a traffic jam while trying to bring a present to his daughter's birthday party. Whereas Travis shows signs of a soldier's battle fatigue, D-Fens displays symptoms identified with the compassion fatigue of a middle class asked for decades, and with no end in sight, to sacrifice for others.

Travis Bickle drove the night shift in his taxi. D-Fens is stuck in morning traffic. Significantly, the action in Falling Down occurs in the bright Los Angeles sunlight on the hottest afternoon of the year rather than in the bleak cold of a New York night. Symbolically, the rejection of much of the repugnant behavior stigmatizing America's cities has shifted, westward like the nation's demographic center, from the Atlantic Coast to the Pacific Coast, and has moved from the secrecy of night to the openness of day. In their enthusiastic responses to Falling Down, American audiences are at last coming out of the dark and candidly expressing their disappointment with cities that dominate the attention of the news media they house as well as their disillusionment with urban areas that drain the economic and moral health of the nation.

When Martin Scorsese first saw audiences' reactions to the violent
outburst by his character, he commented: "The idea was to create a violent catharsis, so that they'd find themselves saying 'Yes, kill'; and then afterwards realize, 'My God, no'—like some strange California therapy session." Falling Down brings that therapy session to California, as audiences again empathize with the main character's concerns, share his frustrations, experience his anger, but ultimately do not embrace his turn to violence, since then he becomes what he is fighting against: he becomes the bad guy. Although Falling Down is a flawed film that does not have the cinematic flair (or emotional flare) and dramatic intensity of the classic Taxi Driver, its contribution to the overall look at attitudes of Americans in the '90s is important.

In their reactions to Falling Down, the American public clearly appears to be offering a chorus of opinions reflecting their positions on the conditions of America's cities. As the nation's founders feared and as Jacob Riis forewarned nearly a century ago, America's cities have proven to be the danger-spots that threaten the health of a democratic nation. When the American middle class continues to abandon the urban centers—believing Frank Lloyd Wright's perception that individualism, freedom, and democracy are jeopardized by the evils of big cities—and when it seems that the behaviors accepted or condoned in the country's large urban areas counteract traditional values, a pessimism spreads. Stephen Berger, former executive director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey recently declared, "If the ability to believe in the future is what separates a growing from a dying civilization, then New York is in deep trouble." If audience responses to Falling Down across the country are an accurate indication of their attitudes towards the major cities near them, New York is not alone.

Tuning Fork

One of the last in a series of horse paintings

"I realized that there weren't very many of those images left, that it had absolutely naturally reduced itself to a place where I was going to be forced to continue—differently."
—Susan Rothenberg

Perhaps the horse turned to you as you slept—you who had kept it running for years.

And you thought:
What can this horse show me that I have not already known?

There was no other choice. You offered it your bones, anchored it to your body, to your uncertain earth. The horse, awkward in your form, paused.

What else could the spirit do when threatened with flesh? It knew it no longer pleased you.

All the time, you grew stronger, believed you could keep running if the horse were firm. You remembered you were artist, not Muse.

But when the horse left, when it fled into earth or air, did you think, for a moment, to join?

Christine Rueter
Nice Places

James Combs

“This is the city,” intoned the voice of Sergeant Joe Friday (Jack Webb) on the early TV series Dragnet. The camera panned across Los Angeles, as his worldweary voice told of the plight of the cop in the modern city. For the police, the city was a labyrinth of dirty secrets and foul deeds, uncovered by those who patrol its unruly streets and observe its crime-prone populace. The city needed a dragnet in order to catch the multitude of miscreants who slither around its dark halls and mean streets. The city of angels is populated by human vermin, and police form a thin blue line guarding the portals of the thin veneer of civilization. They’re all out there, in the dark, lurking, the demons of the city.

The LAPD has gone on to greater glory with the Rodney King case. The whole episode reminds us of our antipathy toward cities. Simi Valleys may prosper, but South Central Los Angeles and like “inner cities” languish in ruin. The reasons for this are many, but surely one clue is in popular images of the city. The city has not fared well in our popular culture. The city was a hostile and forbidding place for the immigrant who came ashore at Ellis Island; but it was no less overwhelming and destructive for the indigenous migrant, the ambitious boy who came to the city only to discover frustration and failure, and the girl who found only degradation and ruin. The city was the place of Nighttown, the behemoth that swallowed you, the modern hell of alleys and shadows and unspeakable horrors, the asphalt jungle of white slavers and lounge lizards and jaded playboys.

And the camera still pans: our image of the city has come from popular traditions such as hardboiled fiction, the private eye, the film noir, the corporate tower and penthouse drama, the Bowery Boys, Dirty Harry Callahan, and Batman. For many of us, the city is not a nice place, and urban dwellers are not nice people. Police shows—from Sergeant Friday to today’s reality-based “cops” shows following urban police around as they deal with petty crime at the bottom of society (for which they, and presumably we, have absolutely no sympathy)—reveal glimpses of a nightmare world of violence, hatred, and entrapment. The city kills the spirit, destroys morality, favors the streetwise cynic and con artist, loses the individual in the mass, and flings us into a mad dash for gold and glory without cease in a neon and concrete waste land. Unreal city, indeed.

At least this is the mythography. Cultural myths include a map of the apocryphal stories they unfold for our delight and instruction. The North American continent was named for a mapmaker, and we have been making maps in our head about the discovered and imagined topography of the land ever since. America was a place to conquer, and in that conquest we established, or longed for, places, especially nice places. Evelyn Page, in her fascinating book American Genesis, finds in pre-colonial writings myths of longing for a new wonderland that would inspire the search for El Dorado, cities of gold, communities of true faith, the lost tribes of Israel, and so on endlessly. The wilderness and the indigenous peoples who lived there proved to be more forbidding, and quickly was translated into a place of evil that had to be conquered, and the ‘natives’ defined as evil people who could be subjugated or removed. Once out of the way, nice places could be built westward from Jamestown and Plymouth, and if you didn’t like the place where you resided, you could dream of going and starting a nicer place somewhere else. There was always a new start in the West, and it was no accident that North America became the continent of an endless array of utopian dreamers, from Shakers and Rappites to Mormons and

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Fourierists down to Moonies and Branch Davidians. Indeed, Gary Lindberg, in his excellent book *The Confidence Man in American Literature*, argues that the “promotor’s vision” of a land of promise lured many millions here in hopes of finding the right place: “Nation building turns out to be a massive game of confidence...Thus actual settlement and virtually fraudulent land boomings were twin features of American development from early seizings of rich bottom land along Virginia’s coastal rivers to recent speculation in suburban shopping-center sites.” Real estate (or perhaps we should say “surreal estate,” since much of this was based on speculative hyperbole) turns out to be our primary economic institution, the basis for all American dreaming and questing, to find and buy a place in the sun. Americans desire property not for its material assets, but rather for its spiritual edification and existential fulfillment. We are not worldly people.

The great good place of American myth has had various locations, depending on what we wanted out of our own territory. For some, the wilderness was a moral and physical desert to either be avoided for its pagan lure or to be transformed into a garden. Mountain men, cowboys and ranchers, wanderers like Natty Bumppo or trailblazers were symbols of freedom whose moral and physical fortitude was honed by their frontier experience. For others, the pastoral life was the place of “the chosen of God.” The hardy American Gothic farmer lived in the right place, virtuous yeoman who populated the peaceable kingdom of “the garden of the world.” Even the virtues of the city has had its champions, although relatively few. It seems to me that the thrust of American mythographing points to the town as the true bastion of virtue.

The town is in our mythography the place of democratic civilization. The lone frontiersman is too asocial, alone in his rugged and violent individualism, without family or lasting ties that make him part of a community. The city is too massive, crowded, bustling, and dirty; it cannot promote peace and virtue, for the city dweller is at one with his or her environment. The urban person is, well, urbane, removed from both the soil and primal values, living a cosmopolitan life of artifice and pretension. Even the country life is too isolated and self-sufficient; it lacks the institutional virtues of the town, and has too many crude and nasty rustics in the guise of Joads and Jeters and Kettles. The town is the true bastion of the American dream, wherever it may be in the country of our mind: Grover’s Corners, River City, Boone City, Bedford Falls, Walton’s Mountain, even darker places like Hadleyburg, Zenith, and King’s Row. The town is life on a human scale, in a place of democratic virtue and institutional benevolence wherein the individual is not lost either in a crowd or in a crop, but is part of something, the heritage and continuity of our town.

The mythography of the town is simple. The family unit is intact in tree-lined streets, business is honest and brisk, everyone attends the church of their choice, and school inculcates the “right values.” It is a nice place to live, to bring up kids, to get to know everyone, to feel a part of, to sit in the park and watch children play. In the American mind, it endured as an ideal, expressed in everything from Currier and Ives prints to M.G.M. musicals to *The Saturday Evening Post*. No matter where we went, we were never to forget our raising, never venture too far from home, remember how things were and are in the enduring old home town, come home from war and marry the girl next door, and always plan on someday going back home to live. The town gives us a mythic place to be from (presidents flaut their small town origins if they can: Independence, Abilene, Johnson City, Whittier, Grand Rapids, Plains, Dixon, Hope.) And it gives us a mythic place to want to go to.

Ronald Reagan was from there. In the mythography he learned at Warner Brothers and represented so well in his public personage, he was something of a Boy Mayor who reminded us of the simple gifts and institutional sanity of the Town of yore. There were “male” institutions (business and government) and “female” institutions (family, church, and school). Women were a civilizing force, and men were the bearers of prosperity and order on Main Street and in the courthouse. Problems were the province of local self-government, and behavior was shaped and controlled by the intimacy of the culture. The place was nice, the people were nice, and the whole world should be run on the model, and values, of such a town. If we could bring “common horse sense” to Washington and New York and Los Angeles, they too could share in the happiness and bounty that the primary place enjoyed. The American village had its drawbacks—babbitry, provincialism, gossip, conformity, caste and class—but they were minor given the promise of American life located there.

Yet there is much evidence that the town is passing, both in its nostalgic function and cultural centrality. Driving around America, one sees many towns that are dead or dying, others strung out along highways without any core or center, still others absorbed or surrounded by development. The town businesses that were locally owned have been ruined by chains; the local restaurant is done in by franchise foods; church attendance is down, threatened by golf and televangelism; and government at higher levels enforces standards on schools and budgets. Too, the ideal of the town has been superceded by the suburb. The suburb offered access to cities or “edge cities” without the problems of urban life or the provincial isolation of “island communities” in the hinterland. The latter-day suburb was promoted as an up-to-date place that improved on the town, retaining the charms of local life but giving people access to the advantages of the city. Eventually developments reached deep into the country, but in most cases they transformed American life by keeping
The mythography of the town was celebrated in popular culture not only because people had pleasant memories of it, but also because they did see something meritorious in it. The suburb has yet to inspire any such celebration. There are many older suburbs that are quite pleasant places, but many developments simply have no soul. One may drive through often very upscale developments and realize immediately that there is simply no “there” there. The town inspired a mythography because it was a place that nostalgic memory wished to include in its cultural map; but many such bland and heartless suburban developments are off the map. A town had character, a history, and a network of stories that sustained it; a development has no character, no past or future, no sustaining relationships. In many such places, the denizens are temporary, there are no neighbors since no one knows anyone else, and there is really nothing in common that brings people there. There are no emotional ties, no familial networks, no support groups, no lasting friendships; they are not places anyone will remember or wish they could return to.

Many recent developments are not communities in any other sense than they are a fortress against the world. They are behind walls with security features, don’t allow strangers in, often don’t let relatives or children stay overnight, restrict access and behavior (no wash on outside lines, no alteration of one’s dwelling, no trucks or RVs on the street, the size of your mailbox, and on and on), and of course exclude those people deemed undesirable. Whether it occurs to many people who dwell in such restricted habitats that these places have no life, or that they exist not only in a fortress but also a prison, is difficult to know. Certainly security in “the good life” is more important than freedom and contact with the range of humanity that one risks in the outside world. The town has been superseded by a dreary and lifeless bourgeois utopia, unworthy of popular remembrance. Nothing happens there: people come and go, age and die, marry and procreate, but no one cares because they are not part of any vital or enduring community. Ironically, these suburbias are characterized by the anonymity of the city and the isolation of the country, devoid of any of the saving graces of the town. If they are to be the new center of American life, then there is emptiness at the center.

The town survives in nostalgic memory because it represented something we as a people thought we had lost. The postmodern development evokes no memories, because there is nothing there to lose. Some people feel we have already lost, in a way, our cities: neglect and abuse have made them irredeemable as vibrant centers of culture and commerce. Others claim that we have destroyed rural America, and the culture that went with it, by delivering it to agribusiness and international corporations. And we have already noted the widespread death of the town as a unit of local culture. If these analyses are true, then we may wonder where American cultural life is going. If the best and brightest—the professionals who rule America now—hide in exclusive developments, then their knowledge of, or interest in, the external world of unsettling and dynamic reality will be minimal. Further, they and their progeny may acquire as personality traits—the ethos—of the places in which they live. For such places are most notable for just being phony: they are not a real place in the way a functioning small town or city neighborhood was. They have phony names, are sold by phony pitches, are dominated by phony values, so the people there may become phony too. A phony place engenders phony people.

One of our hopes as a nation is that there are still many people who are willing to risk human contact. Too often the utopian impulse results in creating a fortress that turns out to be a nightmare, a heaven that becomes a hell. Contemporary developments become artificial universes of such stultifying and terrible sameness that trouble arises in paradise (the kids running away from “home,” depression and anomic, the nagging thought, “Is that all there is?”). Both cities and towns at their best had something to offer that drew, or kept, people there. The development represents one identifiable feature of the emergence of a phony culture, devoid of any value other than its own security and prerogatives, and committed only to the defense of private living realms to which the inmates willingly sequester themselves. But such a change in American living patterns should remind us that the American search for the nice place in which to live takes astonishing and not altogether happy turns, and that as we approach the twenty-first century with both cities and towns in decline or worse, we should reflect on the fact that where we live tells us a great deal about how we live.

David Novak's discussion of Jewish-Christian dialogue is a fascinating contribution to the expanding number of volumes discussing the state of Jewish-Christian relations today after three decades of serious dialogue. Novak is particularly interesting because he both represents an orthodox view of Jewish thinking and is recognized as a central influence on certain leading Christian thinkers, such as Paul van Buren. This combination is quite enticing. My approach to the book, therefore, was filled with anticipation. This anticipation, however, was soon dampened. While Novak ultimately presents a schema for dialogue that is quite interesting, his approach is all too narrowed to what might be a Jewish justification—that is, the book is not essentially a book for dialogue, but rather narrowly, a book for Jews who might want to enter into dialogue.

Nevertheless, Novak's approach is important, especially if the ranks of dialogue are to be expanded to include not only reform and reconstructionist Jews but conservative and orthodox Jews as well. His arguments are hardly surprising and represent a foundation long assumed to be the Jewish rationale for dialogue. Novak adds scholarly insight to these rather typical arguments that may be useful to any student interested in the parameters for dialogue for the Jew. In addition, Novak provides the bridge between the orthodox view of the Noachide laws and the possibility for Jews to consider Christians as a special case for dialogue partners. This is a valuable move for the conservative/orthodox spectrum in American Judaism.

While the book ultimately leads to a new theology of Jewish-Christian dialogue, (a theology rooted in what Novak calls 'theonomous morality') and underscores the issues that are most often appealing to orthodox Jews (issues of social and moral importance, particularly the issue of jointly encouraging a retrieval of theonomous values in our society), the book does little with the advances already a part of the dialogue's history—especially on issues of theological importance (themes like covenant, Christian views of Jews, christology and messianism, the land of Israel). Novak also shows only limited awareness of the leading contemporary Christian thinkers in the dialogue. In the end, the book is appealing in its arguments for a new Jewish perspective, particularly as it honors orthodox Jewish views. Even so, the promise with which I approached the book was lost in the limitations of the approach and, perhaps, in the author's experience and view of dialogue.

James Moore


Any approach which brings a touch of playfulness to pastoral care is a welcome breath of fresh air. In his recent book, Donald Capps helpfully draws attention to what he calls 'reframing' as an addition to the range of available pastoral approaches. Concerned that much pastoral counseling deals with "first order change," "more of the same," Capps argues for a "second order change," opposite and against common sense, which he carefully explains and illustrates for the benefit of "the parish pastor."

Capps does not claim that 'reframing' has all the answers, but he shows that it relates to a valuable and relevant perspective of Biblical material, represented by the methods of Jesus. He sees it as especially expressive of the wise-fool model of pastoral care with a God's-eye view.

In two chapters on Job and the response Job receives from his friends and God, Capps examines the need in pastoral counseling for both an accurate identification of the roots of a person's problem and for an examination of the assumptions behind the counseling which is offered. These assumptions relate to views of the nature of
suffering in human experience and also to the respective perceptions and experiences the counselor and counseled have of God. To ask about the real nature of a person’s problems, and to ask about the view of God implicit in any approach to pastoral care, is not only necessary for ‘reframing’ but is something every Christian pastor continually needs to do.

Capps gives us an enjoyable, stimulating book which will greatly benefit any thinking person. But he also raises a question. ‘Reframing,’ we are told, should set human problems within a framework of the big questions and address what he calls the “meaning vacuum.” Is there a danger that an attempt to an adequate theology? wisely avoids simple recitation of statistics and incidents regularly dispensed by major media, Barndt presents a cogent, scriptural analysis wrapped in intense anger, compassion, and hope. He challenges us to understand racism, then, in righteous rage, to work with people of color in destroying its insidious control over individuals of all hues.

Dismantling Racism’s systematic analyses of individual, institutional, cultural, and ecclesial racism are not entirely new. (The author acknowledges others with similar views.) Unfortunately for Americans, such perspectives appear so rarely in major public arenas—the church, education, the media, politics, government, and business—that Barndt’s description of our unexamined racial perceptions will enlighten or disturb most white readers. This makes the book quite valuable.

A strong metaphor, an effective definition, and persuasive liberation theology drive the analyses.

Metaphorically a strong and subtle double prison, racism pervades all aspects of society. Its walls are “improperly and unjustly functioning institutions and systems,” seen by Barndt as collective action(s). Though these—housing, lending, insurance, employment seniority, education, and others—appear superficially fair today, their underlying characters, formed in times of overt, legal racism, remain discriminatory.

Well-camouflaged, a “deceptively comfortable and disarming friendly” prison unjustly limits even whites who think themselves free. “An intricate web of deception” describes the “dehumanizing walls” . . .[as] the outside walls of the . . .prison for people of color. . .” This makes racism “as debilitating to white people as it is to people of color.”

Moving beyond metaphor to focused discussion requires defining racism, a common term with varied meanings. Barndt’s clear definition is relevant throughout American life.

For his purposes, racism is not simply prejudicial thought—an unalterable human trait. “All of us, white people and people of color, are racially prejudiced.” Nor is it individual prej- judgment or insult. Such distortions have only limited negative effect.

Instead, racism is a massive, overwhelming, stifling pattern of injustice on a national scale. Racism means “prejudice plus [the] power”—here implying action—of one racial group to control another. Since only one group fits this definition, American racism is, properly, white racism.

Prejudice-based control, “expressed with an iron fist or a velvet glove,” is used both directly—by persons or institutions—and indirectly—by those allowing or ignoring its application, thereby benefiting materially. To some degree, Barndt says, society’s structure makes all whites direct or indirect participants. “The linkage is automatic . . .we unavoidably participate in a system that gives us power and privilege based on our racial identity.”

All American whites, then, are racist—an unavoidable, indelible, and untrustworthy characteristic inculcated in each generation by society’s institutions. The resulting continuity and commonality partially mask racism’s true nature from its individual carriers.

Here Barndt finds key roles for liberation theology: freeing individu-
als and critiquing the American Christian church.

Whites "are not the real enemy. [We] are also children of God, enslaved, loved, and in need of God's liberating word." The word frees us from our prison and, though racism remains part of our human make-up, admonishes us to also become "anti-racist" in outlook and action.

That God's word—"enslaved by sin and freed by grace"—is the same for all people underscores the "false division" that even Barndt's analysis of racism can imply. Though whites and people of color may be 'enslaved' by varied sins, all are united by receiving undifferentiated grace and one exhortation: struggle for justice!

The church should tell all people this and more, but—"with a different church for either side of the ghetto walls"—it is society's "most racially segregated" institution.

The "predominantly white European-American church" is, generally, "today's triumphal church." It creates "ecclesiastical anesthesia" by dispensing "holy nationalism" and, often unthinkingly, perpetuating "many of the myths, distortions, and lies about people of color and white people."

Far better at dealing with racism, Barndt says, is the "servant church" which identifies with "the poor, the suffering, and the rejected." Here is a voice of "prophetic anger, demanding justice for the oppressed."

Having said all this (and much more), Barndt offers white Christians three directions for dismantling racism. Begin with personal confession: acknowledge participation in and imprisonment by racism. Receive God's freeing forgiveness; remember baptism and share Holy Communion. Empowered by these sacraments, live a determinedly anti-racist life.

This life has a number of facets: understand the essential unity of all people; reject racism's benefits because "the gains of freedom will far exceed the rewards of our comfortable prison"; join the "conspiracy to tear down the walls of oppression" and "build new communities that are inclusive and pluralistic"; follow the leadership of people of color." The latter is critical. If only whites—however well-intended—determine priorities, the racism defined earlier will simply continue in another form.

As in most paradigm-challenging works, there are weaknesses. Barndt (deliberately) oversimplifies. His key definition causes heavy reliance on results-based methodology to identify racism. Shifting weight is given to motivation and to individual responsibility. Despite the book's readability, some will be put off by its intentionally heavy-handed, repetitious style.

Nevertheless, Dismantling Racism is an important book for anyone seeking to perceive and counter racism's negative impact on all American lives.

James Ihde


Already known for his earlier books, Christians and Nonviolence in the Nuclear Age and Enemies and How to Love Them, Vanderhaar here offers his reflections on how to achieve peace in our personal lives. The reflections are "an invitation to believe that a nonviolent attitude and nonviolent actions . . . are the best available options for personal as well as political living in this complex, often cruel, and certainly demanding existence we call life" (22).

The nonviolent philosophy put forward is based on Jesus' words and example, on Gandhi's ahimsa (non-harm), on Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others of Vanderhaar's acquaintance. The suggestions for a contemporary nonviolent lifestyle are eminently practical: we are reminded of the many negative influences in our life which often, even unconsciously, cause our violent reactions; of the importance of developing nonviolent speech and non-threatening body language; and, above all, of the necessity of having a healthy self-love to help us cope with anxiety and worry.

Two topics call for special mention. One, how should we deal with an assault against our person? Vanderhaar sees the using of violence against an assailant as only escalating the spiral of violence. As an alternative to "fight or flight," a strong case is made for what has sometimes been called "moral jiu-jitsu" or nonviolence. Through anecdotal material the author claims that the results of using nonviolence in these circumstances are at least as favorable as the more common response of meeting violence with violence. Some readers, while wishing this to be true, will remain skeptical. Second, Vanderhaar makes an interesting link between the "consumer mentality" and violence: an obsession with consumer goods can easily lead to indifference toward the needs of others, and, at worst, can increase the economic injustices (violence) being suffered by our brothers and sisters in the domestic or foreign Third Worlds. How to deal with this dilemma? The author offers a balanced view for those of us living in a consumer society. He recognizes the real threats of both misery and luxury and advocates a "decent lifestyle." All of our choices of food, housing, recreation, etc., should be such as to make us "fit for service" to others.

With a growing interest today in nonviolence as a tactic for social change, Vanderhaar convincingly reminds us how important nonviolence is in one's personal relationships as well.

James J. Doyle, C.S.C.


Christopher Kaiser's Creation and the History of Science is a comprehensive survey of the role of "the creationist
tradition" in the development of Western physical science from its inception to the present century. The author concisely sketches figures and trends, both major and minor, in the history of Western science in an effort to explore the interplay between theological ideas and the progress of science. The book is the third in a series of volumes published by Eerdmans under the general editorship of Paul Avis on the history of Christian theology, the aim of which is to provide "an extended introduction to religious thought in the Christian tradition from an historical perspective."

Kaiser defines "the creationist tradition" as a loose set of theologically-motivated presuppositions or ideals which served to inspire and regulate scientific inquiry since the second century B.C. Its main tenets are the comprehensibility of the world, the unity of heaven and earth, the relative autonomy of nature, and the ministry of healing and restoration. At points, the author broadens the scope of the tradition to encompass a number of other themes as well, from the ultimate compatibility of Biblical faith and Greek science, to an appreciation for the progress of basic science. According to Kaiser, one of the most remarkable features of the creationist tradition throughout its history is not (contrary to widespread popular opinion shaped by the current controversy surrounding "creation science") its initial resistance to new scientific ideas, but rather its ability to assimilate them. The author's sense of the flexibility of the creationist tradition is evidenced by his interpretation of eighteenth century materialism as no less legitimate an expression of the creationist tradition than other ostensibly religious perspectives on the natural world.

Kaiser construes many of the so-called "conflicts" between science and religion which began to emerge during the medieval period as in fact manifestations of the tensions that gradually developed between distinct emphases within the creationist tradition. The story of the divorce between science and theology is thus the story of the gradual separation of the radical wing of the creationist tradition, which eventually abandoned its theological orientation altogether, and the more conservative wing, which eventually lost its interest in science. Ultimately, by the end of the eighteenth century, secular expressions of the comprehensibility, unity, and autonomy of the world, detached from their original theological associations, became the governing ideals of physical science. Kaiser thus interprets the confidence of present-day scientists in the rationality of nature and the power of the human intellect as vestiges of the creationist tradition.

Kaiser offers to his readers a fairly nuanced conception of the relation between science and theology, exhibiting how the development of science can be positively influenced by theological ideas, not merely as targets for reaction, but as sources of insight. Theology is shown to play a variety of roles within scientific inquiry, from providing a measure of social legitimation to the scientific enterprise in the early stages of its history, to stimulating the development of alternative scientific explanations of natural phenomena. Overall, Kaiser concludes that "if there has been a positive contribution of the creationist tradition to the development of Western science, it has stemmed from its balance and flexibility in charting direction rather than from any ability to determine the contents of a correct science."

The author further suggests that theology cannot plausibly be regarded as having either impeded or caused the rise of modern science. According to his reconstruction, over the centuries, the two interacted "with changes in each making changes in the other more feasible." In particular, the creationist tradition was not static, but adapted itself to meet the challenges of science, which adaptations themselves in turn "provided insight and inspiration to natural philosophers for whom theological belief was still an important part of life." Thus, the fundamental relation between theology and science is that of a creative tension between the two kindred perspectives on reality.

Kaiser acknowledges that a full assessment of the impact of the creationist tradition on the development of science awaits the outcome of efforts in Non-Western cultures “to graft modern science on their traditions and the subsequent contributions of those traditions to the further progress of science.” Likewise, the import of theology as a whole to the history of science hinges on our understanding the impact of other theological traditions besides the Judeo-Christian on the advancement of science.

Kaiser’s study is a highly readable introduction to the interaction of Christian theology and natural science, representing a substantial contribution to the current literature on science and religion.

Christopher Stewart