The Cresset (archived issues)

3-1990

The Cresset (Vol. LIII, No. 5)

Valparaiso University
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The CRESSET is published monthly during the academic year, September through May, by the Valparaiso University Press as a forum for ideas and informed opinion. The views expressed are those of the writers and do not necessarily reflect the preponderance of opinion at Valparaiso University. Manuscripts should be addressed to the Editor and accompanied by return postage. Letters to the Editor for publication are subject to editing for brevity. The Book Review Index and the American Humanities Index list Cresset reviews. Second class postage is paid at Valparaiso, Indiana. Regular Subscription rates: one year - $8.50; two years-$14.75; Student subscription rates: one year - $4; single copy - $.75. Entire contents copyrighted 1990 by the Valparaiso University Press, Valparaiso, Indiana 46383, without whose written permission reproduction in whole or in part for any purpose whatsoever is expressly forbidden.

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Back cover: Kortlang. Good Samaritan, Detail.
Doing the opposite of what sensible people who live in terrible climates should do, I have been travelling about in the last week. In an ice storm of some dimensions, I flew to Minneapolis to observe the Nobel Peace Prize Forum, an event sponsored by the five Lutheran colleges of Norwegian foundation, and hosted this year in the rotation by Augsburg College. It was the sort of thing for which the term "heady experience" was originally made. The planners had put together a list of speakers whose combined experience and understanding weighed enough to have sunk a battleship, as we used to say. But sinking battleships can hardly be the appropriate image for a conference designed to inform and inspire the young with the possibilities for new thinking about the issues of world peace, justice and human rights. Instead then, let us say that the speakers combined enough wisdom and idealism and courage to move mountains perhaps, or even to change the way we think about doing good.

The headliners were Jimmy Carter and Yelena Bonner, who came to fulfill her late husband's commitment to attend. (In his honor, this year's event was dedicated to Dr. Andrei Sakharov.) Also speaking were Peter Duffy, the chair of Amnesty International, correspondent Flora Lewis, diplomat Max Kampelman, Geir Lundestad of the Nobel Peace Prize Institute, and Walter Mondale, as well as David Preuss, bishop emeritus of the American Lutheran Church. On Friday these people met with groups of students from the five colleges (Augsburg, St. Olaf, Luther, Concordia-Moorhead and Augustana-Sioux Falls) in small working sessions on topics concerning human rights issues. On Saturday, the Augsburg gymnasium was packed from 9 till 5:30 with several thousand people to listen to the speeches and responses to questions. It was a remarkable event, and we will write a greater length about some of its implications in a later issue. (Some of our sense of awe will by then have faded; at the moment, we may still be dazed by having been in a situation where the answer to our question, "which way to the press briefing?" drew the answer, "just follow Mr. Mondale." Which we did, but that's another story.)

At present, thinking through the hundreds of details from the two days, and the many wise and insightful and unexpected things said by the speakers, we are strongly conscious of the need for profound changes in the way we think and speak. "Sinking a battleship" is one example. Or that I had first written, in the sentence before last, that a thought had "struck" me. Why do thoughts strike, instead of stroking, or caressing, or lighting, or settling down in the mind? We seem to be constructed so that language of conquest and aggression forms the way we speak about our experience. Is it also the way then that we conceive of our experience? And is it then the inevitable way we must always live with each other?

My other trip in the last week was to the Lutheran Center, or Higgins Road as it is frequently called. I had been reading about Higgins Road lately, and most of what I read is pretty combative. Because I did not grow up in the churches whose affairs are being administered from there, I am not a part of its history, and I do not know about the struggles from the inside. I just saw a building full of people who looked to me as if they were working hard, and in not very pleasant conditions, to do their work. I should have said, judging from the signs, that it was the work of the church that they were about.

But a difficulty of course, is that we have trouble agreeing about what that work should be. I was at Higgins Road to choose artwork for the covers of this month's Cresset, which I did. I like the Kortlang woodcuts for their use of line, the way he has taken a hard, intractable material and made an image which is fluid. What seemed stiff has, with his skill, taken on life and motion. As I look at the two images, they seem to me to describe two ways of dealing with evil. The angels see the dragon, and with their strong arms and their weapons they are about the business of destroying it. They are unhesitating and confident and determined. They know what they are about. The Samaritan does not see the dragons, or the robbers, but only the wounded man. In Kortlang's vision he isn't even doing anything, just holding the other in a position reminiscent of a pieta. The world, seen from the vantage point of people like Carter and Bonner, is about as filled with wounded, and maybe as filled with dragons, as we can imagine. Can the churches get any better at responding to the need? Are we as church in the dragon-bashing business? And how must that be done? Or should our energies and even our theology focus on holding and comforting and healing the wounded world?
About This Issue

Last fall, our new colleague and old friend Jim Bachman asked whether the members of VU’s philosophy department could think together about some issues of doing philosophy in a community like, for example, a Christian university. And, as you will see, they did. In addition to having thought, they went so far as to write some of those thoughts, the results of which are published in this issue. Each of the four members of the department submitted an article, each of them on time, and only about one third longer than asked for, which anyone who has ever dealt with philosophers can tell you is a record.

When we sorted out pages and column inches, we discovered that if all four were to be published at once, there would be no room for anyone else, and thus we prevailed on Professor Klein to delay his piece until April. Since he has written powerfully on how we might think about nuclear weapons, his article fits very well into next month’s issue and its theme of new thinking and new living. But it should be clear that he is a philosopher, and he is with his colleagues in this joint endeavor.

This effort has been a good thing for the Cresset, strengthening its sometimes apparently tenuous connections to its roots in Christian higher education, or in high religion and high thinking. These roots are never very far from the editor’s mind, though the fruit may at times appear unexpected. Kevin Geiman’s article, for instance, asks about the “we” of the community MacIntyre requires, and Renu Juneja’s comments about a current American obsession with autobiography loops back to those problems from another direction. Is there an American “we”? And if so, who describes it best? Edward Byrne’s column on film makes such a nomination, which will not be surprising, but allows him to enter this year’s Oscar sweepstakes. Byrne’s claims for film and film directors as truth tellers join other such claims, and thus can hardly be ignored or dismissed as secondary by those concerned with high religion. If one is going to teach faithfully within a culture, how are judgments to be brought to bear on it unless it has been examined? And though we may expect that philosophers will naturally reflect on faith as it relates to culture, Tom Kennedy’s review of the thinking of several contemporary Catholic philosophers describes just what a radical undertaking such examinations may be. And Bachman? He is pastor, theologian, philosopher, teacher—and he keeps all those balls in the air here.

Peace,

GME

Shades

Tears of smoke run down
waxen faces peering
between cold wire fences.
Fires from buildings provide
an eerie backlighting
that forces shadows into
the eyes and mouths of children.
Old men, lined with ruined
faith, raise voices toward song,
a song, dark backbeat supplied
by gunshot, that moves into dance.
An obscene line dance
moving from shower to barrack
to pit without hope. Most fall
quickly, but some dance
for years—friends thinning
as bodies do, into ash—
until God takes their hands
and dances with them.

David C. Donahoe
PHILOSOPHY, THEOLOGY, AND THE PREACHING OF CHRIST

James V. Bachman

Even before my student days at Valpo I was struggling with questions about "good reasons" and the Christian faith. That is, I needed both philosophy and theology. I still need both, and I still find both equally capable of diverting me from the biblical path of faith.

Philosophy and theology employ God's gifts of the powers of our minds and hearts to help us probe many different issues—the foundations of science and mathematics, the thought worlds of various religions, the nature of moral discourse, and so on. In this essay I shall be focusing on only one specific topic in which both philosophy and theology are interested: What is the nature of the faith that may put us in a right relationship with God?

This is a particularly treacherous question for both philosophy and theology. If they harness the powers of our minds and hearts to the wrong project, both reason and faith are perverted and our relationship with God is undermined. Philosophy and theology may, however, help illuminate what it is for faith to crucify free choice on the God question. In this case philosophy and theology can help us to learn the necessity of the cross and to hear the preaching of Christ. I hope to illustrate in a small way how philosophy and theology pursue this task.

The Faith that Justifies is not a Psychological Work

Terence Penelhum is a contemporary philosopher who has devoted much attention to what he thinks are the philosophical mistakes involved in certain widely popular ways of defending religious belief. In the course of untangling some complicated debates between believers and unbelievers he makes a particularly helpful observation. He says that "the popular view of faith among those who do not have it is that faith is the obstinate insistence on believing doctrines which do not have adequate grounds—pig-headedly being certain of doctrines that are uncertain." (1983b, 171f.) In another place he says believers seem, to the outsider, "to be obstinately believing the incredible." (1983a, 301) What is helpful here is the word "obstinate."

Luther too looked at the claim "I believe" with a suspicion that some obstinacy is involved. For, from the biblical perspective, the phrase "I believe" often betrays the stubborn and willful intention to make something of myself by the way in which I define and lay hold of God. Luther puts it this way: "Faith is not the human notion and dream that some people call faith." People often make the mistake that when they hear the gospel, they get busy and by their own powers create an idea in their heart which says, 'I believe'; they take this then to be a true faith. But, as it is a human figment and idea that never reaches the depths of the heart, nothing comes of it either, and no improvement follows. Faith, however, is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, John 1. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different people, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. (LW35, 370)

Luther speaks with his usual direct clarity here, but that will not prevent most of us from willfully reading right past the crucial phrase: "it kills the old Adam." For Luther this is no figure of speech, but a radical reality. It means that whatever God's gift of faith is, it is not to be identified with the old Adam's psychological struggle for confidence about God and his will.

Dead people can't say "I believe," and faith kills the old Adam. Thus, Werner Elert claims that "in Luther . . . as an act of man [faith] is altogether empty." (1962, 104) Again, "justification is no psychic change; it is a word of God spoken to the sinner." (1962, 87) The faith that receives justification is not a psychological work on the part of human self will. Faith "is no autogenous changing of one's thinking. It depends on the hearing of the Gospel." (1962, 64f.) Gerhard Forde puts it this way: "It is simply not possible to work with an anthropology which assumes a continuity that survives the cross, and turns it into an object for free choice to daily with." (1987, 11)
"God, where are you?"

When the question is about God, both philosophers and theologians are hard pressed to escape a common temptation. We want our freedom of choice to survive intact, even at the price of not finding God. Tangled in this perennial temptation, our old Adam wants to choose God on its own terms; we resonate to the snake's promise: "you will be like God." (Genesis 3:5) We insist on our freedom to ask the question, "God, where are you?" And we demand the freedom to judge proposed answers. We will unmask the hidden God on our own terms or be damned trying. The famous philosopher and unbeliever, Bertrand Russell, is supposed to have said that, if there happens after all to be a God, he will reproach him for providing "insufficient evidence." (Morris, 1989)

Christ, the new Adam, however, comes with his cross to kill us. He asks God's question, "Adam, where are you?" (Gen. 3:9) The scriptures call this grace! "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." (2 Cor. 8:9) This rich/poor talk sounds good until we realize just how poor Christ takes us to be. We're so poor, we're going to have to die with him on the way to becoming rich. But we don't want salvation on those terms, so we go back to the snake's advice: "You don't have to die. (cf. Gen. 3:4) Your destiny is to be like the deathless God, not like this dying God. Let me give you a few good ideas and feelings about God, and you can get on with trying to find him."

Why should we have to take up our cross and die with Christ? God will not and cannot be judged by human free choice; this is the meaning of the First Commandment: You shall have no other gods. So God addresses human beings in the cross to crucify the old Adam, destroying along with my old Adam the free-choice hypothesis. As Forde puts it

The postulating of free choice means that the subject stands over against the gospel as an object, a theory which is to be accepted on grounds dictated by the subject. But what could such grounds be? Can the subject will its own death? Wilfully, the subject, claiming to be free, constructs a defense mechanism against the gospel, and permanent scepticism is the outcome. (Forde, 1987, 12)

In self-defense we turn from Christ to preserve our right to choose. But then the burden of proof about God falls upon our own mind and heart. Forde says permanent scepticism is the outcome. But he also observes that a well-chosen submission to some authority—whether Rome or 'inner light' or inerrant scripture—tempts many of us as the way out of scepticism. “Freedom is given with one hand only to be taken back by the other!” Forde then comments that the Enlightenment appears from this perspective to be "simply a kind of institutionalization of scepticism over against ecclesiastical authoritarianism." (1987, 12)

In order not to have to crucify my own foundations in myself and my own right to choose God, I must cut myself off from God's address to me: "Adam where are you?" But now I constantly struggle with the correlative question, "God, where are you?" And the life I sought to save for myself diminishes away toward death—either in scepticism or in a troubled accommodation with some "freely chosen" authority.

God is hard to find all right! He's hard to find because I want to find him (or be found by him) on my own terms. So, I look for him high up in the heavens or possibly low down in the depths, in ideas and symbols, in the motions of my own mind and heart, but not in the all-too-human and concrete preaching of Christ. I don't want to die, so I don't look very deeply into the cross. Meanwhile, God is always near at hand in Christ and his cross. St. Paul puts it this way:

The righteousness based on faith says, Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?" (that is, to bring Christ down) or "Who will descend into the abyss?" (that is, to bring Christ up from from the dead). But what does it say? The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach); because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:6-9)

The biblical proclamation is that God himself is encountered in the lowliness of the preaching of Christ and that necessarily God must there be encountered. To seek God apart from Christ and his cross, is to cling to free choice. But then we encounter the unrelenting reality of God's will to destroy the old Adam, and in the face of that we can hardly be expected to muster up some convincing thoughts about God's kindliness, as though he never meant the cross. We preserve ourselves—for a time, and perhaps even believe. But (as Jesus said) we end up losing ourselves nonetheless.

The preaching of Christ is no mere means to a higher encounter on some level of a freely-chosen relation with God. The Word claims to be present audibly and visibly in the lowliness of the words, the water, the bread, the wine. Thus, our problem is not really about how to find God. He is present in Word and Sacrament. We are called to put ourselves before these realities where He himself is present. Adam, where are you? "Faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ." (Romans 10:17)
It is necessarily the preaching of Christ, because only in Christ is the Word of the necessary death of will-full humanity and the Word of God's forgiveness of that same humanity encountered together in one well-defined presence and place. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us.” (Gal. 3:13)

Whenever we succumb to the temptation to take the preaching of Christ and the cross to be imagery, symbol, or disguise for some 'higher' reality, precisely against which the biblical words warn. We seek to save our free-choice selves. Our reason gets called all the names that Luther so notoriously called it. And our emotions, for that matter, are not any better. Even our faith and belief is but a "human notion and dream." (Luther, LW, 35, 370)

Psychological Change Comes after the Faith which Justifies

Faith is not a psychological state but a constant encounter with wrath against human presumption and grace freely given in the preaching of Christ and his cross. God’s grace is that the preaching of Christ works to catch us in even our most subtle (religious) acts of self-assertion and rebellion. The preaching of Christ catches us there and crucifies us, and only after grace has done its saving deed do questions about our subjective state, our belief and unbelief come into the picture.

The central question we have been discussing up to this point concerns God's finding us in the preaching of Christ. This is not a question about human psychology. Once we are found in Christ, however, many interesting questions about the fruits of faith deserve attention. These include questions about the human psychology of belief and unbelief. The simultaneously justified and sinning saint prays for help against her or his unbelief. This is the meaning of the anguished father's prayer, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24) When doubts arise, one must, like that father, resolutely look away from the problem of psychological fruitfulness back to the preaching of Christ in which any good tree must be rooted.

Christ's faith and faithfulness become ours as a gift, and this is the death of all our self-regarding religious seeking. But, and this is the good news, since the faith that receives justification is not our psychological act, therefore the certainty of faith is not a function of our changing psychological states. Everything depends on the hearing of the Gospel. Faith "does not seek the answer; it hears it." (Elert, 1962, 63) In losing our selves for Christ's sake in the radical dying to self, there is also lifted from us the deathly burden of seeking certainty in a parade of ideas or emotions about God.

When Luther exclaimed to Erasmus, “What is more wretched than uncertainty?” he was not focusing on "the psychological possibility of doubt in the believer—which Luther knew as long as he lived—but [on] the nature of faith itself. If faith does not have one's own psyche as its basis and content but has Christ, it also has in Him the basis of its certainty.” (Elert, 1962, 87) What makes such a mess of discussions of faith and reason is that we hardly ever stop to see that justifying faith is a work of Christ, not a work of our own minds and hearts.

The philosopher and historian of skepticism, Richard Popkin, could not be more wrong when he says, as an interpretation of Luther: “Christianity involves the affirmation of certain truths because one's conscience is completely convinced of their veracity.” (1979, 7) Or again, "the rule of faith of the Reformers thus appears to have been subjective certainty, the compulsions of one's conscience.” (1979, 8) This philosopher can't imagine that faith could be anything other than the self finding grounds to convince itself. He then goes on to criticize his travesty of Luther's position with the easy observation that "this type of subjectivism is open to many objections." (1979, 8) Of course it is! And the preaching of Christ cuts out this type of subjectivism in the most radical way. The careful, self-willed philosopher seems unable even to imagine, much less entertain, this possibility. George Will, the contemporary Newsweek commentator, fares no better in his misreading of Luther: "The primary idea of the Reformation was the primacy of individual conscience." (November 20, 1989, 90)

Luther intends his comments on the Third Article of the Creed to be taken in a radical way that cuts out free-choice subjectivism. What is it to believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting?

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, and sanctified and kept me in true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it united with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. (Small Catechism)

It is possible, of course, for us to misread this in a way that enables us to keep a continuity between our old self-seeking self and the new self in Christ. We can keep focusing on our own minds and hearts. I can search whether the Holy Spirit has done his work in me yet. "God, where are you?" But then we overlook how Luther's focus is not on our psychology but on the Spirit's work in the preaching of Christ. This work is

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centered in the life of the "whole Christian Church on earth . . . united with Jesus Christ in the one true faith." It is not only the church evangelism committee that asks, Adam, where are you?

It may help to clarify these reflections on faith by putting them in the light of Luther's ongoing struggles with false steps in the doctrine of justification. Thomas Aquinas got it wrong; so did the enthusiasts. So, for that matter, do we Lutherans. The free-choice temptation undermines us all.

Problems with Thomas Aquinas

We Lutherans try to remain at least vaguely aware that there are some moves in Thomas' philosophical theology that might get in the way of biblical proclamation. Lutherans approach this problem in terms of how properly to capture the biblical relation between grace and works. We do not always see, however, that puzzles about faith and reason are often an instance of this problem about grace and works. Notice how grace, works, faith, and reason are closely entangled in a famous formulation from Thomas: "Since therefore grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it, natural reason should minister to faith, in the same way as the natural inclination of the will ministers to love." (Summa Theologica, I, Question I, Eighth Article)

Some Lutherans suspect that talk of how "the natural inclination of the will ministers to love" may get us into trouble with works righteousness. Others point out, however, that Thomas talks about "grace alone," and they suggest that if we rightly understand him, he is no longer subject to the Lutheran critique. Leif Crane, in his commentary on the Lutheran Augsburg Confession of 1530, argues that it is not enough simply to say 'grace alone.' The central question is about how the relationship to God itself is understood. The accusation of "works righteousness" which Luther directed against the theology of his time thus attacks not only the view which holds that humans have the capability to do good works by their own power, but just as much strikes at Thomism, even though Thomas never forgets for a moment that human merits are God's gifts. For, even though everything is set under grace, it is an absolutely essential premise for Thomism that a person must become worthy of eternal life in himself. (1987, 86f.)

Thomas presupposes a continuity in meritorious free choice between the old Adam and the new. He takes the action out of Christ's hands and puts it back into self-asserting human hands.

Works have retained their place in justification—by grace alone. But now the very thing that the emphasis on 'faith alone' is intended to prevent in the Lutheran doctrine of justification has happened: righteousness is no longer equated with Christ's righteousness. (1987, 87)

Crane sums up the underlying conceptions:

For Thomas, grace is a power by which human capability is strengthened so that a person can raise himself up to God. For Luther, grace is the fact that God in his mercy is present as the one who fights for sinners who have nothing to hold on to but the alien righteousness of Christ. (1987, 86)

The critique of Thomas thus far has been cast in terms of grace and works, but the same dynamic is at work in Thomistic teaching about faith and belief. Interestingly, even Penelhum, working from the perspective of philosophical analysis, suspects that something is wrong with Thomas' account. Here is his summary of Thomas on faith:

Each of the theological virtues comes about in a person through the grace of God. In the case of faith, the central act which manifests its presence is the inner act of assent to the truths that the Church proclaims about God. He considers this assent to be a voluntary action... but one which I am enabled to perform only with divine help. Only such divine help can give me the necessary willingness and desire to perform it; and, more important for our purposes, since I am assenting to truths which reason cannot demonstrate, yet am doing so with a certainty and assurance that otherwise only belongs when I assent to demonstrations, grace must assist me in the act of accepting them. Faith must be belief in unproven truths, since there is no freedom in assenting to what is proved, and therefore no merit in such an assent. (1983b, 172)

The last sentence says it all. The old Adam wants to be free to assent and so to achieve merit. Thomas gives the old Adam a theology that puts off the cross. To be sure, divine help enables me to make the meritorious assent, but it is nevertheless my assent. Thus, I do not have to die with Christ in baptism in any but a nicely symbolic sense. Grace does not kill and make alive, it only gives our self-assertion back to us—"new and improved."

Penelhum attempts to go beyond Thomas' account by defining faith as an attitude of trust that is based, of necessity, on a core of cognitive beliefs. His analysis is both insightful and wrong. It is insightful, because he seems to recognize that trust in God is in some sense not faith but a fruit of faith. On the other hand, the most important error of considering faith to be "an achievement" of the psychological self is still forthrightly made. (1983b, 174) Whether the achievement of trusting God is made with or without divine
weakening this tie. In 1525 Luther criticized the will. However, it becomes necessary for the Roman church to stress the human role in justification by describing the psychological process which the justified person goes through. (1987, 77) Again, the believer needs no real encounter with the preaching of Christ, "since God in his eternal wisdom gives the Spirit directly through some sort of inner transformation." Rome, on the other hand, emphasized the Spirit's bondage to the means of grace, but this makes the sacraments sufficient in and of themselves as tools to be manipulated by human self will. So the truth and efficacy of sacramental practice must be vouched for by a priesthood that can lift the community up toward God. "Precisely for that reason, however, it becomes necessary for the Roman church to stress the human role in justification by describing the psychological process which the justified person goes through." (1987, 77) Again, the believer needs no full encounter with the incarnate Christ, because the coming of grace involves primarily a psychological process of ideas and emotions rather than the slaying of the old Adam.

Problems with the Lutherans

I've been drawing examples from Rome and the enthusiasts, but Lutheran theologian Gerhard Forde says Lutherans regularly sell out the incarnation as well. Lutherans, no more than anyone else, are ready for the cross and the death of the old Adam. Consequently, Lutherans also become uncertain about faith's basis in the preaching of Christ. In practice Lutherans have resorted mostly to a dogmatic absolutism largely dependent on a view of scriptural inerrancy, which usually brought with it disguised moral absolutisms of various sorts as well. A will which supposedly begins in a state of freedom ends in captivity. The message becomes a perverted mirror image of itself: 'Yes, you are free, but you jolly well had better choose to believe in justification by faith alone or you will go to hell. The Bible says so! And then you had better show your thanks by your sanctification.' (Forde, 1987, 12)

Problems with the Enthusiasts

Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Creed confesses that justifying faith must be kept closely tied with the preaching of Christ in the community of the Church. Many heirs of the reformation betrayed their misunderstanding of justification by severely weakening this tie. In 1525 Luther criticized the enthusiasts for "their talk of communing with the Spirit apart from proclamation and the sacraments." The enthusiasts claim that access to God is not through the down-to-earth proclamation of Christ, but through inner experience. The focus is again squarely on the human mind and heart. The enthusiasts teach that God's Spirit is given "after a preparation consisting of the mortification of the flesh." So again, human willful activity, not Christ, is the key to justification. "According to the Lutheran reformers' understanding, the enthusiasts' perception of the Spirit contained a dangerous subjectivistic element which would not only dissolve the church, but which implied a denial of the incarnation." (Grane, 1987, 79)

Dissolving the church and denying the incarnation are closely related phenomena. The church is the community of those who gather around the lowly preaching of Christ. Grane argues that both the enthusiasts and Rome sought "to avoid the offense of the incarnation." The enthusiasts emphasized the Spirit's sovereignty. The believer needs no real encounter with the preaching of Christ, "since God in his eternal wisdom gives the Spirit directly through some sort of inner transformation." Rome, on the other hand, emphasized the Spirit's bondage to the means of grace, but this makes the sacraments sufficient in and of themselves as tools to be manipulated by human self will. So the truth and efficacy of sacramental practice must be vouched for by a priesthood that can lift the community up toward God. "Precisely for that reason, however, it becomes necessary for the Roman church to stress the human role in justification by describing the psychological process which the justified person goes through." (1987, 77) Again, the believer needs no full encounter with the incarnate Christ, because the coming of grace involves primarily a psychological process of ideas and emotions rather than the slaying of the old Adam.

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I've been drawing examples from Rome and the enthusiasts, but Lutheran theologian Gerhard Forde says Lutherans regularly sell out the incarnation as well. Lutherans, no more than anyone else, are ready for the cross and the death of the old Adam. Consequently, Lutherans also become uncertain about faith's basis in the preaching of Christ. In practice Lutherans have resorted mostly to a dogmatic absolutism largely dependent on a view of scriptural inerrancy, which usually brought with it disguised moral absolutisms of various sorts as well. A will which supposedly begins in a state of freedom ends in captivity. The message becomes a perverted mirror image of itself: 'Yes, you are free, but you jolly well had better choose to believe in justification by faith alone or you will go to hell. The Bible says so! And then you had better show your thanks by your sanctification.' (Forde, 1987,12)

Philosophy, Theology and the Preaching of Christ

Because both philosophy and theology can be so quickly enlisted on behalf of the project of shielding and saving the old Adam, they are dangerous guides for the life of faith. If, however, in the presence of the preaching of Christ, philosophy and theology can learn the necessity of the cross, they can, as Forde puts it, realize their limits and "give way to the sheer proclamation of grace." (1987, 15) Rightly used, careful reflection "drives to proclamation. Its thinking is dedicated to making that proclamation hearable in a given context as a radical gospel which sets free from bondage and makes all things new." (1987, 15) On this campus, under the sign of the cross, philosophers and theologians are struggling about and with that task. The argument of this essay is that the first necessity is to keep placing ourselves under the biblical preaching of Christ.
AFTER WHOREDOM: Christian Philosophers and Christian Universities Today

Thomas D. Kennedy

It happened again in class just last week. A student commented playfully that he had already learned at least one thing in my philosophy class. He had thought that all philosophers are atheists, but having heard my homily in chapel and having seen me in chapel several times since then, he was now convinced that that judgment was mistaken, that not all philosophers are atheists. I, of course, reminded him that he doesn’t know me very well, pointed out some assumptions he was now making, and cautioned him that his limited evidence might not support the new generalization he wished to make.

But his new generalization is correct and he was initially wrong in thinking that all philosophers are atheists. Still, his first assumption is not too surprising. Perhaps he was raised on Luther, and the “whorish nature of reason” has been deeply embedded in his consciousness. Philosophers, in our refusal to “kill reason” as our evening sacrifice to God could not but be atheists, he might think. (Dillenberger, 131) Or perhaps this student just has a good sense of how theism in general and Christianity in particular have fared in the last two hundred years of philosophy and philosophy education.

Philosopher Steven Cahn quotes the central character in Tom Stoppard’s play *Jumpers* as he reflects upon an atheist: “Well, the tide is running his way, and it is a tide which has turned only once in human history... There is presumably a calendar date—a *moment*—when the onus of proof passed from the atheist to the believer, when, quite suddenly, secretly, the noes had it.” Cahn identifies that moment as the posthumous publication of David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* in 1779. (Cahn, 63) I’m not sure Cahn is correct in identifying the moment, but certainly the “noes” have had it most visibly and vocally in the professional philosophical world, especially in this century. (I know of no studies which indicate that philosophers are any more prone to atheism than, say, sociologists or historians, but the popular image would have it that it is the philosophers who are atheists.) The “noes” have had it and have often flaunted having it, as many an introductory philosophy student throughout the nation will tell.

But times change in philosophy, as elsewhere, and although it would be absurd to say that in the academy today the onus of proof has shifted back to the atheist, it is the case that theistic philosophers are much more visible and much more open about their faith identity than they have been at any time during this century. This new visibility of Christian philosophers can be accounted for in a number of ways, one of them being the not entirely salutary pluralistic character of philosophy today. With the failure of any one method or school of philosophy to establish itself as the dominant force, a plethora of philosophical groups have entered the circle of philosophical respectability. So, for example, at a recent American Philosophical Association meeting there were group meetings of the Society for the Philosophy of Sex and Love, the Society of Iberian and Latin American Thought, the Society for the Study of Ethics and Animals, the Association for the Philosophy of the Unconscious, and the International Philosophers for the Prevention of Nuclear Omnicide, along with the Society of Christian Philosophers. Christian philosophers take a place as one among the many and although we may not be a dominant force in professional philosophy we are a lively and growing number in the profession. (For an engaging discussion of the pluralistic character of contemporary philosophy see Bernstein, 15-17)

Two events stand out in my mind as landmarks in the newfound confidence and visibility of Christian philosophers in this latter part of the century. The first event occurred in April 1978 when the Society of Christian Philosophers was formed at the Western Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in

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Cincinnati, Ohio. The Society was founded by a number of philosophers who are Christians for the purpose of providing Christian fellowship and encouraging philosophical reflection on issues which are and should be of special concern to the Christian community. The Society of Christian Philosophers, as these founders envisioned it, would be broadly ecumenical and would represent no particular philosophical orientation. Membership would be open to anyone who considers himself/herself both a philosopher and a Christian.

At that meeting William P. Alston of Syracuse University was elected the Society's first president. Alston is well-respected within the discipline, having published significant works in philosophy of language and philosophical psychology and, more recently, in the theory of knowledge and philosophical theology. Alston has also served as the editor of the Society's fine journal, *Faith and Philosophy*, since its initial publication in 1984. He has been succeeded as president by Robert Adams of UCLA and Alvin Plantinga of Notre Dame, both, like Alston, well-respected philosophers.

The Society of Christian Philosophers has since grown to over 900 members. It sponsors meetings in conjunction with the divisional meetings of the American Philosophical Association as well as independent regional meetings and workshops open to both members and non-members. Many philosophers may be dubious about or even hostile towards the Society, but few are unfamiliar with it.

A second landmark event in the increasing visibility of Christian philosophers was Alvin Plantinga's speech at his inauguration as the John A. O'Brien Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame in 1983, and the development of the Center for Philosophy of Religion at Notre Dame following Plantinga's appointment. (I will return to Plantinga's speech in a moment.) The Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame, co-directed by Plantinga, sponsors conferences dealing with topics of philosophy of religion and philosophical theology and provides fellowships for research and writing to individuals working in the area of philosophy of religion and Christian philosophy. Its purpose is to encourage, stimulate, and support the work of Christian philosophers.

The fruit of the Center's endeavor is clearly evident in the publishing world. Two new series of books, many of which are authored by current or former Center fellows, are especially worthy of note. Under the general editorship of William P. Alston, Cornell University Press has founded the series "Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion" which will specialize in current work in philosophical theology and philosophy of religion in the Anglo-American or analytic philosophical tradition. Among the initial releases in this series are Edward Wierenga's *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes* and William Hasker's *God, Time, and Knowledge*. And the University of Notre Dame Press now offers the "Library of Religious Philosophy" under the editorship of Thomas V. Morris, a series aimed to "stimulate the publication of books characterized as much by genuine philosophical insight, and even a spirit of wisdom, as by technical rigor or clarity of expression." Already published in this series is *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays*, edited by Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. and Philip E. Devine's *Relativism, Nihilism, and God*. And Notre Dame continues to support its "Notre Dame Studies in the Philosophy of Religion," with new titles such as *Christian Philosophy*, edited by Thomas P. Flint and *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, edited by Thomas V. Morris.

What these events and series of publications indicate is that there is in the philosophical world today a hearty interest in and discussion of not only the traditional issues of philosophy of religion but also of the import and role of Christian commitment and identity for philosophical theorizing. There is no uniform position being advocated by the participants in the discussion. There is, rather, the acknowledgement that these are issues which it is important and legitimate for Christian scholars to address.

Three Contemporary Christian Philosophers

It may be instructive for all who are interested in the life and mission of a Christian university to listen in on the conversation of Christian philosophers as they discuss the bearing of Christian faith upon the discipline of philosophy. To this end I have selected three prominent Christian philosophers who have addressed this topic and whose advice may prove both stimulating and helpful to those in other disciplines. All three are active members of the Society of Christian Philosophers, two of them having served as president of the society. Two, in their discussions, are explicitly addressing an audience of Christian philosophers, the third an audience of professional philosophers and learned lay readers.

In the fall of 1983, Alvin Plantinga was inaugurated as the John A. O'Brien Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. His philosophical reputation was established upon his careful analyses of the ontological argument for God's existence, his discussion of the problem of evil (his most accessible presentation of these issues appearing in *God, Freedom and Evil*) and his innovative employment of a modal logic in addressing these issues. But in his inaugural

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address, "Advice to Christian Philosophers" he turned his attention to much broader concerns. The concluding words of that address were these:

We who are Christians and propose to be philosophers must not rest content with being philosophers who happen, incidentally, to be Christians; we must strive to be Christian philosophers. We must therefore pursue our projects with integrity, independence, and Christian boldness. (Plantinga, 271)

Now this admonition to Christian boldness ought certainly to be welcome to Lutheran ears, at least while sinning, but one might well wonder what Plantinga was trying to get at with his talk of being a Christian philosopher. What does it mean to be a Christian philosopher rather than a philosopher who happens, incidentally, to be a Christian? Plantinga was, in this speech, making two substantive suggestions: (1) Christian philosophers ought to display more independence from the rest of the philosophical world, and (2) the work of a Christian philosopher ought to display more integrity, more unity, than has been the case in the recent past. To this Plantinga added a word of encouragement—Christian philosophers ought not to be embarrassed about this calling but should engage these issues with confidence and boldness, trusting that God will do a good work with these reflections. (Plantinga, 254)

In essence, Plantinga first declares the independence of the Christian philosopher from the reigning trends and research programs in philosophy. Christians ought not automatically take over the research programs of the secular university. It is not that the research programs of the secular university are unimportant or uninteresting. It is, rather, that these should not be the first priority or the central focus of the Christian philosopher merely because these are the issues of the secular academy. A Christian philosopher’s identity is grounded foremost in her belonging to a community of faith. And the questions, the concerns, the needs of the Christian community may not, at any particular time, be identical with those of the secular academy. A scholar’s projects ought, then, to be determined by her fundamental identity and for the Christian this will require first of all a consideration of the needs and the concerns of the Christian community.

There is a second reason why a Christian philosopher ought not automatically to take over the research projects of the secular academy according to Plantinga. Many of these research projects do not comport well with the Christian faith: “they fit in badly with a Christian or theistic way of looking at the world.” This has not always been the case, but there is little doubt that this is how things now lie. Some research programs may assume a human self with a considerably better-developed brain but no more inherent dignity and worth than a cockroach. Other theories may implicitly assume that there is no meaning in reality independent of that which we humans invest it with, the consequence being that we are equals to God in our creative power. But neither of these views fits well with a Christian understanding of the self, and the result is that a Christian scholar who embraces research programs such as these cannot possibly exhibit the wholeness and integrity to which any scholarship should aspire.

Instead, according to Plantinga, the Christian philosopher ought to develop her own research projects and in these projects she has as much of an intellectual right to start from Christian assumptions as a secular philosopher has to start from naturalistic ones. She is under no obligation first to prove that theism follows from or is probable with respect to premises widely accepted in the contemporary secular philosophical academy before trying to work out its implications for epistemology and ontology, for ethics and logic, for aesthetics and philosophy of mathematics. (Plantinga, 1988, 160)

She may discover as she carries out her project the need to modify some of the Christian beliefs with which she started, just as some naturalistic physicists have, in the course of their research, felt the need to modify some of their naturalistic starting points. But there is nothing inappropriate in having Christian beliefs in that initial body of beliefs from which one’s theorizing originates.

Plantinga’s view is, then, that the Christian philosopher ought to start with Christian beliefs and develop research programs and construct theories which bear upon the well-being of the Christian community. And Plantinga suggests that there are three kinds of projects which should at the current time be attended to by Christian philosophers. Christian philosophers should engage in more careful and sophisticated philosophical reflection on specific Christian topics—the Trinity, the Incarnation, Atonement, and Sin. Secondly, Christian philosophers should be examining and criticizing contemporary ideas from an explicitly Christian perspective. The third kind of project, and in Plantinga’s eyes perhaps the most important of the three, involves “developing from a theistic perspective a full-orbed, articulate, systematic set of answers to the main philosophical questions.” (Plantinga, 1988, 163)

Marilyn McCord Adams of UCLA, current
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president of the Society of Christian Philosophers, recently used the tenth anniversary of the society in 1988 to offer her own advice to Christian philosophers. Adams' focus here is upon the problem of evil. There is an apparent inconsistency in a set of beliefs normally held by Christians: (1) God exists, and is omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good and (2) There is evil. The problem is that an omniscient and omnipotent being would know of all the evil which exists and would be able to eliminate it and a perfectly good being would want to eliminate all the evil that it possibly could. It would seem to follow, then, that either a God who is omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good does not exist or that evil does not exist, neither conclusion a particularly happy one for traditional Christians.

Adams points out that this problem of evil can be taken and responded to in two ways. One can take it as David Hume and the recent philosopher J.L. Mackie want the problem to be taken, as pointing out the irrationality of Christian beliefs. If the problem is taken in this way a theistic response is to mount a defense against the charges, to construct a counter-argument establishing that a perfectly good being might have good reasons for not eliminating every possible evil. Perhaps the elimination of evil would entail the elimination of some greater goods to which a perfectly good being is committed. Hence, it does not follow that God as a perfectly good, omniscient and omnipotent being does not exist. Alvin Plantinga himself has offered just this sort of defense.

The problem with responding to the problem of evil in this way, according to Adams, is that in order to show that a perfectly good being might be justified in permitting the amounts of evil and the types of evil which are present in the world one must appeal to moral beliefs about goodness and greater and lesser goods which are not shared by all and which themselves lack a demonstrative rational foundation. A naturalist philosopher may not admit the value of or even the existence of the types of goods which might outweigh the evils with which we are familiar. And in the absence of a set of moral values shared by all rational participants in the discussion the prospects for a demonstrative defense are slim indeed.

Adams suggests instead that we take the problem of evil and other such problems aporetically, as puzzles generated within a particular set of beliefs and to be solved in reference to that set. With regard to the problem of evil the attempt would be to try "to articulate what we actually believe about God's goodness and how He is solving the problem of evil." As she writes in her article on Duns Scotus:

Christian metaphysics would examine the goodness of God as He is in Himself, while soteriology would chart how God is being good to created persons. Our attempted formulations would then be measured for adequacy against both the canons of consistency and the convictions of the wider Christian community. Failures would pinpoint more precisely where and how evil is a problem for believers; and Faith seeking Understanding would send us in pursuit, with both heart and philosophical mind, of a more profound grasp of the mysterious goodness of God. To the extent that we succeed, our solutions might not only exhibit the compossibility of God and evil, but also commend God as a character worthy of worship. If the atheistic arguer could not share our value theory, he might at least gain a better understanding of our position or even come to appreciate how reasonable people could find it attractive. (Adams, 1987, 487)

Thus, for Adams as for Plantinga, the task of the Christian philosopher is to theorize in light of her Christian beliefs, in this case beliefs about goodness and moral value and whether a being such as God could have moral obligations, aware of the puzzles generated by her set of beliefs. Her theorizing is not sectarian insofar as she offers that theorizing to the wider community mindful that even as the works of the atheological philosophers Hume and Mackie have lent clarity and insight to her project, so may her project lend clarity and insight to others.

Alasdair Maclntyre of the University of Notre Dame is undoubtedly the most discussed philosopher working in the area of moral philosophy today. First in After Virtue (1981) and more recently in Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (1988) he has charted the failures of Enlightenment moral philosophy and directed us to take seriously the role of "tradition-based" theorizing. MacIntyre begins After Virtue by noting the extent of moral disagreement present today not only in our everyday life but in academic philosophy. The amount and the extent of disagreement cannot but be confusing in light of Enlightenment confidence in the power of human reason and the ability to establish rational standards of morality. Contemporary philosophers tend to retain allegiance to a particular moral theory and to assert the rational superiority of one theory over another but their inability to state clearly just what that rational superiority consists in and to persuade fellow philosophers, apparently rational, to embrace their theory suggests that, their claims to the contrary notwithstanding, their project of constructing a rationally founded moral theory has failed.

One response to this failure is to embrace a relativism which claims that any morality or rationality is just as good as any other and to refuse to make either positive or negative assessments of alternative traditions. But MacIntyre proposes an alternative to
relativism. He suggests that we recognize that there are no universally shared standards of rational justification and that we acknowledge the embeddedness of all rational inquiry in particular traditions.

How does MacIntyre avoid an incipient relativism? His view is not, in fact, that one tradition is just as good as another. Many traditions will fail by their own internal standards. And, even given the fact that we have, say, two competing traditions neither of which has failed by its own internal standards of rational justification, it will not follow that one is no more true than the other, only that we may not be in a position to judge which of the two is superior. MacIntyre is not, as I read him, committed to the view that there are no standards of truth or rational justification independent of traditions, but rather to the view that we have no demonstrative access to such standards. But there may be other rational creatures, for example, God, who know the standards. The point is, thus, not that there are no true standards of rational justification but rather that there are no demonstrably true standards.

The task for the contemporary philosopher and student according to MacIntyre is to explore and develop both the poverty and the riches of his or her tradition, to plumb it for its adequacy in addressing the problems which he or she confronts or, in the absence of a commitment to a particular tradition, to locate one. Confronted by fragments of multiple social and intellectual traditions, each making a claim upon one's allegiance, how is the decision to identify with a particular tradition to be made? MacIntyre suggests that that decision should be based upon one's self-understanding and self-knowledge; that is, you embrace for exploration and understanding that tradition which comports best with who you understand yourself to be. This is no guarantee that one will remain within that tradition, for the tradition may ultimately fail to satisfy its own standards of rational justification. It does, in any case, remove the illusion that tradition-commitment can be based upon some neutral standards of rational justification which can be applied to all traditions.

Each of these three Christian philosophers, then, advocates the legitimacy of a Christian philosopher's doing her philosophy from within the Christian tradition, addressing certain problems which confront the Christian community or working on puzzles generated by Christian beliefs. And it is important to recognize that in waging the case for this legitimacy, each assumes the failure of foundationalism, the view that there exists a body of premises known to be certain and from which, employing methods of reasoning themselves known with certainty to be reliable, we can arrive at other certain beliefs.

It would take us too far afield at this point to examine the arguments against foundationalism but if foundationalism is not a failure, that is to say, if there is indeed a body of truths to which all rational people would agree and from which interesting, and not merely trivial, conclusions can be drawn, then things will look much different for the Christian philosopher. Then it will be unclear why her projects qua philosopher should differ from those who are not Christian. I am convinced, along with our three partners in the conversation, that foundationalism has failed and that this makes "tradition-based inquiry" all the more important. But this is not a belief shared by all philosophers. (For a somewhat less enthusiastic response to MacIntyre's project see James Bachman's 1988 essay in The Cresset.)

Philosophy and the Christian University

In conclusion I want to think briefly about what the doing of philosophy might look like at a Lutheran university if we were to take something like what Plantinga, Adams and MacIntyre argue to be correct. We identify ourselves as a Christian institution and by far the vast majority of our students stand in some relation to the Christian tradition. I would argue that in light of this a Christian university owes these students at least five things: (1) an awareness about and an understanding of the central problems of human existence which have puzzled philosophers through the centuries; (2) an examination and exploration of past Christian attempts at addressing these problems; (3) an identification of the central issues that confront reflective Christians today and an attempt to address these questions in light of Christian beliefs; (4) a familiarity with alternative philosophical traditions and worldviews and an understanding of the distinctiveness of the Christian tradition as well as that which it shares with other traditions; (5) training in the philosophical skills which will equip the student for addressing these problems on her own and for anticipating problems which may confront the Christian community in the future.

This, I think, is what the Christian university owes its Christian students when it comes to philosophy education. But the Christian university also has its obligations to those students who have rejected the Christian tradition or who embrace alternative traditions or who have not located their tradition as well. And that obligation is best satisfied not by offering "equal" training in other traditions, not by minimizing or ignoring the identity of either instructor or students, but by welcoming the other to listen in on the conversation of the Christian tradition and to explore his or her own tradition in light of the challenges the
Christian tradition faces as well as in light of the challenges the Christian tradition may put to him. Hence, the same sort of training which will satisfy our duties to the Christian student will, when provided by honest and humble and fair individuals, redound with benefits to those who stand outside the tradition.

Does a Lutheran university owe its students anything more when it comes to the study of philosophy? We could promise our students a careful examination of what the great Lutheran philosophers have said on every topic we address in philosophy without it costing us too much in the way of class time. But, in all seriousness, I do think we as a Lutheran university fail our students if we do not offer them some exposure to Lutheran philosophers, which is to say Kierkegaard. And it is not because I have any special affinity for his work that I say this. But Kierkegaard is a significant philosopher and his presence and only his presence as a great Lutheran philosopher (we would do well to attempt to reclaim St. Augustine as a Lutheran philosopher) tells us something that we may need to know about philosophy and how Lutherans have historically understood Christian engagement in it.

It is an exciting time to be a philosopher and to be a Christian philosopher. It is a time, I think, in which Christian philosophers, while ever mindful of both the whorish character of much philosophy and our own whoremongering proclivities are, nevertheless, mightily convinced of our own enfeebled existence and of philosophy’s identity as a magnificent and awe-inspiring nurse. We ought to be humble and cautious, lest we claim more for Christian philosophy than we are entitled to. But there is no virtue in claiming less.

**Works Cited**


Alasdair MacIntyre concluded his provocative book, *After Virtue*, with the following observations:

It is always dangerous to draw too precise parallels between one historical period and another; and among the most misleading of such parallels are those which have been drawn between our age in Europe and North America and the epoch in which the Roman empire declined into the Dark Ages. Nonetheless certain parallels there are. A crucial turning point in that earlier history occurred when men and women of good will turned aside the task of shoring up the Roman *imperium* and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that *imperium*. What they set themselves to achieve instead—often not recognizing fully what they were doing—was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time...We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.

The two most interesting features of MacIntyre’s diagnosis and prognosis are the phrases, “not recognizing fully what they were doing” and “ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of [the] *imperium*,” for he takes these to be not only integral dimensions of Benedict and his followers’ self-understanding but a model for those who would seek to have done with the present day *imperium* as well. Simply put, the claim is that persons should not seek to justify their actions with respect to the currently obtaining social order and that they couldn’t give such an account even if they wanted to. Just action is not a matter of claims and their legitimation; it is *done*. There is something appealing—almost romantic—about MacIntyre’s suggestion, amplified by the fact that he refers to Benedict. Perhaps saints have that way about them. This romanticism is heightened, for example, in Francis of Assisi who, in his few writings, speaks of “leaving the world” (*exire de saeculo*) with no particular plan of action or statement of principle to guide him (“Nobody told me what I was to do”). Clearly there is an element of the a-rational here, and Francis—though not Benedict—openly called himself a fool (*pazzo*). Leaving the established order of power, wealth and secure knowledge is indeed a foolhardy project. Unless, of course, there is a wisdom in this madness.

There is much talk bandied about these days praising the idea of turning one’s attention from questions of normativity, justification, foundations, and so forth toward social practice. One might well claim that this is *the* philosophical theme of the postwar intellectual community, bridging the apparent split between the “analytic” and “Continental” camps. The challenges to any normative standpoint raised by the heightened awareness of language’s “holidays,” the suspicions surrounding a Hegelian-Marxist dialectical theory of historical transformation, and the sheer absurdity of many of the world events of this century have led philosophers to focus attention away from what one says about truth, justice and goodness to the ways in which one acts, the structure of action and the forms of narrative practice. Normative philosophy gives way to the sociology of knowledge, and the quest for foundations is recast in the terms of a never-ending...
conversation of humankind. The intentions are good; the arguments (when they are provided) are generally not, for the invocation of "social practice" is already a philosophical move, not a substitute for or successor to philosophical reflection and analysis. After all, what is social practice or social action? What are its characteristics?

One way of approaching these questions is to ask another: Can there be an order of action without a corresponding order of things? Actions and practices do not occur in a vacuum, and the transitivity of the majority of our verbs indicates that among the determining characteristics of any given action are both the object toward which that action is directed and the object domain in which that action is carried out. One kicks—a ball. One eats—dinner—at a table—with knife and fork. These trite examples by which one learns to diagram sentences also teach us something about actions generally, namely that they do not occur without a world in which the possibility of their being carried out is secured and in which the actor modifies familiar actions and discovers the possibilities for new ones. The order of things that is germane to the given action also figures in the evaluation of that action. One who puts shot well will have to do more than move his body in a particularly noteworthy fashion; the shot will have to have gone some distance. Similarly, building a better mousetrap is not simply a matter of applying new technologies, for no matter how sophisticated the gadget, it is not a better mousetrap if the rodents continue to escape. These are, of course, commonplaces.

But is the case much different when, instead of bodily action, social action is the point of focus? Here the problem is compounded by the fact that both the context and object of our actions are not simply material objects (balls, food) but ourselves and our relationships as well, and it is at this point that the turn to social practice opens up the door to questions concerning the nature of these relationships, the status of their interconnection and their functional contribution to the formation of the context of action.

Perhaps the most fundamental problem concerns the status of the actors and their role in implementing or carrying out their various activities, and it comes as no surprise that a theory of social practices generally carries with it its own supporting sociology, philosophical anthropology or, at the limit, social ontology, defining the nature of the actors themselves and specifying appropriate action capabilities. Historically these accounts were often made in binary terms. The account of the life of the polis in Aristotle's Politics presupposed the Athenian aristocracy and the slaves, and Augustine's City of God brought the Neo-

Platonic Christian distinction between the "higher" and "lower" levels of existence to bear on the account of social formations. There was enough strength in this model to influence, many centuries later, Leibniz's cosmologically and ethically oriented "Two Kingdoms" schema, in which mechanism and libertinism were contrasted to teleology and the life of the hommes honnetes. Similarly, the Marxist model of social transformation ultimately rests on a two-level conception of society—proletariat on the one side and capitalist on the other.

There is philosophical motivation for these models that share the common denominator of a two-leveled concept of social formation. It lies in the concern not only to describe social action generally but to prescribe such social action that is considered to be normatively correct or just and to condemn its opposite. To the denizen of the City of God and to the proletariat, for example, belonged both the capability and the responsibility for the overall transformation of the social environment from what it was to what it should become. This motivation can also be the Achilles heel of a normative social theory, for the critical stance that is won on this basis runs at a pace other than that of the social domain; social members and their actions do not fall pell-mell into order on one or the other of two sides. Hence when the normative theory is applied as a standard for decision-making and evaluation in the social world it often loses its ability to function as a guide and yardstick. Of course, no rule will cover all applications, but it is another thing altogether to establish a rule that has none, or so few as to lose sight of the fact that it is social theory with which one is concerned. Without the aristocracy, the communion of saints, the republic of homnetes or the proletariat, the normative dimension of the theories just mentioned appears to be but another ideological weapon pressed into the service of the interests of some social group.

Must this be the case? Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests that

if it is true that as soon as philosophy... prejudges what it will find, then once again it must recommence everything, reject the instruments reflection and intuition have provided themselves, and install itself in a locus where they have not yet been distinguished, in experiences that have not yet been "worked over." (The Visible and the Invisible, 130)

Theodor Adorno was less polite:

"Thought must... be ready to think against itself. Unless willing to measure itself against those extreme situations which elude conceptual formulation, thought assumes from the outset the character of a mere accompaniment—similar
Perhaps it is time—if only for a short while—to invert Marx's Xth Thesis on Feuerbach, for changing the world means not only developing the tools with which to do it but understanding the nature of the task at hand as well. Far from confirming the "end of philosophy" (pace Rorty), the turn to social practice reconfirms the necessity of philosophical interrogation if it is to avoid being background music for terror.

In recent years there has been a proliferation of writing on the merits of communitarian thinking and social organization as a way of getting out of this impasse in critical social thought. MacIntyre's After Virtue, Jurgen Habermas' The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, and Richard Rorty's various writings all have as the point of their focus the conceptualization of participatory structures that serve to provide both the ground of social cohesion and the critical apparatus for its internal transformation. For MacIntyre, this focus is on the development of communities capable of sustaining the "moral life" against the onslaught of rampant utilitarianism and empty formalism. For Habermas, this centers on a reformulation of the Husserlian concept of the lifeworld, the world of everyday lived experience. On this account, the lifeworld is used "as a resource from which interaction participants support utterances capable of reaching consensus.... To this extent, concrete forms of life replace transcendental consciousness in its function of creating unity." (Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, 326)

Rorty has suggested that one is well advised to continue with the project of social engineering as it has been carried out on the North American continent during the last three hundred years. The project of social engineering is less concerned with questions concerning normative practices and their justification as it is with the "attempt to make concrete concerns with the daily problems of one's community...the substitute for traditional religion." (Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity," 174)

Common to all three views is the claim that one needs to recover some sense of community identification in order to overcome the loss of meaning and social stability that are taken to be characteristic of the modern age. Further, such communities, because they function holistically, do not run the danger that previous conceptions of the social bond ran into, namely, the determination of a discrete agent of social transformation. Now, the task of social regulation and development is spread across the entire community through a common moral structure (MacIntyre's "virtues"), a common form of social integration (Habermas' "communicative action") or a common project (Rorty's "social engineering").

While each of these revisions of social theory poses interesting problems worth careful consideration, the fallout of these discussions leads this writer to believe that what is at stake is, as one thinker has already suggested, "the manufacture of a subject that is authorized to say 'we'". (Jean-Francois Lyotard, Just Gaming, p. 81) By this is meant the conceptual elucidation of a social arrangement such that the final court of appeal for settling disputes would not consist in a fact of human nature or a metaphysical/theological dogma but the active consensus of all parties. Examples abound, from the "we" of "We the people" to the "we" of popular petition ("We, the undersigned, etc.") to the "we" of "our community/neighborhood/country." In each of these examples, the "we" authorizes the claims made in its name and bears full responsibility for them. Of course, this is not a novel idea; it has its origins in the social contract theories of early modernity. And as in those theories, the "we" is inviolable.

However, it must be objected that the invocation of a "we" does not end discussion; it introduces a presupposition that requires further interrogation. But is it possible to interrogate the "we" without begging the question? All too often one falls back on some identifiable, existing community or another, from MacIntyre's thickly veiled defense of the Irish Republican Army to Jurgen Habermas' thinly veiled defense of German social democracy and Richard Rorty's poorly veiled defense of the North Atlantic alliance. What is troublesome about this is not that one is substituting a concrete manifestation for a regulative norm. This is always a danger and is easily corrected. What is troublesome is that one cannot fail to speak of some "we" or another without at the same time speaking of a "they," it's a matter of the pragmatics of language. And as soon as one has introduced the "they," is it not the case that there is already at work some principle of exclusion and social division at work?

Perhaps one might seek to avoid this difficulty by indicating that the "we" in question is not limited, that it is a universal "we" that admits of no "they." But is it not a far-fetched claim that there is some group to which all, irrespective of their own activity and self-understanding, belong? Clearly at present there is no such universal community to which everyone will admit membership. At best one can hold this out as a goal to be achieved, an end toward which all ought to direct their action. But if this is the case, then what one is dealing with is a prescriptive, normative claim. Such claims cannot function as premises in an argument, for any number of plans of action can be attached to a pre-
scientific as formal (and as empty) as "All ought to become a "we."

Still, one should not underestimate the rather widespread social prognosis which serves as a motivation for these efforts. The prognosis is that we are not very well off at all. MacIntyre premises his views with the assertion of a wide-spread ignorance of the very terms we use to discuss moral qualities and on the "barbarian" rule of present-day government. Habermas is interested in providing an alternative to what he takes to be the confused "new conflicts [that] flare up around... questions concerning the grammar of forms of life." (Habermas, Theory of Communicative Action, II, 392) According to Habermas, the breakdown of classical world-views and the expansion of the political and monetary spheres now leaves us without sufficient resources to develop a coherent, rational social formation. Habermas—perhaps only too acutely aware of the reactionary undercurrent in the political environment in the Federal Republic—has a vested interest in combating, with all the rigor philosophy can muster, any attempt at maintaining or reviving a conservative politics that can lead back to fascism.

The question is whether things are as bleak as some of our contemporary authors contend. Now Lyotard counters that while this breaking up...leads to what some authors analyze in terms of the dissolution of the social bond and the disintegration of social aggregates into a mass of individual atoms thrown into the absurdity of Brownian motion, (n)othing of the kind is happening. (The Postmodern Condition, 15)

Nothing of the kind is happening, because the nature of the social bond is not such that when the philosophical (or social) system of regulation breaks down chaos results. Indeed, there is no such system to begin with. This ideal is a left-over from the nineteenth century when it was felt that society should form some kind of organic whole with a determinate teleological framework. The view that "Brownian motion"—a random orderless movement of social particles—will result from the absence of such a communal system is, Lyotard claims, "haunted by the parasitical representation of a lost 'organic' society," which we are then counseled to regain or bring into existence.

Perhaps what is required, then, is not the construction of new communities (new "we's") that will carry on the work of civility and morals now that the big "we" of the imperium has crumbled. This notion attests more to its origin in philosophical systems than to the requirements of the complexity of social life. Rather what might be required is a form of thought and action that looks for and listens to what Michel Foucault refers to as the "interruptions, [the] gaps, those small things of little value...those things said on the great surface of the empire." (Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, 172) Because the social order is not and cannot be fixed, the determination of appropriate agents and courses of action requires that one enter into the thick of things and be subject to the demands of a world where fortune holds sway. Here one must not prejudice the nature of what one will find, but rather must be willing to let the activity of the day and, above all, the various and sundry views and actions of others come to expression and make their impression.

Now it might be objected that any group, no matter how perverse one might find its practices and views, is to be accorded place under this conception of marginality. The critic will perhaps have in mind the National Socialists or the SDS, the advocates of an increased military budget or the proponents of unilateral nuclear disarmament, the "Pro-Choice" or the "Pro-Life" groups, the National Rifle Association or the gun control lobby. The critic may be uneasy about the apparent consequence of the view being advocated that these groups shall be allowed to pursue their aims and activities without qualification. Now one may have reasons for not participating in any of the groups just mentioned. One may seek to challenge the positions, to propose alternative plans of action and to criticize fundamental assumptions. What is at stake is that one does not choose (like Leibniz' God) from among the spectrum of ideally possible actions, implementing just the one that is necessarily the best possible. One is not a demiurge; one is human, and decisions in the social domain, if they are not to be ideological, are to be informed by the given conditions and the positions available in the social domain. Truth, goodness and beauty are not partisan matters.

This is not simply an appeal for an undogmatic posture; a call for openness that neglects categories and structures runs the risk of underwriting a general stupidity, where one neither knows what one does nor knows how one does it. Rather, at issue is a conception of justice. Recent attempts to show that futility of pitting "good" against "bad" social practices and tendencies have been criticized as being devoid of any moral or political orientation. The point here is that unless one specifies, either structurally or in terms of its effects, the determinate characteristics of normative action, one cannot hope to maintain a defensible critical stance. I tend to disagree with this position. It seems that it would be possible to locate a political and moral orientation in the everyday practice of agents without introducing structural or attitudinal dualisms into those practices, precisely on the grounds that the very introduction of these distinctions already preju-
dices the characterization of those social actors and curtails their actions. I would follow Lyotard’s lead when he writes that

there are language games in which the important thing is to listen, in which the rule deals with audition. Such a game is the game of the just. And in this game, one speaks only inasmuch as one listens, that is, one speaks as a listener, and not as an author.” (Lyotard, Just Gaming, 71-72)

Only by listening to (which is not the same as hearing) the polyphony of voices can one continue to play the game of justice. The only “we” worth having, then, is one that continually faces the prospect of its own dissolution in acknowledging the possible truth of others’ discourse and actions.

I am asked to say something about philosophy and Christianity, about “faith” and “reason.” The foregoing remarks apply particularly to the putative “we” of Christianity. A Christian “we” that does not open itself to the “non-we,” be it non-Christians, non-gender-proper-Christians and non-denominationally-proper-Christians, suffers from the Sitzfleisch that Nietzsche (for once right on the money) thought to be precisely the “sin against the Holy Spirit,” the one that can never be forgiven because channels for the Spirit’s actions have been actively denied. Such a “we,” proceeding from and returning to itself, can only result in rear-guard action to maintain a sphere of immediacy and integrity. Such a “we,” destined to operate in secrecy and silence, manifests the fear that is the opposite of justice, for it does not allow the question of justice to be raised and discussed. Such a “we,” ever-mindful of its own preservation, rejects the good gift of brokenness and emptiness that has been offered it and, with that gift, the life it might have hoped to attain.

The purpose of the Christian “we” is to become obsolete, to carry out such activity and to be in such a way that it become impossible to contrast a Christian “we” to a non-Christian “they.” Of course this author (and everyone else for that matter) knows nothing of what such a condition would look like. Marx had thought that capitalism was pregnant with the transformations that would allow the passage to socialism. He was only partially right, for as the development of the economy over the last hundred years has shown, what Marx called “capitalism” was actually pregnant with many diverse forms of social and productive relations. The same would hold true for transformations in all spheres of life and in all forms of human association. Historical development is not linear but a pattern of the successive implementation of one or several of a range of possibilities. It is clear that here one does not recognize fully what one is doing, but perhaps it is here that “faith” and “reason” become indistinguishable from one another. Perhaps.

Works Cited


The Disappeared

When our plane lands in El Salvador,
We see low-sitting sandbag forts line
The runways; dark barrels point out
In each direction. The North American
Poets deplane first, all seriously costumed—
Bandanas and sandals. They are here,
They say, to witness the struggle, to be
At one with it; but, alas, they have
Only three days, must leave, weather
permitting, all their testimony ready
For the engagements their agents have arranged.

Meanwhile, we read that the mothers
Continue to march in Buenos Aires.
The faces of sons and daughters
Hang from cords around the necks
Of these women; they refuse to stop
Marching, refuse to return home.
Slowly strangling from loss, they refuse
And refuse . . .

We decide not to leave the plane,
And we leave El Salvador; we have
Seen what we needed to see
And we promise ourselves we'll say
Nothing about this until the bones
Of the missing appear again,
Cradled in their mothers' arms.

Robert Pawlowski
The First Freedom
Joe Patrick Bean

For the benefit of Hungarians who do not read English but nonetheless would like to read the articles, Playboy magazine is now published in Magyar. This fact, however trivial its subject, points to a stunning explosion of freedom of expression across Europe in 1989 and early 1990.

Also in Hungary, Colonel Imre Bokor's scathing expose of corruption among his nation's top military officers, Princes in Uniform, is selling so fast that the publishers can't print enough copies. Since its start in Budapest in February of 1989, Mai Nap, Hungary's first independent newspaper, mixing tabloid-style sensationalism with political and legal topics, has doubled its circulation to 100,000.

In Romania, leaders of December's revolt against Nicolae Ceausescu took over state television and renamed it Television Free Romania (TRL), broadcast-

ing the nation's unfolding revolutionary upheaval live and uncensored. TRL also televised the trial of Ceausescu and his wife, Elena, and pictures of their bullet-ridden corpses after their executions. And for the first time in Romania since 1947, TRL and state radio broadcast a live Christmas service from Bucharest's Patriarchie Cathedral.

The official Romanian government press agency, Agerpress, disbanded after the Ceausescus' overthrow, and in its place, the governing National Salvation Council created a new press service, Rompress, intended to be free of state control. And two new newspapers recently began publication in Bucharest, laying the foundation for a free press in Romania.

East Germany's Communist Party youth newspaper, Junge Welt, in October published a letter by dissident author Hermann Kant that helped topple hard-line dictator Eric Honecker. The paper subsequently exposed the privileged lifestyle Honecker and the country's other former leaders had enjoyed in their exclusive Wand-litz compound outside of East Berlin. Berliner Zeitung, East Berlin's Communist Party newspaper, also published exhaustive accounts of the deposed regime's financial corruption, and state television broadcast similar reports.

Shortly before Czechoslovakia's old regime fell from power, and former prisoner Vaclav Havel was elected president, state television began broadcasting coverage of anti-government demonstrations in Prague's Wenceslas Square. A few weeks later, state television unveiled two new, uncensored political programs, including Open Screen, an hour-long, thrice-weekly forum that will provide all citizens and political groups access to the airwaves to present their views to the nation.

The leading Soviet literary magazine, Novy Mir, in August began publishing installments of exiled Nobel laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn's chronicle of Stalinist repression, The Gulag Archipelago. By October, Gulag had made its way onto the reading list of one 11th grade Moscow history class. Another literary magazine, Oktyabr, has published Vasily Grossman's short novel, Forever Snowing, charging that political terror and repression are the legacy of Vladimir I. Lenin, the Soviet Union's founding father and greatest national hero.

A growing number of Soviet newspapers are taking advantage of President Mikail Gorbachev's policy of glasnost to publish scathing ex-poses of Stalin's reign of terror and even to criticize the current government. Prominent among them is the weekly Argumenty i Fakty, which is the world's best-selling newspaper, with a circulation of 26 million copies. Also as a result of Gorbachev's policies, leading literary figures last spring began work to establish a Soviet chapter of PEN, the international writers' organization best known for its opposition to censorship.

Eastern Europeans have very little experience with democracy or freedom, which, as they are discovering, do not come fully assembled with batteries included. Yet their decades without it have taught them that freedom of expression is the essential first freedom, without which other liberties are trivial and fleeting. At the same time Eastern Europeans are struggling, sometimes dying, to expand freedom of expression, some Americans unfortunately are working with similar fervor to limit it in this country.

The Rev. Donald Wildmon of Tupelo, Mississippi, and his groups, the American Family Association and Christian Leaders for
Responsible Television, are trying to "clean up" network television by targeting shows such as The Wonder Years, Full House, Cheers, Murphy Brown and ALF as morally objectionable. Wildmon denounced The Wonder Years, ABC's wholesome and insightful Emmy-winning show about a boy growing up in the late 60s because it "teaches that sex is the obsession of pre-teens." A Wildmon supporter wrote, in a letter to The Houston Post, that this show's "sex scenes were some of the most explicit I have seen. And on prime time! Someone needs to be a watchdog, and I am grateful to Mr. Wildmon."

The Orlando, Florida, Christian television station WACX dropped the Dallas-based children's program Mr. Peppermint from its schedule last spring after receiving complaints about the show. In one episode, the program showed film of Japanese children and their surroundings. The camera briefly recorded footage of a statue of the Buddha, which offended viewers called a "graven image." Others objected to an extraterrestrial character named Kelli Green, who came to Earth to teach children not to litter, saying that the fictional alien promotes "mysticism."

Multimedia Cablevision bowed to pressure from fundamentalist religious groups last fall when it chose not to broadcast The Last Temptation of Christ on its pay-channel channel in Oklahoma, Kansas and North Carolina. Some of the nation's leading video-rental chains also decided not even to stock the controversial movie when it was released on videocassette last summer.

Jesse Helms, with other congressional conservatives, tried last summer to gut the National Endowment for the Arts, but failing in his attempt to do that, Helms is now using his staff to investigate NEA grant applications. He apparently hopes this pressure will cause NEA officials to back away from funding art projects that he might consider objectionable, or that could cause any controversy for the beleagured agency.

Missouri State Representative Jean Dixon and a group of local religious leaders tried to keep the drama department of Southwest Missouri State University from staging Larry Kramer's widely acclaimed play about AIDS, The Normal Heart, in November of last year. During the heated controversy about the play, the home of a student leader supporting the production burned. Investigators believe the fire was deliberately set. And when school administrators and regents refused to cancel the drama, its opponents said they would try to persuade the Missouri General Assembly to cut the university's state appropriations.

When a high-ranking FBI bureaucrat last year wrote a letter on official stationery to the head of Priority Records protesting the lyrics of a song by the rap group N.W.A., the music industry got a chilling message: the FBI is now in the business of monitoring rock lyrics.

Canadian author Margaret Atwood's celebrated 1986 novel, The Handmaid's Tale, was removed from an English class at Houston's Lamar High School last September after parents objected to what they called offensive language. Ironically, and probably not coincidentally, Handmaid's Tale is a powerful and not altogether unrealistic account of a futuristic society where right-wing fanatics have seized control of the United States government and taken all legal and political rights away from women, reducing them to the status of breeding stock. During the 1988-89 academic year, 172 attempts at or actual incidents of book banning occurred in public schools in 42 states; most cases involved offensive language, and few accusers had bothered to read the books they wanted to ban.

Last year, Americans celebrated the 200th anniversary of the Bill of Rights, including the all-important First Amendment. The examples noted above sadly are but a small number of censorship attempts across the United States during 1989, clearly showing that many Americans still have much to learn about the precious rights this amendment guarantees, and about the crucial importance of freedom of expression in a democratic society.

Eastern Europeans don't have nearly as much experience with democracy as Americans do, but, ironically, they offer this country a timely lesson. The alternative to a society where freedom of expression is zealously protected, Eastern Europeans might say, is not one any sane person would willingly choose. Yet, too many Americans are complacent accomplices in the censorial activities of Wildmon, Helms and the rest.

If Vaclav Havel, or Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Imre Bokor or Hermann Kant, the editors of Argumenty i Fakty or the producers and directors of Television Free Romania were to ask why so few Americans are willing to confront the dangerous and increasingly frequent assaults on free expression in this country, what would the answer be? And would it be too late?
There must be many ways to take the pulse of a nation and many are recorded in these monthly columns of The Cresset. As a relative novice at this brand of cultural commentary, I am still learning to devise antennae. When all else fails, true to the predilection of someone who lives by books and sometimes in books, I turn to the printed page. Surely, what we write and what we read must be as true an index as any of the state of this nation's mind and heart. The proliferation of books of all kinds and on all subjects makes it difficult to clearly demarcate trends, but the best seller lists of The New York Times Book Review remain a handy tool. Lately, my reading of the nonfiction best seller lists in particular has pointed to a curious phenomenon: a large proportion of the books the American public is reading so avidly are autobiographical books about the public and personal lives of celebrities and personalities. It seems that almost anyone who has ever held a public office of note or achieved notoriety or fame has written or will set out to write a book. Let me give you a list compiled from a random sampling from three recent issues of The New York Times Book Review: Child Star, by Shirley Temple; Roseanne, by Roseanne Barr; It's Always Something, by Gilda Radner; Liar's Poker, by Michael Lewis; Confessions of An S.O.B., by Al Neuharth; Drive, by Larry Bird; Education of A Wandering Man, by Louis L'Amour; All My Best Friends, by George Burns; Bo, by Bo Scherbechler; Miles, by Miles Davis; Pete Rose: My Story by Pete Rose; and, of course, Nancy Reagan's My Turn. You may remember that the last one was preceded by books from Don Regan and Michael Deaver.

Autobiography is not a new form. St. Augustine wrote his Confessions in the fourth century A.D. and thereafter many notables, literary and otherwise have confessed themselves in writing. The word autobiography, however, is of fairly recent coinage, and the invention of the name signals the emergence of autobiography as an increasingly popular vehicle of self-expression. The word appears towards the beginning of the nineteenth century, and by 1964 Bonamy Dobree has claimed autobiographies as "the most entrancing of books." Autobiography is a compound of three Greek roots - auto (self), bio (life), and graphy (writing). This conjunction of self and life or self and history suggests the increasing appeal of autobiography for this nation and this culture. In the Library of Congress classification system, autobiography is a subspecies of biography, and biography a branch of the "Auxiliary Sciences of History." A nation with a fragile and tenuous sense of history, a nation self-consciously creating its self and its history, must find the self-creations of autobiography almost a psychological necessity.

Walk into the magazine section of the drugstore and you will find a multitude of so-called peoples' magazines that are but variations of True Confessions. Glance at the pages of tabloids like The National Enquirer and you will find disclosure after extraordinary disclosure of people's personal lives. People seem to need little prompting to launch into narratives of self. More and more people are taking up the pen to tell their story; more and more people think that they have a story worth telling. That this should be so is, I think, because autobiography is particularly suited to the American experience and temperament.

There are, of course, a lot of great autobiographies from other cultures and nations as well. But it is most so in America that the self must achieve coherence and definition without mediation from, or interference from, powerfully existing traditions, communities, and beliefs. American autobiography comes into its own with works like Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography and Henry Adams' The Education of Henry Adams. These men are building a nation, creating a national character as it were, and connecting their self through their writing to...
the life of the nation. These are people discovering and articulating a self that is, in some ways, expressive of their moment in history. In autobiographies of those like Franklin and Adams, the writing about self is a self-consciously cultural act appropriate to the building of a new nation.

Today, autobiography thrives among new immigrant groups and among minorities still attempting to seize their moment in history, still seeking to project themselves on the nation’s consciousness through such works of self-definition. Vladimir Nabokov writes *Speak, Memory*; Mary Antin writes *The Promised Land*; Alfred Kazin writes *A Walker in the City*; Maxine Hong Kingston writes *The Woman Warrior*. Most recently I read a favorable review of Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation: A Life in New Language* which the reviewer describes as a looking backward to Hoffman’s childhood in Poland and to emigration to the U.S., an attempt to repair, through the act of writing the autobiography, those losses in the self that the book laments. The autobiographies of black writers as diverse as Malcolm X and Maya Angelou share a sharply etched historical consciousness which perceives the history of the individual self as representative of larger social realities. From the earliest slave narratives like *Up From Slavery* to Alex Haley’s *Roots*, individual consciousnesses set out to discover themselves as members of their community, as participants in a history that they must consciously remember in order to recover.

There are other features of the American consciousness which find a hospitable expression in the autobiography. The revolutionary Protestantism of those arriving on the Mayflower endorsed individual self-assertion in matters of politics and religion. The individual self has thereafter retained a sanctioned preeminence in all aspects of American life. Indeed, I am told that there is even a new, glossy magazine entitled *Self*. Whitman is our great poet writing the uniquely American epic of the self. Autobiography then would surely have a special appeal as a literary genre which would allow writers to create churches to themselves. America is like no nation in history; Americans are not like anyone in history. Each of us, so we believe, is a unique individual with a uniquely distinctive story worth telling. The individual has value, and, this is the great American myth that seeds our dreams, the individual can succeed.

Many of the American autobiographies are stories of success. Let us think that only the present is so obsessively self-oriented, let me quote for you the beginning of Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*: "As a constant good fortune has accompanied me to even an advanced period of life, my posterity will perhaps be desirous of learning the means, which I employed, and which, thanks to Providence, so well succeeded with me." Franklin may appear modest in invoking providence, but really what he is saying is this: "Let me tell you, folks, how I succeeded; you could learn from me." In fact, he continues on to say that his readers "may also deem" the means he employed as "fit to be imitated." Lee Iacocca’s *Iacocca* is born from the same impulse and perhaps his readers turn to his autobiography hoping to learn the secrets of his success.

Yet while much of what I have said about American autobiographies may apply to the list I have culled from *The New York Times Book Review*, the autobiographies that now make the best seller status are, I think, somewhat different. Let me confess, for instance, that except in my capacity as a chronicler of our times, these are not books that pique my interest. Northrop Frye writes in his *Anatomy of Criticism*: "Nearly always some theoretical and intellectual interest in religion, politics, or art plays a leading role in the confession. It is his success in integrating his mind on such subjects that makes the author of a confession feel that his life is worth writing about." I would argue that it is our anticipation of this kind of reflection in an autobiography that makes the book worth reading.

Yet, such expectations seem out of place for many of the books that now occupy pride of place on the best seller list. These writers are not describing lives of great magnitude or dealing with issues of great consequence or grappling with connections between their soul and their world or charting the development of a self-consciously evolving mind. Nor can I assume that I will be interested in the character of these writers as I am Rousseau’s or Montaigne’s or Charles Lamb’s. Autobiographies entice me because they are fascinating recreations of a self whose authenticity and validity I as a reader am called upon to affirm, a process which I expect will lead me to discoveries of my self, my time, my place. Such expectations, too, seem out of place from books from the best seller list.

What, then, are the expectations and delights that lead multitudes of today’s readers to such books? What interests do
they satisfy both of writers and their readers and what do they tell us of the culture within which such an enterprise thrives so well? All the writers are stars of some kind or another. Sometimes, as with a Jessica Hahn, the public limelight may only be there because of sexual misadventures with someone else who is a celebrity, but at the very least these are people whose names have been household words for a moment in time. These are memoirs where what is remembered is memorable largely by virtue of the situation or social status of the writers and not because of some intrinsic worth of the objects of memory or the mind that remembers. The exceptions are also revealing. Gilda Radner’s book describes her fight with cancer, her will to live, her courage under stress that evoke a personality one can admire. Yet we read her book less because of the nature of her story or character but more because of who she was—the star of the television and celluloid screen.

These always famous and usually rich (if not before the book then after the book) people are the substitute elite of this nation who serve us in lieu of a genuine elite. We have abandoned inherited titles and aristocracies of rank. But we still seek distinction and distinction, so it seems, in our minds is now equated with celebrity status. In some paradoxical way, our craving to read about lives of distinction, however this distinction is defined, is a function of the democratization of this culture. On the one hand, only in a democratic culture can everyone presume that what he or she has to say deserves the time and attention of others. As William Dean Howells said, autobiography is "the most democratic province in the republic of letters." On the other hand, it is also in a levelling democracy that so many ordinary lives would want to be touched by the glamor of lives lived in a different ambit. It is surely telling that even as we believe profoundly in the equal worth of all lives, we are nevertheless fascinated by those who are, in some visible way, a little better than equal. Equality is a fine but abstract moral concept. In an extremely competitive culture like ours, we expect—even want—some people to come out at the top of the heap, and those who have made it to the top, whatever the heap and whatever the reason, we find worthy of our interest.

At its best, autobiography humanizes the heroic and the extraordinary. People whose lives seem to be lived on a grander scale than ours become accessible and knowable because to read an autobiography is to share a life, to become a part of the life of the writer. We project our own life into the text, merging our own life with that of someone else. Saint Teresa of Avila records that when she read Saint Augustine’s Confessions she saw herself being described there. It is this desire to become part of the lives of the rich and famous, to achieve the voyeuristic pleasure of being someplace we could not be otherwise, that draws us to their books. George Burns’ best friends can become our best friends.

There is perhaps a less healthy form of levelling also going on here. Even as we enter the world of these stars, they are also, paradoxically, being brought down to our level. What a pleasure it is to discover that the motives and concerns and preoccupations of these high and mighty people are really no different from our own. How we relish the little sleazy exposures of self and others that liven these books for us. In fact, our delight at such exposure is so palpable and strong that it has helped spawn a whole sub-genre of kiss and tell books that have hit the best seller list this past decade. So many of these books are gossip on a grand scale and gossip is a wonderfully leveling activity. And gossip is also such an intimate activity, or at least one that offers a false sense of intimacy. Is it because our world offers so little genuine intimacy that we crave this spurious intimacy of gossip? Is it because our world offers so few genuine communities that we are so ready to become members of communities far away out there, communities where the price of membership is only the price of the book?

Nancy Reagan has said that she wrote My Turn for history and for her children, and, of course, to give "my side" of the story. But Random House, in having paid her a reputed three million dollars, knows better. The book is not going to sell because of our interest in history. We will read it because we’ll learn more about the White House china, about Don Regan, about Nancy’s and Ronnie’s relationship with their children, about Nancy’s hostilities towards Raisa Gorbachev, about maybe even the truth of her age (is she 67 or 65?). "What made Nancy Reagan’s book," says Lawrence Hughes, chairman of the Hearst Trade Group, "was Don Regan’s book" which disclosed that the Reagans consulted astrologers. Now we await the book from the astrologer.
Reel Realism

Edward Byrne

The intelligentsia have always had contempt for the realistic novel—a form that wallows so enthusiastically in the dirt of everyday life and the dirty secrets of class envy and that, still worse, is so easily understood and obviously relished by the mob, i.e., the middle class.

—Tom Wolfe

Good theater and good drama should move and shock you. You have to wake them up. Movies have gotten too cerebral.

—Oliver Stone

In the November, 1989, issue of Harper’s Magazine Tom Wolfe issued “a literary manifesto” (“Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel”) deploring the near abandonment of the realistic novel by American authors since the end of World War II. Wolfe concludes that “if fiction writers do not start facing the obvious, the literary history of the second half of the twentieth century will record that journalists not only took over the richness of American life as their domain but also seized the high ground of literature itself.” Throughout the article, Wolfe offers what he sees as evidence of the erosion of the power of the novel due to a turn towards absurdism, abstraction, and minimalism by many of America’s contemporary authors.

To perceptive readers these charges were not representative of new revelations, merely an enlargement of the collection of previous pictures depicting the literary situation in America presented by Wolfe, as well as others, ever since his publication of The New Journalism in 1973. Still, Wolfe’s manifesto has stirred a great deal of response, especially among American writers: some strongly in support of his stance, others irate at his attack on the current state of fiction, many animated in defense of themselves and articulate in defense of their fellow novelists. Already, writers as diverse as Margaret Atwood, Philip Roth, Walker Percy, Alison Lurie, Madison Smartt Bell, Mary Gordon, Scott Spencer, Jim Harrison, T. Coraghessan Boyle, and John Hawkes have answered invitations to join the fracas.

Clearly, it is not difficult to counter Wolfe’s blanket assertion that American novelists in the last half of the century have almost unanimously and uniformly fled from realist fiction: too many examples to the contrary exist. Nevertheless, it appears impossible to deny an implication which arises from Wolfe’s major contentions: the novel’s power to move individuals is no longer supreme among the narrative arts. As Wolfe states it, the novel has been displaced “as American literature’s ‘main event.’” Whether one agrees with his observation that “in at least four years out of five the best nonfiction books have been better literature than the most highly praised books of fiction” over the past twenty-five years, one must acknowledge that the impact of the novel on American attitudes, morals, values, customs, and politics has diminished, if not disappeared, since the works of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Lewis, Steinbeck, and others in the years between the World Wars. Society no longer looks towards its authors’ works of fiction or, for that matter, non-fiction for instant self-reflection and long-term guidance, except sometimes in an indirect manner as these works are adapted for, and adopted by, the silver screen. Film is the fictional, and at times non-fictional, narrative which best serves these purposes now.

For most Americans, the mirror reflecting today’s society and
the looking-glass offering the direction to be taken in tomorrow's world are clearly shown by those rectangular screens illuminating the movie theatres and living rooms of America. Characters in today's novels do not inspire changes in fashion as Lady Brett Ashley managed to do for many women in the late 1900s or define romantic relationships for all the way Jay Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan once did; instead, fashion follows the lead of film characters like Annie Hall, and the relationships between men and women are influenced by the way Harry treats Sally.

More importantly, our views of larger issues such as war or race relations are no longer presented through novels dominating national attention like those of Hemingway, or even Norman Mailer, and Ralph Ellison did at one time, but through films which create a nationwide stir of interest like those by directors such as Michael Cimino and Spike Lee.

This shift in influence from the novel to the cinema has occurred gradually since the end of World War II along with the migration of film crews off studio lots for on-location shooting, but has escalated in the last three decades since the institution of the ratings system on Hollywood films ironically allowed, and in most cases encouraged (in order to gain the more desirable R rating), moviemakers to be more bold in their depictions of the darker, dingier, and more dangerous sides of American society. Responding to the political and social turmoil of the times, American filmmakers sometimes reflected the sordid and cynical sides of of the nation's public figures or institutions, and spotlighted the events which at other times triggered, if not a revolution, at least a cultural evolution in the last thirty years.

At the same time, technological developments, such as the steadicam, allowed for the more intimate filmmaking appropriate for investigating the apparent contradictions and conflicts between the self and society in contemporary America. As a result, since the late sixties America's most powerful films have contained just those qualities Wolfe called for in his first manifesto of 1973, "a highly detailed realism...a realism more thorough than any currently being attempted, a realism that would portray the individual in intimate and inextricable relation to the society around him." In fact, American directors have been able to recreate the realism of contemporary society so well that they have virtually eliminated any possibility of novelists competing in the arena of realism for the minds and hearts of the American masses.

Mistakenly, Wolfe has concluded that those serious American authors who have abandoned the realistic novel have done so voluntarily and without coercion. On the contrary, many American novelists have determined that they almost have no choice: when one cannot compete in the arena of realism because the medium of film is so much more immediate and its verisimilitude so much more convincing, one must turn to a style which is served well by words rather than pictures and which cannot as easily be recreated by film—abstraction. Even some of those authors who have bravely adhered to realism in contemporary literature (Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, Ann Beattie, etc.) find themselves attacked by critics, including Wolfe, as "K-Mart Realists" because their descriptive writing styles have borrowed the images and icons of commercialized America normally associated with the visuals of film or television, because their minimalist constructions resemble film-scripts, and because their plots have tended to train their attention upon individual introspection, leaving lots of room for filmmakers to fill in their own visions of the surrounding society as they adapt these works for the vast scale of the motion-picture screen.

Of course, this is not the first time an art form has lost its position atop the cultural ladder. In the late-nineteenth century the novel, with its power and potential to offer more realistic narrative than the poem, captured more completely the attention of the reading public. Especially after the horrors of World War I, American audiences found the more realistic tales of their times as related in the novels of Hemingway and Fitzgerald far more compelling than the poetry of the era which had already abandoned realism to the novelists and turned toward the abstraction exemplified by modernists such as Eliot, Pound, and Stevens. In the visual arts, painters discovered as the twentieth century began that they could not compete with the verisimilitude of the photograph and—like their counterparts in poetry—moved away from realism through various stages from Cubism to Abstract Expressionism.

Theatre's position at the beginning of the century as the prime narrative offering spectacle suddenly was supplanted by the cinema, and so modern theatre moved more towards minimalism and abstraction. Even in the case of filmmaking, a strong argument would demonstrate, at least partially, that the relatively recent revival of emphasis upon realism in cinema by some of the country's best directors has been an attempt to compete with the current events witnessed daily on
The American director whose name emerges as often as anyone else's in current discussions of film realism is Oliver Stone. In the short span of five years, Stone has released a series of potent portraits of American social, cultural, and political upheaval which, as prescribed by Wolfe, have introduced an "individual in intimate and inextricable relation to the society around him," or which have presented "a slice of life, a cross section, that provided a true and powerful picture of individuals and society." The films which Stone has directed include the following: Salvador (1986), Platoon (1986), Wall Street (1987), Talk Radio (1988), and Born on the Fourth of July (1989).

Oliver Stone first received widespread recognition as a screenwriter when his screenplay for Midnight Express (1978) won an Academy Award. The uncompromising toughness of that script seemed to offer a promise for future screenwriting assignments. However, after a number of years of writing scripts fashioned for others' visions in films like Scarface (1983), Year of the Dragon (1985), and 8 Million Ways to Die (1986), Stone decided the only way to get his personal statements on the screen would be to write and direct the films himself.

Since the late 1970s, Stone had been carrying two scripts about the Vietnam War, Platoon and Born on the Fourth of July, from studio to studio and having doors closed in his face. Eventually, in 1985, one smaller film company, Hemdale, agreed to back Platoon; however, at the time, they would not pick up the second Vietnam script. One must remember that, although more than a decade had passed since the end of the war, by 1985 only three films about Vietnam had received any real critical recognition, Coming Home (1978), The Deer Hunter (1978), and Apocalypse Now (1979), none qualifying as a blockbuster at the box office. Hemdale was gambling on Platoon; it couldn't afford to take any greater chance by committing to two Vietnam epics. Also, Hemdale knew when it signed Stone that it was getting a director whose devotion to realism and belief in frank expression would counter all the unwritten rules which guided studio executives in their decisions about which scripts could turn into hit films.

Stone's attitudes toward filmmaking were formed in the seventies while he was a student in the film program at New York University, which seems to inspire a much greater respect and affection for realism in its graduates (including, most prominently, Stone, Martin Scorsese, and Spike Lee) than that created by its more famous California cousins, the film programs at USC and UCLA. Stone studied under NYU alumnus Scorsese, and worked with Scorsese on a number of projects, including the production of a 1970 student/faculty collaborative film, entitled Street Scenes, which chronicled college campus conflicts concerning race relations and anti-war activities, and followed political demonstrations from Wall Street to Washington. Like Scorsese, Stone saw filmmaking as a way of confronting viewers with those aspects of society which in ordinary living they perhaps had gone out of their way to avoid. Both Scorsese and Stone present a personal vision of society which appears to have been seen through a microscope: not only are the small flaws on the skin of society, which when viewed from afar disappear into the background, suddenly visible, but the germs beneath the surface of the body politic—the causes of social disease as well as the keys to any future cures—are offered, and in the case of historical films such as Platoon and Born on the Fourth of July even exhumed, for examination.

Born on the Fourth of July is Stone's most ambitious project and, therefore, is subject to some minor errors in judgment as his dialogue seems overly sentimental or stilted in a few scenes, yet it is the film which fulfills his promise as an important filmmaker willing to continue to assume the role as one of Hollywood's main risk-takers. In fact, one might be tempted to say that Purple-Heart Vietnam veterans Stone and Ron Kovic, upon whose experiences the movie focuses, earned the right to express a few sentimental moments just as they earned their stripes and combat badges; they might be considered part of the privileges which come after difficult battle. Although all of Stone's previous movies have achieved varied degrees of critical acclaim, and every one of them has challenged its audience to review the relationship between self and society, each had been limited by the controlled scope of an independent view of an individual experience. Salvador served up a journalist's solitary slant on American intervention in Central America. Platoon, masterpiece that it may be, offered, in Stone's own opinion, "a white boy's view of the war." Wall Street presented a young man's discovery about how a desire for the power of position and possession can easily cause corruption. And Talk Radio concentrated on the claustrophobic atmosphere in a radio studio as a confrontational late-night host of a conversation show discusses the controversial concerns of his city's citizens.
Paradoxically, despite Tom Cruise’s confinement to bed, body cast, or wheelchair throughout most of the film in his role as Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* moves beyond the barriers imposed by an individual experience and widens the horizon far enough to encompass at least six separate stories: the adolescent romanticism of wartime activities, the harsh reality of war’s horrors, the inadequate rehabilitation of the wounded, the awkward reintroduction of the veteran to the old world of family or friends, the painful rejection of the warrior by certain sectors of the society for which he felt he’d fought, and the ultimate refusal by some brave soldiers to withdraw from the battle on the homefront so that the truth about the war would be heard by all.

Ironically, in order for those truths to finally be heard by all, Ron Kovic’s book, like other fiction and non-fiction books today, had to be translated to the more immediate, more powerful medium of film. In a recent issue of *The New York Times Book Review*, Molly Haskell, in a front-page article (“Is It Time to Trust Hollywood?”) observing the changing relationship between film and the novel, Hollywood and the novelist, reports producer Peter Guber as saying, “If only the people who read the book go to the movie, the movie is a disaster: 200,000 read *The Witches of Eastwick*, two million may read a best seller—still a drop in the bucket in movie audience terms.” Haskell, herself, states that, despite her reservations about the relationship between film and the novel, about Hollywood’s infatuation with “star magic,” she has to admit that “Tom Cruise gives a stunning performance, and without a star, a charismatic presence, what audience would want to follow a Vietnam veteran into the quagmire of loss and desperation and physical ruin that paraplegia represents?” Although she misses the point that what moves the audience is more the power of the medium shaped by the hands of an adept director than the star, (as Stone’s earlier works without box-office stars seem to confirm), Haskell does concede with apparent reluctance the power and popularity of the form. To borrow from the language of Tom Wolfe, one might say it appears that still today many of the intelligentsia have contempt for the realist cinema—a form that wallows so enthusiastically in the dirt of everyday life and the dirty secrets of class envy and that, still worse, is so easily understood and obviously relished by the mob, i.e., the middle class.” However, it has become clear that film has overtaken the novel as the instrumental, and influential, form for literature today.

In his manifesto, Tom Wolfe, in apparent despair over the loss of the power of the novel in contemporary times, declares that “America today, in a headlong rush of her own, may or may not truly need a literature worthy of her vastness.” *Born on the Fourth of July* was released in the end of December, making it eligible for the Academy Award it so rightfully deserves (no other American movie of the last year even compares to this one), but went into nationwide release in January. However, whether one regards it as the last great film of the eighties or the first fine film of the nineties seems to matter little. In any case, Oliver Stone’s *Born on the Fourth of July* stands out as an excellent example of how directors of realist cinema are supplying for contemporary America “a literature worthy of her vastness” and are delivering to all of American society, whether or not we are willing to admit it, the influential literature of our future.

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