Paul says this in all of his letters, whenever he refers to these things—some of his writing is hard to understand; ignorant and insecure people distort his words, just as they twist the rest of the scriptures, and they destroy themselves in the process.
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Knowing and Doing

Last night's news showed pictures I never expected to see; in fact, they were pictures I think I have been taught all my life I would never see. The camera was angled up at one of those Russian balconies, and there in front of the huge crowd in the square were—not a row of solemn gentlemen in overcoats and fur hats—but instead, three Orthodox priests, chanting prayers of thanksgiving for the failure of the coup. At least that is what the commentator said they were doing. Down in the square, people were crossing themselves, heads bowed, some lips moving in what the calm voice of the newswoman said was prayer.

By the time I started to school in 1946, what we used to call "the Russians" were already our enemies. I was never politically astute, but that's what you called the worst kids on the playground. One reason they were so bad is that they were godless. By the time I was in high school, in the mid-fifties, a standard church event was the evening talk by the Heroic Escaped (Latvian/Lithuanian/Estonian/Hungarian/Czech) Person. Some of these speakers were Lutheran, but I assume every denomination had its own version. While the Ladies Aid served coffee (thoughtfully provided by AAL), a fatigued middle-aged man in rumpled suit and a tie the wrong width told us about the other side of the world and what was wrong there. We shuddered.

I do not by any means wish to imply that what those people said was untrue. (Though John leCarre has done a number on one version of the travelling refugee shows in a brilliant chapter of his latest book, The Secret Pilgrim.) Nor do I wish to belittle their experience. It is undoubtedly true that they were victims of a brutally repressive state system which had attempted to exclude God from the minds and lives of a people.

What now gives me pause, as I attempt to cope with the changing picture of the world I thought I knew labels for, are the uses our government found for those victims. As victims, they demonstrated something that needed demonstrating, and I certainly believed it for a long time. But God did not leave the minds and lives of people in Russia, just because they lived under (note the preposition) godless communism. The people I saw on the news last night saying prayers of thanks were born after 1919.

We are so very limited in what we can know, and so subject to the misunderstandings born of distance and difference, and to the manipulations of those with the power to tell us things or keep us from knowing them. These limitations, our own version of the Tower of Babel, provide us with ample reasons for caution in making pronouncements about world affairs.

Which leads me neatly to this issue, with its two lead articles occasioned by Glenn Tinder's book, The Political Meaning of Christianity. Last spring, The Cresset Colloquium met for several discussions of the book. The five articles generated by these discussions will appear this fall, the first two in this issue. Both these articles point to Tinder's earnest desire that we should recognize the limitations on our ability to know. Given these limitations, how ready can or should or must we be to act within the world's structures for action?

I had thought that these two pieces would suffice for this discussion, and that readers could then move on to other topics for the rest of the issue. But as I studied the pieces I had chosen for the other pages, the same themes began to circle back. Will a consideration of Flannery O'Connor's story "The Displaced Person" allow us to avoid questions of Christian piety and social action? Hardly. Pamela Schwandt's literary essay places us firmly in the context of Christian ethics. Gus Sponberg contributes a column for Campus Diary. Surely here we will be safe from the nagging questions of living rightly? No, and neither are we allowed to slide off into frivolity when we consider film or theatre, for our columnists here also bring to our attention the issues of community action and individual liberty that Tinder's book considers. Because we intend to keep the wider world within our vision whenever we can, we were pleased to have a letter from Celeste Duder, teaching in Chad, and learning about complacency and choices. And so, to complete the issue, Richard Brauer and I chose some selections from an upcoming exhibition drawn from the lively and beautiful new book 3:16: Bible Texts Illuminated. I am pleased by the way they both sum up and open out the discussion.

Peace,

GME
The Singing  
(To Mr. Laferla, who told me to read a book)

I

The day Mr. Laferla asked me to do an impromptu speech I knew my four years of high school silence were over.

Students’ eyes were glazed and some sat in snow and some in rain while two polished cars and a girl knitted and took off her clothes in front of me.

"...the plane was lost in the blizzard and I knew we would crash."

The naked girl pulled her knitted thing over her shoulders and looked at me. The car polishers threw their rags on the hood.

"...my only memory was the pain in my shoulder."

(Mr. Laferla raised an eyebrow)

"...it was some time before I saw them, riding slowly, slowly, out of the snow... they pulled me out of the wreckage and buried the others... my parents... they buried them in the snow... I couldn’t even tell where... the snow piled up and up."

The students in the rain stopped it. The glazed eyes cleared; a boy coughed, hand to mouth, frightened.

"...the ride through the pass was hard... I fell asleep and woke to find the wind and snow whipping the horses... suddenly the pass opened to a valley... warm... with birds singing."

The rest of the story I borrowed from Hilton went in a hush with the class breathing birds and warm weather and lovely girls bringing baskets of yellow fruit and green birds flying in red skies.

The bell rung but they sat looking at nothing.

Mr. Laferla had shut his eyes and the girl was fully clothed in light and the boys were in suits and ties. The rain was exposed in sheets of negatives above their heads and I was free.

II

Since then Inglewood High School seems another world, and indeed it was, as I stumbled around waiting to be asked or to be told to give back the magic. But we didn’t do that at school—that was something that happened in vacant lots or in dark movie houses where we dreamed the hero’s dream and listened for sounds in the walls in our rooms at night wondering if the world were really our dream.

Now that was over. Some chrysalis was cracked forever, and the one book I read in four years brought us all up from the deep well we lived in, out of the tyranny of things we held sacred.

No one talked to me to say they knew I hadn’t made it up. No one asked me if it was a book. There were no signs they would remember that day the class was transformed, changed into something other, clean, bright. But they didn’t have to talk to me. I wouldn’t have heard them, because the singing was in me then.

J.T. Ledbetter
TINDER’S MEANING: CAN A CHRISTIAN BE POLITICALLY INACTIVE?

It is rare to change one’s critical assessment of a book based on a second reading, especially if the first judgment is fundamentally negative. After finishing Glenn Tinder’s well-publicized work, *The Political Meaning of Christianity*, my initial assessment was so generally dismissive that I wondered how in the world it could be receiving so much attention among ethicists, church historians, and other thoughtful people concerned with the relations between religion and politics. So I somewhat reluctantly decided to work my way through the book a second time. And to my considerable surprise, I began to alter some of my judgments and conclude that, despite very serious flaws in his presentation, Tinder does have something of value to say about the proper relations between Christian faith and public life.

The fact that his fundamental views on this question are out of favor among many contemporary Christian scholars and intellectuals—as the discussions in *The Cresset* symposium demonstrated—ought not, I finally decided, lead us to dismiss or condemn Tinder’s perspectives as completely illegitimate. The book does not provide a key to the political meaning of Christianity, but it is especially valuable for what it says about two areas where religion and politics intersect. First, it provides a strong case for the sweeping political implications of Christianity’s teachings concerning the value of the human person. And second, it offers a strong argument for the central importance for Christians of approaching the political world with the proper attitude, particularly what Tinder calls an awareness of “suffering as action.”

Before examining these two arguments, however, let me first summarize Tinder’s work as a whole, and then point out some of the serious flaws that make it easy to overlook the book’s positive contributions. As its title suggests, *The Political Meaning of Christianity* attempts to engage the fundamental theoretical questions concerning the relation of religious faith to politics. What, if anything, should the church as church say or do about controverted political issues? How is what a religious community says or does about politics related to its central spiritual values? To what extent should individual Christians or Christian groups be affected by what their churches say or do (or do not do) about political issues?

In the last fifteen years or so, most theoretical reflection on these matters has come from two opposing religious-political camps. On the one hand, some neoconservative intellectuals who have strongly disagreed with what they see as growing politicization within many Christian churches have argued that most political pronouncements and activism are theoretically ill-grounded and morally arrogant. On the other hand, many liberation and feminist theologians—in North America as well as Latin America—have made serious attempts to interpret central Christian teachings in ways that make their political consequences unavoidable.

Part of what makes Tinder’s book something of a sport in the contemporary context is that it comes from neither of these fairly well-defined positions. Rather, it represents a theological and political position that was once quite prevalent in North America but has been little heard from of late: a moderate or centrist liberalism. Starting from what he claims is an “undogmatic and orthodox” Reformation Protestantism, Tinder attempts to define what he takes to be “the most distinctive Christian insights into human nature” and apply them to the central importance for Christians of approaching the political world with the proper attitude, particularly what Tinder calls an awareness of “suffering as action.”

Before examining these two arguments, however, let me first summarize Tinder’s work as a whole, and then point out some of the serious flaws that make it easy to overlook the book’s positive contributions. As its title suggests, *The Political Meaning of Christianity* attempts to engage the fundamental theoretical questions concerning the relation of religious faith to politics. What, if anything, should the church as church say or do about controverted political issues? How is what a religious community says or does about politics related to its central spiritual values? To what extent should individual Christians or Christian groups be affected by what their churches say or do (or do not do) about political issues?

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Part of what makes Tinder’s book something of a sport in the contemporary context is that it comes from neither of these fairly well-defined positions. Rather, it represents a theological and political position that was once quite prevalent in North America but has been little heard from of late: a moderate or centrist liberalism. Starting from what he claims is an “undogmatic and orthodox” Reformation Protestantism, Tinder attempts to define what he takes to be “the most distinctive Christian insights into human nature” and apply them to the political world. His aim, he says, is to lessen the “confusion” that arises among ordinary Christians when they are beset with claims that their faith entails advocacy of some particular political or economic system, e.g., free enterprise or socialism.

Tinder’s approach to this enterprise is to adumbrate the essential outlook that Christians ought to take regarding all political matters, which he calls the “prophetic stance.” However, Tinder defines the pervasive term “prophetic” quite differently than its normal usage in religious-political discourse. Rather
than a signalling a clarion call of divinely inspired certitude—one mark of the scriptural prophetic tradition—Tinder asserts that true prophecy is characterized by a tone of modesty and ambiguity regarding human knowledge of God’s will for the world. "The prophetic stance," he says, "means offering one’s own weakness as medium for the sovereignty of God in history." True prophecy arises in those human beings who feel themselves "inadequate to the demands of historical circumstances," and who therefore necessarily remain somewhat distant from immediate political battles.

Contrasting this approach with the more engaged religious politics of both right and left, Tinder argues that the prophetic stance "requires human beings to be politically serious yet forbids them to join unreservedly in any of the collective activities that make up the visible political life of the human race." [emphasis mine] As biblical justification for this attitude, he adduces the Pauline texts that proclaim "the appointed time has grown very short," and call on Christians to deal with the world as if they had no dealings with it, "for the form of this world is passing away."

From this fundamental perspective, Tinder proceeds to develop in separate chapters the major themes that define the political position (or, more accurately, the outlook on all political positions) that he advocates. Christianity, he says, stands for "the exaltation of the individual," represented by the incarnation and proclaimed in the gospel message regarding the salvation of each soul. It presents a stance of "prophetic hope," sustained within an eschatological community traveling through a world that is soon to pass away. It upholds a banner of free will and individual liberty, derived from the essential capacity of human beings to freely choose or reject the message of salvation. And perhaps most importantly, Christianity draws its adherents toward a "prophetic spirituality" that transcends both the ideologically inspired yearning for a morally certain politics (which Tinder sees as the characteristic failing of most "Christian" politics, right and left) as well as a completely passive inaction (the kind of pietistic quietism that simply tries to escape the world of political and moral conflict by ignoring it).

Instead, Christianity ultimately leads, Tinder argues, toward an outlook that he calls "political suffering," in which the seemingly "passive" experience of suffering is undertaken in solidarity with other suffering human beings for their sake—just as Christ did in his passion. This suffering is indeed "political" precisely because much of it is engendered by the cruelties and injustices that arise from oppressive political systems or the lack of any decent political order in a sinful world. But by its very refusal to strike back or act according to the ordinary norms of politics, this Christian political suffering points to a realm of transcendence beyond that of any human or temporal political order.

If this summary accurately conveys what I take to be Tinder’s fundamental religious-political outlook, one can immediately see that it is neither a simple-minded nor easily classifiable religious-political position. However, a great deal of the difficulty even a sympathetic reader has in assessing the value of *The Political Meaning of Christianity* arises not only from its rather turgid and diffuse style, but from serious deficiencies it exhibits as a work of Christian political theory.

First, Tinder appears to be only minimally engaged or even acquainted with what one might call the central traditions of Christian political and social thought—from Augustine to Aquinas to Calvin to Troeltsch (to mention only a few names)—that would commonly provide at least the reference points for any constructive contemporary theory. Indeed, it is even debatable whether this is at all a work of political theory in any ordinary sense, i.e., one that presents a persuasive analysis of the central political questions of social order, authority, sovereignty, law, and the state that must necessarily engage all serious political thinkers, Christian or otherwise.

If Tinder is familiar with the standard literature of political thought, Christian and secular, he has appropriated hardly any of it in any very careful or useful way into his own constructive analysis, by way of either support or critique. His treatment of others’ positions on numerous matters—including what he calls "the Catholic view" [emphasis mine] on various issues is frequently simplistic, over-generalized, or simply mistaken. His grasp even of figures whose outlook he claims to share—for example, Martin Luther, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Merton—is often elementary or careless. I do not know, for example, any Lincoln text that could be taken as justification for the claim that the Emancipator was "sustained by an assurance of God’s forgiveness," an assurance Lincoln allegedly "did not claim for himself alone but also for his opponents." The Second Inaugural actually broaches the theory of the Civil War as a divine retribution on America for the national sin of slavery—a rather different view.

Tinder is even worse in treating the views of those he opposes. The broad polemic against the evils of "secularism" he delivers is not much better than what one gets in popular evangelicalism. The great nineteenth-century deicides—Marx, Nietzsche, and
Freud—appear only as cartoons, simplistic foils whose profound criticisms of religion, including its political and social consequences, are never seriously engaged, as they must be by any religious social thinker not preaching to the choir. And liberation and feminist theologians are not even granted the dignity of being criticized by name or citations from their readily available works: instead, over-generalized versions of their positions are first caricatured and then dismissed with assertion rather than argument. Thus, even if it is true, as Tinder contends, that liberation theologians display “moral naivete” and take “too little account of human fallenness,” it is patronizing and unpersuasive to present the reader with such a conclusion in only two apodictic paragraphs.

This disinclination to think along with others, even to refute them, is really a symptom of what one might call a lack of ecclesiology in Tinder’s theology—and hence in his political stance. There is in the book hardly any consciousness of the Christian churches as actual communities of faith existing today in various societies and politics, and faced with the task of developing common approaches to the particular social environment in which they live. There is even less sense of the whole Christian church as an historic “people of God,” with a continuous life and authoritative tradition grafted from covenantal Judaism and stretching through time from the apostolic age to the present. Without some such theological and historical sense of ecclesiology, it seems to me, it is extremely difficulty to think very clearly about Scripture, tradition, or normative authority—on politics or any other question addressed by religion.

These, then, are some of the weaknesses that led me to turn thumbs down on the book the first time through. To some readers—including some in The Cresset colloquium—they may appear so damning as to completely obviate any value whatsoever. Yet after revisiting the text I came to think this assessment a mistake. And as our colloquium proceeded, I found myself increasingly in the position of trying, not necessarily to defend Tinder (for I disagree with many of his views), but to show how certain crucial points he makes might serve as valuable corrective to some common tendencies in contemporary religious-political discourse. Whatever their starting point, all Christian approaches to the relation of religion and politics would be enriched, I think, if they attended more carefully to Tinder’s emphasis on, 1) the political significance of Christian personalism, and 2) the possibilities of passive sympathetic action as a response to the manifold political evils of the world.

In a time when individual liberty often seems linked to social irresponsibility, Tinder provides a valuable reminder of the high place a proper regard for individual personhood must have on any scale of Christian social values. As already noted, Tinder’s approach is an extraordinarily individualistic one. He insists throughout the book, for example, that the “prophetic stance” is never something that can be adopted by a community, but only by individual persons. “It is essential to the political stance that it is maintained only by individuals,” he says. “It is not a standard for group action.... Standing prophetically means being not only without set plans but without power. The individual is solitary and exposed.” However, the very condition that leads Tinder to see the human person as weak, naked, and shivering before the awful forces of history and power politics—the salvific mission and acts of Christ—is also what creates, he emphasizes, the fundamental Christian regard for all human beings not as citizens or social-historical actors, but as religiously “exalted individuals.” Once the Christian understands that he or she must “rely, in one’s own weakness, on the strength of God,” then “the exaltation of the individual becomes the ruling purpose of history.”

“The exaltation of the individual” is a most unfortunate phrase, since it implies a kind of atomism or glorification of personality that is quite different from what I think Tinder means. But if one translates it as something like “the unique and transcendent dignity of each human person,” then Tinder is indeed underscoring what I would take to be one fundamental presupposition of a Christian approach to the political world: namely, that every individual human person in the world has an ascribed worth of infinite value that transcends all circumstances of political power, social location, or intellectual capacity. The worth of the individual is given, in religious understanding, not as a consequence of human societies’ arranged valuations, but by virtue of each person’s creation in the image of God and redemption by Christ.

While Tinder’s argument on this point is frequently opaque, he is essentially right to see it as a crucial starting point for any distinctively Christian reflection on politics and social ethics. A central question that such reflection must then proceed to answer can be framed as this: what are the implications, if any, for the political and social order of the Christian conviction that every human being is infinitely precious and completely equal in the eyes of God? Or, to put it another way, to what extent ought Christians attempt to realize this spiritually derived conception of transcendent human dignity in the functional social and political arrangements of the world?
These questions become most pointed and difficult in relation to issues of political and economic equality. Tinder's discussion of equality is valuable not because it is conclusive, but because it raises all the right issues. He essentially follows the strong strand of Christian political theory that argues that the "invisible and immeasurable" condition of human equality before God cannot, without terrible distortion, be translated into complete political, social, or economic equality in the world. Not only are there radical natural inequalities among people—inelligence, emotional balance, geographic circumstance, and so on—but some substantial inequality of political power and wealth is "a structural necessity of the social order."

The proper Christian approach to the issue of equality, Tinder argues, is not to try to translate equality before God automatically into social equality, but in a sense to "see through" the inherent inequalities of society to the underlying equal personhood shared by people of all social conditions. Such a perspective encourages Christians to work to reduce grossly tyrannical or discriminatory social inequalities that deny fundamental human dignity, without really expecting that such inevitable products of humanity's sinfulness will ever be eliminated.

Tinder is right, I think, that it is essential to maintain this distinction between the ascribed, a priori equality of human beings before God and the quest for whatever degree of equality we might seek to realize in human societies. He unfortunately minimizes, however, the substantial political difference that a belief in "equality of personhood" must make in what might be called the "social attentiveness" devoted to those persons who are weak, poor, or oppressed by society. Human society regularly—and perhaps inevitably—values some people more highly than others. As Hobbes rather brutally but accurately puts it, a human's being's purely functional "worth" to society can in effect be calculated by the "price" that society is willing to pay for each person's social performance. A highly skilled electrical engineer, for example, will inevitably be valued economically and socially higher than, say, an unskilled cancer victim. A highly talented artist or musician will be in more social and economic demand than a child care worker.

But does it not therefore follow that a religious community with a principle of valuation derived from outside society must, if it is true to its conviction, stand as a kind of counter-weight to the political and economic hierarchies of the world? It would seem to be part of the church's function in society to throw whatever political and social weight it possesses into the public world, not in order to seek power for itself or in expectation of creating some utopian social order of perfect equality, but in order to minimize the damage inevitably done by society to those without power, wealth, or status. It must therefore insist, in the political arena and elsewhere, that the poor of body, mind and spirit—the retarded, the senile, the alcohol-and-drug afflicted, for instance—be granted at least the minimum of social dignity required by the fact that they, no less than the successful and powerful, are divine creations in the image of God, despite all appearances. The goal would thus be not so much the attainment of economic or social equality, but the creation of a minimum floor under the social order beneath which no human person ought to be permitted to fall. The gap between this ideal and present conditions among those who are homeless, prisoners, and mentally ill in this country is all too evident.

Of course it can be said that the spiritual equality of persons is not at all contingent on any Christian social action. A person who is retarded, poor, oppressed, or held in slavery is already completely equal before God to any comfortable, well-educated citizen or powerful politician. But if the assertion of this truth by those who claim a Christian worldview is not to be merely a pious rhetorical gesture, it must issue in some kind of public stance with consequences for the real world. Tinder's admirable emphasis on transcendent individual worth as a foundational Christian political value may thus imply a more vigorous communal social witness by the church than he endorses.

A second valuable perspective Tinder develops, especially near the end of The Political Meaning of Christianity, is his emphasis on "sympathetic passive action" as an appropriate Christian response to politically caused suffering in the world. He develops, with some exaggeration, the argument that many of the instincts that drive political activists to try to transform the world reflect pride in their own moral powers and "modern indifference to spirituality" as much as genuine concern for social victims. Even when seemingly motivated by the highest religious ideals, political action is subject to sinful self-assertion. "Where action is carried on under an illusion of innocence," he contends, "sin is apt to be particularly pretentious and unrestrained."

Yet Tinder also points out that the alternative of perpetual inaction in relation to political and social evils can be equally fraught with moral danger. The person who attempts to maintain a purely personal piety and stay above the political fray tends to develop a "false illusion of infinitude," and to become less
aware of his or her moral responsibility for people around them, particularly victims of systematic social injustice. People who try not to become too involved in politics also develop a false sense of their own clean superiority to the morally muddy political world. "To refrain from consciously siding with any of the unsatisfactory alternatives before me allows me to suppose that I am morally uncommitted," Tinder says. "Being unaware of occupying any particular position, I do not feel vulnerable to any of the criticism to which any particular position is always exposed. The guilt most often obscured by such illusions of innocence is probably that of complicity in the evils maintained and perpetuated by one's own society and government."

If both political activism and political indifference are thus so seriously flawed, what then is the alternative? Tinder proposes that it is a distinctively Christian perception of the sympathetic act of suffering with other people in a way that identifies one's own condition with theirs. Quoting T.S. Eliot's "striking dictum that 'action is suffering/suffering is action,'" Tinder argues that the most distinctive Christian insight, derived from an understanding of Christ's redemptive work, is that "suffering can be carried on for others, just as action can." The result is that Christians can serve social victims' needs, not primarily by attempting to transform the world through political action, but by engaging in what he calls "political suffering" on their behalf, by identifying with their plight and sharing in their sorrows. Although this form of "sympathetic sharing" may not seem as efficacious as direct social action, Tinder contends that nevertheless "the consequences may be political; suffering may accomplish things that we try to accomplish also through political action."

Tinder does not really spell out what this perspective might mean concretely in terms of a Christian response to specific social conditions. However, it is not difficult to extrapolate from these provocative insights something like the approach, also developed by some varieties of Latin American liberation theology, in which, for example, more affluent Christians move into poverty stricken neighborhoods subject to violent repression, knowing that authorities are reluctant to act against those with more social standing and resources. In such cases, the seemingly passive act of sympathetically sharing the circumstances of the poor or oppressed—and if necessary suffering with them—in fact serves the political purpose of restraining cruder forces of power.

If something like this is what Tinder espouses as a particularly Christian approach to political life, then I think it might represent, at least in principle, a path of social thought that could be fruitfully explored as an alternative to varieties of unqualified religious activism and pietistic quietism. For Tinder is certainly onto something when he argues that for many of those who engage in serious politics, even out of the highest religious motives, the stakes of the game seem so compelling that they become completely invested in achieving the desired political results. In religious terms, political activists almost unconsciously place metaphysical meanings and demands on certain concrete results that they identify with God's justice or righteousness or will for the world. Tinder's approach, whatever its weaknesses or temptation toward passivity, represents a valuable check on this impulse. To practice social concern in the public world with a readiness to experience deprivation and a complete unwillingness to calculate the results requires, as Tinder says, great humility and trust in a divine will beyond human control.

Many of the dilemmas concerning the moral ambiguity of political action that Tinder invokes are familiar to American Christians from the writings of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr was just as aware as Tinder of the "sinfulness" attendant to political engagement, but he argued throughout his life that Christianity nevertheless required bold and committed forms of political and social action on behalf of "prophetic justice."

But it is significant that Reinhold Niebuhr's equally brilliant theological brother, H. Richard Niebuhr, disagreed quite strongly about the exact relation of political activism to Christianity. This disagreement was focused most famously near the beginning of their careers in a disagreement over the proper Christian response to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931. In The Christian Century, Reinhold argued strongly that the churches ought to support sanctions against Japan. In a response entitled, "The Grace of Doing Nothing," H. Richard Niebuhr objected strongly to his brother's "impatient" religious-political activism regarding worldly crises, and proposed instead an "activity of radical Christianity" characterized by "a patience full of hope... based on faith" that he distinguished from both political activism per se and resigned inactivity. I think there is reflected, in the best portions of Tinder's The Political Meaning of Christianity, a religious sensibility and sense of social understanding similar to H. Richard Niebuhr's. This outlook ought not be taken as the definitive solution to the perpetual problem of religion and politics. But it is a perspective worth hearing and taking seriously.
IF MEN WERE ANGELS:
CHOICES MADE IN A WORLDLY-WORLD

Richard Balkema

It is now slightly more than one year since military forces of Iraq's Saddam Hussein crossed Iraq's southern frontier to invade the small country of Kuwait. In a remarkably short period of time, measured in hours, Iraq's military had succeeded in completely occupying Kuwait and had begun to poise its forces for what appeared to American intelligence analysts as a possible attack on the oil-rich kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Iraq's attack set in motion a flurry of diplomatic activity on the part of the Bush administration. Stating that Hussein's attack would not be allowed to stand, the American President had, by Woodward's report at least, very quickly given his "word of honor" to a member of Saudi Arabia's royal family that the United States would take the steps necessary to block any Iraqi aggression against Saudi Arabia (241).

After intense lobbying by the Americans, several resolutions were adopted by the United Nations, one of which called for economic sanctions against Iraq. Simultaneously, through personal negotiations, President Bush began to assemble an international coalition of nations whose leaders were in substantial agreement with the American position on the Iraqi question.

It was later in the fall of 1990 that President Bush's publicly stated position on the Iraqi problem began to change. There were reports that economic sanctions against Iraq were not working as successfully as hoped, that the use of military force could not be ruled out as a possibility, and that President Bush possibly even intended to "kick Saddam's butt." By mid-December the President had gained support for the use of military force against Iraq from the United Nations, the United States Congress, and, if public opinion polls were an accurate reflection of the sentiment of Americans, the American people as well.

Throughout this period language used clearly was not the language of patience, of charity, of mercy, or of peace. Rather, it was the language of a worldly-world's political leader whose rhetoric ultimately would be followed by:

—Calling up of members of American military reserve units.
—Highly accurate bombings of Kuwait as well as Iraqi military targets preceding a land assault of coalition nations' troops against Iraqi forces.
—A rapid withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, leaving behind between 500 and 700 burning oil wells the smoke of which has on occasion blotted out the sun and whose economic costs to Kuwait are substantial, to say the least.
—Lakes of oil burning out of control in Kuwait.
—Nearly 5,000,000 refugees roaming about the Middle East.
—The almost total destruction of Iraq's infrastructure.
—Thousands of starving and/or malnourished children, particularly among the Kurds of northern Iraq.
—"Collateral" bomb damage which took the lives of scores of civilians, many of which were children.
—The regime of Saddam Hussein as entrenched as it was prior to Operation Desert Storm, with approximately one-half of his standing army remaining and unknown amounts of nuclear weapons material at his disposal.

As some of the above and other events were unfolding between August, 1990, and the first wave of bombing attacks in January, 1991, I recall wondering to myself whether world leaders, particularly the Americans, had exhausted all options humanly possible before deciding to going to war. Hadn't the Americans waited more or less patiently several years for the government of South Africa to alter its racist system of apartheid while economic sanctions were being employed against it? Now, in less than six months, modifying its original policy position, it was determined that economic sanctions weren't working, that military force was the only remaining option.

On another note I wondered what had ever happened to the military during the Reagan years that would require calling up the "minute men" (and

Richard Balkema, Professor of Political Science at VU, has put theories of political activity into practice in a small, nearby Indiana town. He remains bloody, but unbowed.

The Cresset
women) to be deployed to a region of immense American geopolitical importance, but which is of even greater importance to some, notably the Japanese and the Germans, than to the Americans? What was the purpose of it all? Finally, and frankly most cynically of all, in a politically Skinneresque world of "power phrases," "pulse scores," and Presidential public opinion support, I asked whether the military course of action had been decided from the very beginning and simply carefully scripted, packaged, staged, and presented to the American people? And, what of the future?

As a consequence of "Operation Desert Storm," several additional questions must be asked, the answers to which have long-range consequences for Americans. What, for example, are to be the roles of women as members of the American military? What are America's responsibilities for maintaining the relative tranquility of the Persian Gulf secured through what must be regarded as one of history's most successful military operations? Are the Americans to stand at the ready to serve as the "world's policeman" in other mid-intensity conflicts? If so, for what reasons and what are possible long-range strategic planning considerations associated with such a decision? What are America's responsibilities in helping to enforce other resolutions of the United Nations, notably Resolution 242 which calls for Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories? In specific and concrete terms, what types and levels of commitment will be required of Americans for the creation of a "new world order"? What might be the possible expenses of the "new world order" in comparison to those for America's children and their education, housing, health, the environment, and other domestic problems? Will there be less space on the policy agenda for them? And how, standing between what Glenn Tinder describes as "fanaticism" and "cynicism" (13) might the individual approach these questions?

More than two hundred years ago James Madison wrote that "If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary" (322). Madison and others proposed a set of institutional arrangements in which ambition would "be made to counteract ambition" (322). Although I am reasonably certain that Tinder would be in agreement with Madison's observation that men are not angels, humanly structured institutional arrangements are not the most appropriate answer to humanity's less than angelic behavior, its fallenness. For, if government isn't the problem as we have come to be told it is in recent years, then it and society are a reflection of what is. A far better answer lies in what Tinder describes as the "prophetic stance," central to which lies the faith statement that:

In the mystery of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, all of the guilt and hatred dividing human beings from God and from one another have been overcome.

The political meaning of Christianity is implicit in this faith. God has established his solidarity with the human race and with all of its members; in consequence every person is exalted and glorified.... The dignity of the individual, often ineffective and even trite as a human ideal, becomes the law of all being and history. It is thus the source of all political obligations. (7)

Thus, a fallen humanity results in a necessity for order that is reflected in the presence of society and government. Simultaneously, because of Divine reconciling love, the fallen is also the exalted, the dignified individual (35). It is in community, a place where the search for Truth takes place, that the individual is exalted, treated as a child of God and loved in an absolutely no-strings-attached or "what's in it for me" manner, that love called by Christians agape. (54). Whereas, it is in and through the institutions of society and government, organized principally for the purposes of economic and military efficiency (62) that the same fallen but exalted person is depersonalized, objectified, even mutilated (40). Standing between community and society, what is that fallen yet exalted and dignified child of God to do?

Arguing that "the time has come to think much more critically about human action" (14), Tinder proposes what he describes as the "prophetic stance" which means, in part, "...waiting for God. I stress the term waiting. Waiting expresses hope. Community is the fruit of hope" (68). To wait prophetically "...is only to hesitate until the commands of God are heard... "(200). It is an attitude which is skeptical, questioning, discriminating, even aloof and defiant (11). Yet, taking the prophetic stance also means being communicative and responsible (11). It is an attitude which is particularly questioning of society in which the quest for status and power predomi­nates over the quest for community (57). The prophetic stance includes the attitude which knows that governments "rarely deserve much respect" (211). Although Tinder places stress on the waiting for God in history, the individual in the prophetic stance also is attentive and, I stress, available (69). Available for what? To do what? Available "...to attack injustices in the world around us" (66). Poverty, for example, is regarded by Tinder as "a shame and an outrage" in the
face of which we "do not acquiesce" (202). The person
taking a prophetic stance is not quietistic. While he or
she does hesitate, is skeptical and discriminating, they are
at the same time available; available to resist, even
to the point of carrying out acts of disobedience in
resisting injustices (209-210; 64).

Speaking from the perspective of one who has
both studied and participated in politics for the greater
part of my life, I find much that is encouraging in
Tinder's placing emphasis both on waiting in
community where there is a search for the truth, as
well as being attentive and available to act. However, I
am troubled by the distinct possibility that a
questioning and hesitating posture originating in
agape, in reality, could simply be the prudence or
caution of those in government or, worse possibly,
become my personal benign neglect of the injustices
of which Tinder speaks.

Earlier I observed that in a remarkably short
period of time the Bush administration had
substantially modified its policy choice of imposing
economic sanctions against Iraq in what I thought was
an effort to prepare the American people for military
conflict. Although I was personally distressed at the
time that sanctions had not been given a greater
opportunity to work, I can't help but wonder what the
situation might be today if Mr. Bush had waited before
launching his military campaign. Would an obviously
ruthless Iraqi regime have invaded Saudi Arabia?
And, if so, what are the implications of that for
Americans and others? Would Hussein have received
much needed time to develop further his nuclear
weapons capability? If so, what are the implications of
that possibility for other nations of the world?
Clearly, political power is not exercised in a vacuum.
Waiting and questioning on the part of one prince will
surely provide greater opportunity to others.

Policy decisions set in motion, furthermore, can
produce the most frightening of unintended
consequences. The burning wells in Kuwait, starving
Kurdish children and millions left homeless illustrate
this point. In the face of the possibility of such
unanticipated consequences, every fallen, but exalted
and dignified individual—including those in and
through society and government—should pause,
hesitate, and question before acting, not for the sake of
political prudence ("pulse scores," opinion support
scores, etc.), but for a fuller awareness of the
consequences of actions for other fallen, yet exalted
individuals.

If time and unanticipated consequences
represent decision costs for the modern prince,
causing him or her to hesitate and to question, then
my waiting in community may actually be converted
into my indifference or, what S. Dennis Ford describes
as a "sin of omission" (29-36). I don't know about
you, but I can come up with some pretty good
"explanations" for not getting involved. You and I have
heard many of them. From giving at the office, to
getting the kids to Little League, to "I'm only one and
the problem is so big, what can I do?"—whatever the
excuse, the hidden agenda may be to delay, to put off
important decisions and, in the long run, to take no
action at all in dealing with injustices.

Occasionally each of us has the good fortune to
know one of those for whom "explanations" are seen
for what they are: not as standing in the prophetic
stance by hesitating and questioning, but as excuses for
doing nothing. Permit me the luxury of concluding by
suggesting such a person to you. Her name was
Thelma. She died recently. Her memorial service was
in a Methodist church in my small town. It was "SRO.
One person after another came forward to make a
statement about Thelma; about how she had helped
them when there was no food, or how she just stopped
to sit and chat, or helped in getting an antique
hobby off the ground. Although I had made it my
business as a town councilman to know most of the
people in the city, there were many who made a short
comment whose name I couldn't even recall. It turned
out that Thelma was a member of several communities,
the members of which were given both her care, her
affection, and what I have come to call the "Thelma
treatment."

I met Thelma while we were serving on the town's
plan commission. We came to know each other better
through our discussions away from city hall. I had the
habit of running early in the morning. Thelma took
walks about the same time. And, as luck would have it
for me, she hailed me one morning. She was in a foul
mood! She wanted to know why the citizens of our city
were acting like "slaves on a plantation." "Not me," she
observed, "I'm nobody's nigger slave!" (Thelma, a
black American in her eighties, knew from her ancestry
of what she spoke.) Why did they worry so much?
Didn't they care?

I commented that I had stopped worrying about
two thousand years ago, and that maybe we should talk
about what we could do together. She stopped, smiled,
and, that, as the saying goes, was the beginning of a
beautiful (and, at times, trying) friendship. It was
during these early morning chats that much of what
would become the city's public policy agenda was
discussed. Following lengthy discussion, usually
punctuated by open disagreement, Thelma would ask
two related questions. "Well," she would inquire, "I ask
you now, do you think that's right?" After more
based on experience and study, I share with my colleague political scientist Glenn Tinder the questioning, the skeptical attitude of what is often being done through the institutions of government, of the incompleteness of public policies as responses to social “problems,” indeed, even the horror that may be set in motion by our choices. At the same time, I am equally convinced that there are those exalted individuals such as Thelma who were not shorn of their Christian identity when they made the decision to go into government. They recognized, as did the late Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjold, that: “In our era the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action” (122).

WORKS CITED


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**Lovers by a Stream**

It could be
a hot sticky day,  
an overcast day  
just short of rain  
or a pale day so cold that  
our clothes speak for us.

We lovers sit by a stream
connected only  
by our hands,  
fascinated by  
the samenesses, the opposites,  
the very contradictions.

The stream talks itself  
over the dam,  
pulls itself under the bridge  
then lies motionless  
on the other side.  
At first we sit as watchers  
yet soon sense that we are  
part of this scene  
acting in, acted upon.

Ray Greenblatt
Last summer, all students new to St. Olaf, where I teach, were asked to read Flannery O'Connor's story, "The Displaced Person." In September they met in small groups to discuss this novella with faculty members, who had earlier studied it together. The reactions to O'Connor were mixed, among both students and faculty. "I laughed out loud constantly," said one of my colleagues, her cheeks dimpling at the memory of reading the story, "and I felt immensely better about life afterwards." Another had been so intrigued that he read O'Connor's collection, A Good Man Is Hard To Find from cover to cover; he expressed disappointment that others in his faculty group were not prepared to discuss all ten stories.

That was one kind of strong response to the story. A very different kind was epitomized by a student: "Sicko!" The response of a colleague went thus: "This is depressing, repellent. Why are we having students read something as ugly as this?" Readers were offended by the racial prejudice in the speech of the characters, who used the word "nigger" as if it were standard English. They were disgusted by the fanatic religious beliefs they encountered. And they objected most of all to the violent death at the end of the novella. "I was doing fine with this story," said one even-tempered student, "until she made that tractor brake slip. Then she lost me. Was she a bitter person?"

After these discussions, I pondered the two intense and opposite reactions to this work, for thoughtful, sensitive readers inhabited both camps. Both were reacting to something real within the story, to powerful materials embedded there, and I asked myself how these apparently contradictory materials fit together, whether O'Connor finally did reconcile them within this story.

I was scheduled to give a chapel talk in a few weeks, and I decided to use this occasion to explore the questions raised by students and faculty. Our college pastor, Bruce Benson, had asked me to consider two texts: the Biblical text for the day, James 2:1-13, and the O'Connor novella. From the beginning, I sensed that the two texts spoke to one another, but I had to revise the talk many times before I could articulate how. In the end (but not in the middle), I was deeply grateful to Pastor Benson for first discerning this connection; wrestling with the Biblical text enabled me to see this story in a new way. James 2 now seems the perfect accompaniment to O'Connor's novella, for it places in moral and spiritual perspective the central elements of the story.

Here is James 2:1-13:

My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "Have a seat here, please," while you say to the poor man, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brethren. Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you, is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme that honorable name by which you are called?

If you really fulfill the royal law, according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well. But if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," said also, "Do not kill." If you do not commit adultery but do kill, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment. (RSV)
The text from James emphasizes two things in its opening statement: that our Lord Jesus Christ is the Lord of glory, and that if we are to live our faith in this lord of glory, we must regard each human being as a brother or sister. In our thoughts and actions, we must not show partiality to one class of people and belittle another. It is not right to usher the well-dressed man to the best seat in church and tell the shabby man to go sit on the floor. James tells us that making and acting upon such distinctions allies us with the powers of evil. The word he uses is "evil." We become "judges with evil thoughts." My readers might be resisting this, wanting to say, "Stop! How did we get here? Making a shabby man sit on the floor isn't nice, but if that is evil, what word do you reserve for murder with malice aforethought?"

I'll speak to this eventually, but now I'll turn to the other text, "The Displaced Person." The story is set on a dairy farm in Georgia in the early nineteen-fifties. It is owned by Mrs. MacIntyre, a widow of sixty who had said that after what those people had been through, they should be grateful for anything they could get. Later she remembered that she had seen the Negro jump silently out of the way as if a spring in the earth had released him and that she had seen Mr. Shortley turn his head with incredible slowness and stare silently over his shoulder and that she had started to shout to the Displaced Person but that she had not. She had felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley's eyes and the Negro's eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever, and she had heard the little noise the Pole made as the tractor wheel broke his backbone.

This is a story about the operation of evil, and at the end, it may seem as if evil has won: the man who was an energetic force for good lies dead on the ground with his family weeping and praying over him. In the disorder following World War II, they lost their home, victims of an evil unleashed by Hitler and institutionalized in the Holocaust. In America they become victims of another institutionalized evil, slavery, whose effects still flourish on the dairy farm. Flannery O'Connor brings these monumental evils together in one story and implies that these are NOT two separate evils. They are interconnected. They come from the same dark place in the human heart, from the love of money and the consequent hardening of heart toward one's neighbor, from the self-interest and daily pettiness that result. It is a mistake to discount this daily pettiness, as if it didn't matter, says the story; it is the very stuff of evil.

Here is a scene coming early in this story. Mrs. Shortley is recalling a conversation with Mrs. MacIntyre. Noteworthy are the lack of compassion, the begrudging manner in which Mrs. MacIntyre bestows her gifts on the refugee family, this woman who has inherited all she possesses:

There had been a great deal to do to get ready for [the Polish family] because they didn't have anything of their own, not a stick of furniture or a sheet or a dish, and everything had had to be scraped together out of things that Mrs. MacIntyre couldn't use any more herself. They had collected a piece of odd furniture here and a piece there and they had taken some flowered chicken feed sacks and made curtains for the windows, two red and one green, because they had not had enough of the red sacks to go around. Mrs. MacIntyre said she was not made of money and she could not afford to buy curtains. "They can't talk," Mrs. Shortley said. "You reckon they'll know what colors even is?" and Mrs. MacIntyre had said that after what those people had been through, they should be grateful for anything they could get. She said to think how lucky they were to escape from over there and come to a place like this.

Mrs. MacIntyre changes her mind about him when she discovers that Mr. Guizac has arranged for Sulk, one of her black farm workers, to marry a Guizac cousin now living in a refugee camp in Poland. In disgust Mrs. MacIntyre breaks off this arrangement and begins to sympathize with Mr. Shortley, who has been agitating to get rid of this disquieting presence, this foreigner who cannot be made to understand the moral code of the place: that workers work as little as possible, that blacks and whites do not marry. Now she says of the displaced person: "He doesn't fit in. He's extra!" The struggle ends a few months later, on a November day. Mr. Guizac is lying on the frozen ground fixing machinery. Sulk is handing him tools. Mr. Shortley has parked a large tractor on an incline nearby. We see the action through Mrs. MacIntyre's eyes:

She heard the brake on the large tractor slip and, looking up, she saw it move forward, calculating its own path. Later she remembered that she had seen the Negro jump silently out of the way as if a spring in the earth had released him and that she had seen Mr. Shortley turn his head with incredible slowness and stare silently over his shoulder and that she had started to shout to the Displaced Person but that she had not. She had felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley's eyes and the Negro's eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever, and she had heard the little noise the Pole made as the tractor wheel broke his backbone.
In effect, the shabby Guizacs are being told to go sit on the floor. Mrs. Shortley’s words—"They can’t talk. You reckon they’ll know what colors even is?"—have a loopy comic brilliance. (They were taken from a real life conversation reported to O’Connor a few years before she composed the story, and she recognized their humor immediately, writing them down in a letter to a friend.) But like a lot of statements that we greet with a hoot of laughter, this one has a spin to it, and if we grab it and hang on, we’ll be whirled into the nether reaches, into the murder of Mr. Guizac, in fact. At least Flannery O’Connor was, and through the story she constructed, she made the progression seem wholly logical.

Here is one human being, Mrs. Shortley, unable to accord full humanity to another family of human beings because they do not talk like her. If people cannot speak English, they cannot talk, and if that sense is null and void, the other senses must be also. They can’t possibly see right either, can’t distinguish one color from another. This seems logical, if we squint just the right way. It is not a long jump from this to the implacable hatred Mrs. Shortley comes to feel for Mr. Guizac, when he proves to be a more valued worker than her husband. And this hatred is her legacy to her husband after her sudden death, the legacy that fuels his active campaign to expel the Displaced Person.

In this passage, Mrs. Shortley thinks she’s talking about curtains, but the fiction writer hears more resonance in the speech. It is as if Flannery O’Connor tells us: Just suppose Mr. Guizac cannot make distinctions in color, as Mrs. Shortley imagines. What if the foreigner arrives and fails to notice the distinctions in skin color around which the entire social order of the dairy farm is based? What if he treats everyone there without partiality, white and black, poor folk and rich, respectable people and white trash, Americans and foreigners? What if he holds everyone to the same moral standard, but at the same time regards everyone as potential members of his human family? What if he attempts to enact the teachings of the Gospel? What would come of that? There is only one answer, from the standpoint of those defending that social order. If he cannot be made to see the color distinction, he must go. If he does not go of his own accord, he must be fired. If he cannot be fired, he must be exterminated. The upheaval caused by his remaining would be too great to live with.

The word “exterminated” is not used by Flannery O’Connor, but it seems to me the right one to suggest what solution would be acceptable to those who want to get rid of this menace to their way of life. They do not think of themselves as evil. Quite the contrary. They are convinced that right is on their side, and they find all sorts of arguments to show that the Displaced Person is allied with the forces of evil.

When they see that tractor rolling toward Mr. Guizac’s back, they have a split second to act. They do nothing. Precisely nothing. This is the decision their actions and thoughts have been preparing them for during the entire story. They have given their hearts permission to live in a state of hatred toward another human being. They have elected to shut him away from love and compassion. Singly, they decide to let the tractor run its course. But the moment they do, they look in one another’s eyes and are profoundly frightened by what they see reflected. Murder. What they have assented to—singly, collectively—is murder. They have willed the man dead, and because of that willing, he is dead.

Evil in this story is shown to be a strong and powerful force, but at the very moment of its victory, its power begins to melt away. Something within each of the participants in Mr. Guizac’s death refuses the spoils of victory. Mr. Shortley and Sulk suddenly leave their places on the farm, the places they have been fighting to keep, and wander off aimlessly. Mrs. MacIntyre comes down with a nervous affliction, sells off the dairy herd, formerly the mainspring of all her actions, and becomes bedridden. The only people she now sees are the black woman who waits on her and the priest.

From the beginning another force has been present, visible to all who have eyes to see. This is the force of divine love, working redemption in the midst of evil. It shows forth everywhere, perhaps most dramatically at the moment of Mrs. Shortley’s death halfway through the story, when she is given a true religious vision, to replace her willfully misconstrued earlier ones. At the beginning of the story, Mrs. Shortley feels no need for religion: “she felt that simply, if they have the brains to avoid evil without it For people like herself, for people of gumption, it was a social occasion providing the opportunity to sing.” But in straining for arguments to turn Mrs. MacIntyre against Mr. Guizac, she hears herself insinuating that he is allied with the devil, and then she believes her own words. She begins to ponder questions of good and evil, convincing herself that a pernicious European evil is creeping over to America in the persons of the Guizacs, and she begins to study her Bible seriously, especially the Apocalypse and the Prophets. She comes to “a deeper understanding of her existence”:

She saw plainly that the meaning of the world was a mystery that had been planned and she was not surprised to
suspect that she had a special part in the plan because she was strong. She saw that the Lord God Almighty had created strong people to do what had to be done and she felt that she would be ready when she was called. Right now she felt that her business was to watch the priest.

This is how she now sees the actions of the priest, as "leading foreigners over in hords to places that were not theirs, to cause disputes, to uproot niggers, to plant the Whore of Babylon in the midst of the righteous!"

I think it is fair to say that, for now, religion is a weapon she has seized to harry Mr. Guizac off the farm and still to think well of herself. The interesting thing is that although her religious journey originates in pride, selfishness, love of money, and hatred, its path takes her to the country of true revelation. As she ponders her Bible and misinterprets all she finds there, increasingly zealous in her own cause, she is also receiving the essential truths of salvation.

In the midst of her new religious fervor, Mrs. Shortley has a vision. As she stands on a hillside, she sees a magnificent white-gold figure in the sky and a resonant voice tells her, "Prophesy!" She finds herself uttering these words aloud: "The children of wicked nations will be butchered. Legs where arms should be, foot to face, ear in the palm of the hand. Who will remain whole? Who will remain whole? Who?"

Walking home and still in a daze, she sees the priest's car before Mrs. McIntyre's house: "Here again. Come to destroy." In her zeal to assist the Lord in fulfilling His plan, which she assumes to be synonymous with her own, she eavesdrops on the priest and Mrs. MacIntyre. And thus she learns that Mrs. MacIntyre regards as "an idiotic old man," and Mrs. Shortley first as "kind of foolish" and later as "full of crooked ways." Neither sees beyond her own nose. From beginning to end, the priest is faithful to his religious vocation: to practice charity, preach the Gospel, administer the sacraments. He works steadily throughout the story to provide a home for the homeless, persuading Mrs. MacIntyre to receive and then to keep the Guizacs on the farm. He persists in laying before her the church's teachings about redemption, and gently tries to persuade her to follow them in her everyday life, to act by motives apart from greed: "Dear lady, I know your tender heart won't suffer you to turn the porrrr man out. Think of the thousands of them, think of the ovens and the boxcars and the camps and the sick children and Christ Our Lord."

What he gets for his trouble is indifference, contempt, anger. "He's extra and he's upset the balance around here," Mrs. MacIntyre replies to his plea, "and I'm a logical practical woman and there are no ovens here and no camps and no Christ Our Lord and when he leaves, he'll make more money." Another time she shouts at Father Flynn, "It is not my responsibility that Mr. Guizac has nowhere to go." Nor is it his, in worldly terms, but he takes that responsibility upon himself. He has nothing to gain from his work but the satisfaction of following his calling, in the name of Christ. No money, no honor, not even thanks or success in his ministry come to him, that we are allowed to see. He is fully sensible of Mrs. MacIntyre's mockery and anger, and for a time he stays away because of them. But he returns and continues his work, guided as he is by his vocation.

In this he stands apart from those who know and insist upon their rights, who manipulate others for their own gain. It is no accident that Mrs. Shortley...
instinctively spots Father Flynn as her enemy, the one who needs to be watched. Frail, elderly, mystical, lacking her forceful rhetoric, he is nevertheless a powerful opponent to the workings of evil.

In this story, O'Connor allows us to see divine love everywhere in the creation, in the non-human elements of the story as well as in plot and character. It is present in the quiet loveliness of the November landscape that distances itself from the human ugliness causing Mr. Guizac's death. "There was a heavy frost on the ground that made the fields look like the rough backs of sheep; the sun was almost silver and the woods stuck up like dry bristles on the sky line. The countryside seemed to be receding from the little circle of noise around the shed."

Divine love is splendidly manifest in the peacock that daily struts about the dairy farm. To Mrs. MacIntyre it is "another mouth to feed," and to Mrs. Shortley, "nothing but a peachicken." At another point the narrator describes Mrs. Shortley standing before the peacock's tail with its "fierce planets": "she might have been looking at a map of the universe but she didn't notice it." The priest has a different reaction. He gazes at it in awe:

"So beautiful' the priest said. 'A tail full of suns,' and he crept forward on tiptoe and looked down on the bird's back where the polished gold and green design began. The peacock stood still as if he had just come down from some sun-drenched height to be a vision for them all.

Another time the priest watches the peacock unfurl its tail and says, in a "loud gay voice, 'Christ will come like that!'"

Before we meet any of the human creatures of the story, we are made aware of the peacock's presence. Here are the opening two sentences:

The peacock was following Mrs. Shortley up the road to the hill where she meant to stand. Moving one behind the other, they looked like a complete procession.

Most of us read this story in a collection called A Good Man Is Hard to Find. On its bright gold paperback cover, Mrs. Shortley stands right in the center, glowering out at us. She intends to be in charge. And behind her is the fan of a huge peacock's tail, towering above her hat and surrounding her colossal body. My group of students tried to interpret the cover picture, and one of them got right to the heart of the matter: "It's Mrs. Shortley trying to deny she's a peacock." At the beginning of the story, divine love is gloriously present and active, insisting on attaching itself to Mrs. Shortley, who thinks she can do well enough on her own. And at the end, it is still at work, though quietly and humbly. The last sentence is this:

[The old priest] came regularly once a week with a bag of breadcrumbs and, after he had fed these to the peacock, he would come in and sit by the side of [Mrs. MacIntyre's] bed and explain the doctrines of the Church.

In speaking of her vocation as short story writer, O'Connor once wrote: "The peculiar problem of the short-story writer is how to make the action he describes reveal as much of the mystery of existence as possible." In "The Displaced Person," we see a writer taking up the humblest of materials—a group of ignorant, intolerant, petty people arguing over who gets to feed and milk Mrs. MacIntyre's cows—and out of these fashioning a story that explores the deepest mysteries of our lives.
Teaching and Learning: A Letter from Chad

Celeste Duder

It was 3:30 on a moonless morning, a hot wind blowing from the west, when I found myself on my hands and knees on my gray cement front porch. Between bouts of violent vomiting, I realized that my life could have been very different. I might have been, at that moment, eating Camembert in Paris, reading romantic poetry in Chicago, or watching the sun set over the Texas Hill Country. In short, anything other than making a mess of my yard, knowing that in a few short hours, I would “end up” the same, no matter what. My middle class destiny, if vague, was no less certain—a suitable husband and children, an appropriate job, a house and several cars. The movies, as Holden Caulfield says, can ruin you.

So where am I instead? Rather than that bland husband, I have for company the chief of the Moundang tribe, called ‘Le Gong.’ He is 6’5” and wears spotless white Muslim robes that fall loosely from his shoulders. Some of his 63 wives were inherited from his father, though apparently they are not sufficient. His most recent wedding was last October and the bride is 15 years old. She will live, like all the other women in town, by carrying water on her head and babies on her back. She will work the fields for food, and pound millet grains into flour with what looks like a wooden mortar and pestle. Every so often, she will spend an evening with the Gong in his pavilion, which is equipped with running water and a generator, before returning to her own mud hut. The Gong speaks little French and cannot drive any of the three vehicles he owns, including a silver Mercedes-Benz. His chauffeur, armed with an automatic weapon, will take him the half mile or so to the nearest bar. His mud brick compound, built to house his wives and their hundreds of children, is easily visible from the air. It is also the figurative center of Lere.

Lere is a farming village in the southwestern corner of Chad. An unpaved dirt road runs through the middle of town, round mud huts with thatched straw roofs rising to a peak line either side of it. We have two bars, The Central and the Rendezvous, both of which serve cold beer and warm Coke, and two restaurants, where you dine on bits of meat floating in an oily red sauce that will burn your throat all the way down. Other spaces in the town square are filled by Muslim tailors working at ancient foot pump machines and boys who sell bread from rickety wooden tables at 20 cents a loaf. Not everyone in the town can afford it. There is an open well in the center of the square, so men having a drink at the bar or lounging on straw mats in the shade can watch women and girls as they haul water up out of the well, hand over hand, and help each other hoist the full buckets onto their heads for the walk home.

I, too, occasionally sit at the bar with my warm Coke and watch these girls. A few of them are my students and, come morning, will make their way to the one high school within 100 km. You’ll know it by the sign, a white billboard proclaiming Lycee de Lere in the colors of the Chadian flag: blue for agriculture, red for the sacrifices of the people, and yellow signifying the desert to the north. The school’s 100 students took the entire school year of 1986-87 to form mud bricks, dry them, and

Celeste Duder graduated in 1990 from VU and has taught this past year with the Peace Corps in Chad. This is her first appearance in The Cresset.

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cement them together to form eight classrooms. Each room has a sheet metal door in a wooden frame, a board painted black nailed to the front wall, and two windows set just high enough to let in the late morning sun. Being the teacher, I am blessed with a wooden table and a stool, while my students sit on the dusty floor or leftover pieces of mud brick, their paper-covered notebooks resting on their knees. The office of the school, also built by the students, is a much more impressive looking structure, painted white in and out with a black stripe mimicking a baseboard. The teacher's lounge has a blackboard running the length of one wall and on it is written the entire schedule of classes. It was first drawn up in early October, but mysteriously and completely erased the night before school was to start. At a teacher's meeting, the principal deplored what he called "vandalism" and it took another week to get the schedule re-established.

The educational system is based on the French one that was in place during Chad's years as a colony. Classes include math, life sciences, history, geography, French and one foreign language, either English or Arabic. We also have teachers of philosophy and drawing and civics, where students learn, in theory, how to become good citizens. What they are never taught is how to reforest their land with valuable topsoil, or that drinking a mixture of sugar, salt, and water may save a baby with diarrhea from dying of dehydration, or anything else that might directly improve the quality of their daily lives. Possibly one student in each class will make it to the University of Chad, will use his math or French and become a teacher himself. I use "he" for a reason; for every 100 young men who finish high school, there are 15 young women. The rest will be farmers, their backs bending in the millet fields for another fifty years, or maybe merchants, selling pens and soap and string in the market. The women don't have this range of choice—they marry, have children, and feed their families.

My approximately 400 students this year are a good bunch: they have names like Bruno, Bianzoumbe, Lazare and sometimes one of them will carry my books to class. They stand when I come in, and say, "Good morning, Miss Celeste." We spend an hour a day reading short texts about Helene, the good student, or a dialogue between a soccer player and a coach. On Fridays we sing. "Old MacDonald Had A Farm" is a favorite. They wear the same shirts every day and if I haven't yet learned a student's name, I will call him by what is on his shirt, Tuborg beer or even the Who.

They give me example sentences like "We can swim in the lake" or "I wish I had a car," and they copy these lessons from the blackboard into their notebooks. They yell "donkey" at my colored picture, and prepare elaborately drawn cheat sheets for my test. When the rains begin and school ends, they return to their villages and spend the summer harvesting crops and forgetting most of what they had memorized.

The title of this essay refers to teaching and learning in the developing world and you might well ask what I have taught here. Like most teachers, I'll probably never know—possibly some grammar, a few vocabulary words like cow and goat, and, if I've been lucky, that education can offer my students choices they could never make otherwise. The other question that is more intriguing and, having read this far, you too will see what the movies taught me. People in the developing world go to bed hungry and stay that way most of their lives; women work from sunrise until they fall asleep on the floors of their mud huts; students sit in 110 degree heat to memorize the industrial products of France. And maybe one person in 1000 will escape this cycle of poverty and sickness and ignorance. The power to make choices is a luxury not available to everyone, and it does indeed make all the difference.

Next Month in The Cresset...

- Dorothy Bass, Thomas D. Kennedy, and Edward McGlynn Gaffney describe Tinder's implications for church, state, and culture
- Letter from Ecuador
- Photographs from the George Strimbu Exhibit
2.01 Cheers for Quotas
Arvid F. Sponberg


The article was written by Gail Fineberg and the lead paragraph said: "The Library and three labor organizations have agreed to a three-year affirmative action plan that is intended to reduce grade-level disparity and "underrepresentation" of women, minorities, and persons with disabilities in the Library's work force."

Ten paragraphs later, Gail Fineberg quoted Denise Banks, the Library's affirmative action coordinator, as saying that the plan, "does not establish quotas by any means."

The story runs on for another 36 paragraphs—about 2800 words in all—explaining how all goals will be met without using quotas.

Across a two-page spread, the Gazette prints four graphs showing the distribution of employees by race, national origin, and gender in four categories: administrative employees, professionals, technical employees, and senior level staff. The last is the most dramatic. 67.36 percent of the Library's senior level staff are held by white males. 21.34 percent by white females. 4.6 percent by black males. 0.84 percent by black females. 2.51 percent by Hispanic males. Zero percent by Hispanic females. 2.51 percent by Asian American males. 0.84 percent by Asian American females. Zero percent by either Native American males or females.

These graphs show instantly what is meant by "underrepresentation" in the Library's work force. Furthermore, they incidentally illustrate why quotas in hiring are becoming facts of life in spite of all the handwringing about them. While, as a society, we are intellectually uncomfortable with hiring quotas, our equally strong ardor for measuring "normal" behavior pushes us inexorably toward accepting them.

Clear data, simply presented, make it easier to ask tough questions. For example, the Gazette's graph on senior level prompts the question: "Is it chance that 2/3 of these posts are held by white men?" A good answer: "Probably not. Factors in addition to chance precede the result."

Question: "Do those factors operate with the same effect in the other groups?" Answer: "Probably not."

Question: "What will happen to this society if this pattern of distribution of leadership posts persists?"
Answer: "Time will tell. How do you feel about it?"

It is surprising that any true American would object to using quotas to correct "underrepresentation" in the work force. We use quotas in almost every area of life to achieve many useful and interesting goals.

A. Politics—The Constitution sets a quota of two senators for each state. There are other quotas in this document, too, that we don't use anymore.

B. Business—If you sell so many widgets per month, you keep your job. We regard quotas as a reliable and reasonable way to promote the welfare of the company.

C. Sports—Three strikes and you're out. Hit .300 for ten years and you will enter the Hall of Fame. What's more American than that?

D. Health—Consume less than 800 or more than 1200 calories and you've got trouble.. Who made up that one? And what about blood pressure, cholesterol, and lymphocytes?

E. Education—In our department, score a 4 or 5 on the AP English exam and you'll be exempted from a general education requirement. Is that fair to students who can't afford the test fee, or who attend schools without AP courses? In addition, at VU, we like being about 55 percent Lutheran. We think that number helps keep us "distinctive" while, at the same time, it helps us pursue "diversity."

F. Religion—Isn't it recommended that we give a tenth of something to someone?
Even St. Paul seemed to have something like quotas in mind when he scolded some Christians for not being as generous as Macedonians: “I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.” [2 Cor 8: 13-14]

Many people seem to object to quotas only when race and gender enter the discussion. So let’s see if the results of quotas in hiring would be as bad as so many assume. Consider the proposition that seats on appointed and elected boards, courts, councils, and the like should be apportioned by race and gender. What harm would result? Or, to put it another way, how could we possibly be worse off than we are now?

If the statistics are to be believed, our knowledge, disposable income, productivity, morale, and goodwill seem to be at all time lows. Those opposed to quotas worry that more “qualified” candidates will be displaced in favor of less “qualified” candidates. Qualifications include education, experience, and political and economic clout. Should race and gender be added to the list? Our history informs us that these last two have often been considered negatively. Why should we Blanch at giving them a positive spin?

In fact, considering race and gender as qualifications would have several benefits.

A. Assured and rapid empowerment—those presently without a stake in the decision-making processes would be vitalized. The potential for civil disturbances would be reduced. The vigor of our democracy would be restored.

B. Fresh ideas—a bumper crop of innovations for what ails us would spring from the experience of the previously disenchanted. Who knows better what needs doing than those who have borne the burdens imposed by craven, impotent, and dishonest leadership?

C. A happier, more well adjusted distribution of power and wealth—it is not “normal” to have the instruments of government and the means of production concentrated in the hands of one group. Quotas merely establish what is “normal.” They are analogous to the “draft” in professional sports. The weaker teams get to pick the better players in order to preserve the overall “competitiveness” of a league.

The philosophical problem with quotas results from their privileging of the idea of “milieu” or “culture” over the idea of “individuality.” To borrow an idea from Maria Shevtova [“The Sociology of the Theatre” New Theatre Quarterly, May, 1989, 188], “milieu” makes problematical the notion of individualism precisely because “milieu” becomes an anonymous force depriving individuals of their autonomy. Something about you, over which you have no control, determines your future. The fear of this idea lies behind the emphasis on Judge Clarence Thomas’ “rising” from a sharecropper’s cabin and the invidious comparisons of Thomas and his sister.

Must we acquiesce in the view that the most important thing about a person is the color of his or her skin or his or her gender? Quotas seem to do so.

We group people geographically and numerically for political and economic purposes. Why, in reason, should those categories be privileged over race and gender which, in fact, have a more powerful influence on people’s lives than the sites and sizes of their towns and states? Most Americans still behave in daily life as if color and gender define people. Why not face the fact and incorporate our actual behavior into our politics, checking and balancing the effects of our weaknesses? We could hope that in three or four generations, we could eliminate the last vestiges of race and gender prejudice. Seeing ourselves in groups, first, we would come, at last, to see each other as persons. E Pluribus Unum, and all that. Q

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Community Standards

John Steven Paul

Serious theatre is not seasonal fare. There is no particularly appropriate time of the year for plays of strong stuff. But somehow we were surprised by the late spring offerings of Chicago’s Goodman and Court Theatres who both chose to usher in the lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer with plays about communities struggling with moral and political issues.

Big works by Dürrenmatt and Brecht these theatre companies have given us and, by the way, reminded us of the connection between the European theatre of the second half the twentieth century and that of the middle half of the 5th century-B.C.E. For, every spring at the Dionysus Theatre in Athens the poets offered up big issues to the festival audiences lured by the first good sailing weather of the year. A century and more later, Aristotle, theorizing about these springtime rites, named “magnitude” as one of the essential characteristics of tragedy.

Not that The Visit or The Caucasian Chalk Circle are tragedies. In fact, Bertolt Brecht’s play is actually a celebration of good sense, a comedy of judiciousness. And Friedrich Dürrenmatt denied categorically that the tragedian could even find a legitimate home in the last half of the twentieth century. “Tragedy presupposes guilt, despair, moderation, lucidity, vision, a sense of responsibility,” he wrote in 1954. “In the Punch-and-Judy show of our century . . . there are no more guilty and also, no responsible men. It is always, ‘We couldn’t help it’ and ‘We didn’t really want that to happen.’ . . . We are all collectively guilty, collectively bogged down in the sins of our fathers and of our forefathers. . . . Comedy alone is suitable for us.” But if The Visit is comic it is a darkly grotesque turn on what we have come to expect from comedians. The people of Dürrenmatt’s Güllen dance around a corpse rather than a wedding cake.

No, the connection between Athens, Zürich, and Berlin is their playwrights’ preference for mirrors rather than microscopes, for turning the lights up on issues of community rather than for offering exposés of individual infelicities.

The story of The Visit is classic in its simplicity, parabolic in its universal relevance. Claire Zachanassian, the richest woman in the world, returns to visit her hometown of Güllen to which hard times have come. The old lady offers to invest one billion marks in the town’s future — 500 million to the town and 500 million to be divided per capita. In return she requires only that one man, Anton Schill, be killed.

“Little Clara” has nursed a Medean passion for vengeance against Schill from the day, decades ago, that she was turned out of town pregnant with her lover’s child. As teenagers, the two had carried on a grand romance. “My little witch,” he called her; “my black panther,” she called him. When Clara named Schill the father of her child, he not only denied his paternity but brought to open court false witnesses to claim the responsibility. Shamed and bereft, Clara left the town, suffered the death of the child, and supported herself as a prostitute in Hamburg, where the oil baron Zachanassian found her and made her his wife. The old man made her rich and with the money she set out systematically to take her revenge against Schill and Güllen. She strongarmed the trial judge into becoming her butler. She

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tracked down the witnesses, castrated, blinded them and keeps them as pets. She arrives on The Flying Dutchman to finish the job.

The stage might well be set for an intensely personal drama of a wronged woman returning to face the flawed but basically decent and honorable man who wronged her. The stuff of soap opera. But Dürrnmmatt ignores this private matter and turns the focus on the community's response to this soul-trying ethical challenge.

Paul Steinberg's marvelously transformable setting for the Goodman production begins as a grand, if deteriorating, three-story train station that fills the entire stage opening. The openness of the set indicates that the action to come will be of a public character; there is no place for the intimate sharing of recollections or the hushed exchange of recrimination. With its its tri-leveled design, towering walls of window panes, and infinitely variable backlighting, the stage can be transformed from a seedy railway station, to a sunny shop, to a Gothic church, to the town hall in which the fatal vote is taken, and, finally, an elegant ballroom in which Güllen's new prosperity is toasted. The actors play against a series of different backgrounds created only by light. At the end they are silhouetted against a stupendously and eerily brilliant yellow glow. Above them all hangs the enormous railway clock, the single constant feature of the set, ticking ineluctably toward 12 midnight.

In another context, the massive scale of the train station might have expressed the nobility of its builders, but here the architecture dwarfs the characters: there are no heroes in Güllen. From the beginning, the mayor and the town's leading citizens recall Gogol's town fathers anxiously anticipating the arrival of the Inspector General. Their desperate sycophancy at the feet of their visitor-savior foreshadows the descent into the foolishness and the baseness that is to come. In between, we will laugh at all the incongruity of those who champion ideals while grasping for things.

When the offer is announced, a shocked Güllen rallies around its favorite citizen, the man who will surely be elected the next mayor. Not a person can support Zachanassian's barbarous bargain. Yet the economic depression has forced the townsfolk to live without the materialistic pleasures of life for a long time. Gradually they begin to acquire the things of which they have felt deprived. (Each new acquisition, according to Dürrnmmatt's directions, is colored bright yellow from the mayor's new shoes to the minister's vestments.) Expecting the lady to relent and give her gift without condition, they chalk up increasingly luxurious items against their credit. When the prospect of Madame's beneficence fades, they look back at her proposal with its comparatively small price of one life, and begin the search not for justice but for justification.

Once the Gülleners see that self-justification will clear their consciences and open the way to a new age of personal wealth, they proceed deliberately. Madame Zachanassian has a just cause against the cruel Schill, they say. It was a long time ago, but a wrong was done and there should be no statute of limitations, they say. In a climactic public meeting, Schill's erstwhile supporters bravely assert that his death will purge the town of ancient evil and they vote one by one that justice be done. Each raised hand signals the capitulation of another of society's institutions to the materialistic onslaught: the policeman's hand shoots up first, then Schill's family, then the minister, and finally, the teacher.

Following the vote, Schill is ritualistically murdered and the coroner pronounces him dead "of joy." In the final scene, the formally-attired people of Güllen face the audience directly, glasses raised, and sing a chilling paean to their justice-seeking selves and the coming prosperous days. Madame Zachanassian weaves through the crowd ahead of Schill's coffin.

The Gülleners sing out to us and we squirm beneath their gaze as parallels in our own public lives and institutions drift out over the auditorium like noxious gas. Yet Dürrnmmatt protests any attempt to make The Visit into a didactic drama. The truly just resolution of the case between Clara and Schill is not readily apparent. Surely, Schill cannot be forgiven his lie and Clara's agonies cannot be dismissed. Does this mean that towns like Güllen may proclaim justice as they see fit? In our time, Dürrnmmatt may be saying, the ideal of Justice itself fades from the clear view into the clouds of ambiguity. "I describe human beings, not marionettes, an action, not an allegory; I set forth a world, not a moral."

Bert Brecht, never reluctant to teach, makes absolutely sure we get the point of The Caucasian Chalk Circle, his parable for the theatre: "What there is shall go to those who are good for it." Like Dürrnmmatt, Brecht examines the way in which communities make decisions about those matters of most significance for them, but he does so not through a simple progression of plot but by means of a play within a play within a play.

At the heart of the Caucasian Chalk Circle is a test of true motherhood administered by a judge
faced with a Solomonic choice. The question? Who is the true mother of the child, the rich Governor’s wife who gave him birth or the peasant woman who preserved his life in perilous times? The judge draws a circle of chalk around the little boy and orders the two women to stand on opposite sides of the circle, to each grasp an arm and to do their best to pull the child from the circle toward them. When the order is given to pull, the peasant woman releases the boy’s arm for fear that she will harm him. The test is repeated; the peasant releases. And it is to her that the judge grants the child.

The drama leading up to the chalk circle test begins on an Easter Sunday in the Caucasian city of Grusinia when the Governor is overthrown and assassinated. In the flurry to escape the chaotic city the Governor’s wife frets so over the question of which clothing she shall take with her that she leaves the Governor’s infant heir behind in the arms of a servant, Grusha. Grusha has just promised her betrothed that she will wait for him to return from the Persian War, but she has pity on the child and anyone who protects him will be killed by the Governor’s murderers.

Thinking that she will leave the baby at the first acceptable peasant cottage, Grusha sets off into the Northern mountains, but she finds no hospitality. For the baby’s sake, she endures hunger, hardship, and hair-breadth escapes. Just steps behind her, the murderous Ironshirts, soldiers of the Fat Prince who took power in Grusinia, give chase. At one point she agrees to marry a dying peasant in order to give the little boy familial legitimacy. But after the wedding, she learns that the peasant was only faking and that she is married to quite a vigorous, and brutish, man. Just then her own young man returns from the war to discover that his Grusha has married another. Ultimately, after all her trouble, the Ironshirts catch up with her and seize the little boy and return him to the city.

When the judge awards the child to Grusha, he affirms the principle that “What there is shall go to those who are good for it,” a matter of real significance to yet another group of characters in Brecht’s play.

In a prologue, Brecht brings together a group of farmers among the ruins of a shattered Caucasian village in the days following the defeat of the Nazis. Here a governmental expert presides over a discussion among the representatives of two agricultural collectives, one a dairy farm and the other a fruit orchard. There is a dispute over who shall be allowed to cultivate the valley. The dairymen cultivated the land in the days before the war, but retreated in the face of Hitler’s armies. Now the fruit farmers propose to plant orchards. After a brief discussion, the fruit farmers persuade the expert and the dairy farmers that the valley will yield a fruit crop more valuable to the people than milk. Some of the dairymen are disappointed to lose their old land but reason carries the day. To celebrate its triumph a play called “Circle of Chalk” will be performed by the local storyteller, Arkadi.

The story-teller has an aesthetic full of devices with which to tell his tale: huge masks for members of the ruling class, fragments of monumental scenery, stage curtains that don’t entirely hide the business of scenery changing. Even the play-within-a-play structure is designed assure us that is but a play. We watch the Caucasian farmers watching an edifying, entertaining celebration of reasonable action.

There’s something bracing about Brecht — like a slap of cold water to the face. His refusal to permit the audience to spend its emotional energy is uncompromising. As potentially moving as the story of the heroic Grusha and the baby Michael might be, Brecht employs it not to elicit feeling, but to illustrate a principle. The story’s power repeatedly establishes a bond of empathy with the audience. But the story-teller Arkadi, Brecht’s on-stage persona, just as often breaks that bond with an ironic lyric, a wry remark, or a preview of coming action.

The Visit and The Caucasian Chalk Circle premiered nearly forty years ago. Yet, a comparison of these two intellectually sharp-edged works with two recent highly-publicized American plays we have seen this summer tells us something about our theatre today.

Wendy Wasserstein’s play, The Heidi Chronicles, enjoyed a successful run on Broadway in 1989-90 and was recently given a stylish production at the Asolo Theatre in Sarasota, Florida. The play is about to begin an extended run in Chicago and then a national tour. There is talk of a movie. The chronicles of Heidi Holland begin with her graduation from high school in 1965 and continue through 1989. As we drop in on Heidi over the years, we see that she has had all the experiences typical of an intelligent, affluent, white American woman in that turbulent quarter-century: an excellent education from a top-flight liberal arts college, a brush with political activism and feminist consciousness-raising, numerous relationships with men, and a successful career.
What Heidi has not had is happiness. Nor, by the way, has she been married or borne any children. She has had two important men in her life: one is wary of marrying a woman who would compete with him and the other is gay. Wasserstein leaves us with the vague sense that Heidi’s unhappiness is connected with her lack of a family life. (This implication has enraged the feminist critical community, incidentally.) As time marches on, Heidi, a professor of art history specializing in art by women who have been overshadowed by their more famous male contemporaries, frequently looks up from her life’s path with a face somewhere between the plaintive and the quizzical, as if she can’t understand why she, of all people, has to be so unhappy. In the final scene, a smiling Heidi rocks and sings to her newly-adopted infant, Judy. She seems, for the first time, to have negotiated with her circumstances and, finally, come away with something satisfying.

*The Heidi Chronicles* deserves more than a few sentences’ notice. It did win the Pulitzer and several other prizes for drama. Wasserstein is one of the few American women who has been able to succeed in our commercial theatre. Heidi Holland is a sympathetic character; we recognize her and feel with her. She may have as much to say about her place and time as Willy Loman does about his. And, the production at the Asolo reminds us of just how much today’s theatre owes to Brechtian principles: most of the work and machinery of the theatre, even at this elegantly reconstructed nineteenth-century playhouse, is completely visible. We always know we’re watching a play.

But a comparison between Brecht’s Grusha and Wasserstein’s Heidi reveals much about the difference between Brecht and Wasserstein and perhaps about the European and American theatres. Grusha is a rich character and, in the Court Theatre production, Linda Emond realized Brecht’s idea in ways that elicited sympathy and respect for this courageous woman. But though Grusha is the central character in the work, we are never allowed to become lost in the problems of the individual. It is the community for which Brecht is concerned and Grusha’s story is only valuable in that it illustrates a principle important to the life of the community.

Wasserstein cares only for Heidi. We’re never entirely sure—without checking the program—what social context surrounds a particular scene. It is all the good soldier Heidi seeking happiness resolutely but glumly and telling everyone how hard it all is. We see the collections of people through which she passes, but through her eyes only. Wasserstein may be interested in the failure of community in late-twentieth-century America, but only in so far as it affects her melancholy heroine. The difference between Brecht and Wasserstein is the American’s choice to write from inside her character looking out on the world around her. The focus on the individual preoccupation as opposed to the community concern is one we often note when comparing American with European drama.

Promising a wider view was The Goodman’s world premiere of *Book of the Night* co-authored by Louis Rosen and Thom Bishop. These summer musical theatre pieces have become a tradition at the Goodman and, like its predecessors, this show is lavishly gotten up. The dramatis personae include a policeman, a hotel’s night manager, a waitress, an estranged married couple, a bereft young widow and her son, a drug dealer, and assorted others, all colors, classes, and creeds. But, the leading character was to be The City. And, against the stunning backdrop of projected cityscapes animated by flashes of neon, the company numbers pulsate with urban rhythms and for some thrilling moments the performers become parts of an organic whole.

But these exciting group numbers are overwhelmed by the series of solo wails that dominate the show. Varieties of nighttime loneliness expressed in one banal lyric after another are offered up for our sympathy. There is, of course, little these mortally self-absorbed ones can do for themselves and absolutely nothing that we can do for them. That there were many in the audience whose hearts went out to these unfortunates was evident from the loud, sustained applause.

Rosen and Thomas present their urbanites’ sad cases individually for our compassion, not for our judgment. Compare their approach with Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s stiletto-sharp irony as he draws his Gütleners together at the end of *The Visit* to celebrate the beginning of their new prosperity in front of the corpse of Anton Schill. As they raised their self-congratulatory goblets, any one who has ever traded integrity for material gain felt a chill of self-condemnation. The applause was curiously self-conscious.
Road Warriors

DeAne Lagerquist

I thought it was going to be a funny movie, a comedy, well suited to a spring afternoon. The newspaper ads didn't give me much to go on and the trailers showed some high energy chase scenes. In other movies Susan Sarandon's sharp female intellect and core of self assurance have encouraged me. So off we went to watch Thelma and Louise, "the summer's first must see movie." Frankly, the longer I watched the less I laughed and the more disturbed I was. All through what had been planned as a festive dinner I muttered, "I didn't want that to happen." In the subsequent weeks the story of Thelma and Louise has continued to disturb me. This movie is very unlike either Bull Durham or White Palace. I realize this in a conversation with colleagues who had not yet seen Thelma and Louise. One remarked that he and his wife planned to see it that weekend. Then he admitted that he was glad for the warning my reaction gave him because he can't quite get in the groove about the right reaction to movies. A case in point: he was prepared to listen to his wife dismantle An Officer and a Gentleman as sexist propaganda only to discover that she liked it. She explained that it was a "fairy tale," and thus I suppose outside the standards we apply to ordinary life. In contrast to Thelma and Louise, Susan Sarandon's two earlier movies seem to fall into that genre.

Small town baseball gives Bull Durham a concrete setting as well as a mythical quality. Its plots are both mundane and the stuff of dreams. Susan Sarandon's character isn't one found in most fairy tales. Annie is both princess and fairy godmother with some of traits of male characters. Smart, sexy, self-aware, self-assured: she is her own woman making up her own religion and her own romantic plot. In the course of the season she discovers that she has misjudged the year's contenders for the role of the prince. When Crash, the sensitive, aging catcher, returns from his search for another team, he and the smart princess appear to be heading into a more realistic happy ever after. The story took me in, despite my non-interest in baseball, because it is a love story about adults, in which an independent, whole woman gets a happy ending.

So is White Palace, both a story about a strong, quirky woman and a fairy tale in which love conquerors all. Here Sarandon's working poor character shows some resemblance to Cinderella, but when her younger, wealthy, Jewish prince brings her a Dustbuster, she throws him (and it) out. Again the strange integrity of Sarandon's character's self-awareness and self-assurance draws the man. He follows her to New York; their unrestrained romantic reunion takes place during lunch-hour rush in the diner where she works. They too seem headed into happy ever after with a view of the garbage cans. These are fairy tales that don't require self-betrayal. They give grown up women hope that they can be smart, sexy, strong selves and also find love.

This is not the story of Thelma and Louise. Despite my wanting it to, love doesn't prevail for Louise (Susan Sarandon) or for Thelma (Geena Davis) who had even less of a chance. Since the movie is not a fairy tale or a comedy, probably it isn't really much about love at all. I think, rather, that it is about freedom, the illusion of freedom, and the opposite of freedom. And what it shows about these two women's lack of freedom is so disturbing precisely because it is neither a fairy tale nor a comedy nor an ideological piece of anti-sexist propaganda. It is simply an accurate, if somewhat exaggerated, portrayal of what could happen to two rather ordinary women who set out on a fishing trip for a few days of good times. The movie is not about happy ever after, it is about now.

Watching Louise and Thelma plan their weekend escape via phone we also get a vivid look at what this trip is an escape from.

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Neither of them appears to have much in the way of freedom. Louise, a work-weary waitress, knows herself better and at the outset is the more able to negotiate in a world that is indifferent at the best. Thelma, a bored wife, needs her friend’s encouragement to imagine her own initiative. The lives both women were leading before they headed off for the hills demonstrate something of the price women pay for men’s freedom.

Louise has learned to turn off emotion, to expect little, not to rely upon others, and to distrust men. Although what happened to her in Texas is never revealed to Thelma or to us, we suspect that the incident contributed to her distance and wariness. Her musician lover keeps a wandering, erratic schedule according to his jobs and desires. Apparently their relationship depends upon Louise not making demands, upon her willingness to regard detachment as the price of safety. She is not a captive, but she isn’t free. This relationship suggests that Louise is rather an exile or a refugee. There is no mysterious past in Thelma’s situation. She married young and either atrophied or never developed past the young girl who married this jerk of a husband. His pleasures are blatant ones: selling lots of carpet, playing pinball, drinking beer, watching the game. There isn’t much room in the relationship for Thelma’s desires or even for considering what she might want beyond a frozen candy bar. Her role is to do as she is told and to not make trouble. She is a captive, for whom these few days away are an adventure, an escape.

That escape is not into freedom, however. The simple pleasure of a weekend in the mountains is transformed into a high-speed, cross-country chase. Out of town, Thelma pleads for a good time, a few drinks in a road house. Lacking Louise’s worldly wisdom she innocently celebrates her escape, dancing and drinking with a local man. When he leads her into the parking lot she realizes that his desires are the only ones he cares about. Just in time Louise’s voice, backed up by a gun, breaks though the night. But Harlan isn’t willing to let the two women walk away without reasserting his manly status by taunting them. His last words break through Louise’s reserve, releasing anger enough to pull the trigger and kill the man. What began as a get-away vacation becomes a real flight from danger.

Yes, the photography is grand—sweeping views of southwestern landscape seen from blue highways. Sure, watching that scenery go by with the roof down and the radio on looks like freedom. The women are freed from the constraints placed on them by specific men in particular relationships and they embrace the freedom to express themselves in new ways. But the freedom is an illusion because this is not a joy ride, it is deadly flight doomed to failure. The ways women pay for men’s freedom continue to entrap the friends. Each act of self assertion is a revolt against the way things still are: Thelma’s naïve flirtation, Louise’s gunshot, their decision to run rather than go to the police. All along the road the revolt continues. The price of Thelma’s discovery of sexual ecstasy with a hitchhiker is their cash. Her successful use of her new skill in armed robbery to replace it gives her a rush of accomplishment, but it also alerts the police to their location and compounds the charges against them. Given the opportunity to risk marriage, Louise clings to her self-reliance and puts her hope in running away, still an exile and now a fugitive.

Much has been made of similarities between Thelma and Louise and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Both are about friends running, certainly. But the fact that Thelma and Louise are women makes an dramatic difference in their experience and that of the viewer. Our national mythology has a place for male outlaw heroes. The town I live in takes care to call its fall festival the Defeat of Jesse James Days, but none of the children want to dress up like the bank clerk who died in the foiled robbery, for whom the town’s citizenship award is named. They all want to mimic the James Boys and the Younger Gang. Like Butch and Sundance, Jesse James’ flaunting of social convention stands for wild freedom from constraints and open opportunity to express one’s self. Men are allowed to do this; after all, boys will be boys. They are expected to do this. Women are not allowed to.

Women’s revolt is judged unwomanly as well as illegal. It challenges fundamental expectations about society and people’s roles in it. The oddity of these two women’s outlaw behavior in masculine forms is what gives the film a layer of comedy. Claudia Schmidt and friends once performed a gender reversal radio play of the great Northfield raid; its humor had the same basis. As Thelma and Louise drive they stop putting on their faces and let their hair down. They are able to slip free of some social expectations as well as from specific relationships, but they can’t really escape from being women. Despite recent reforms, our legal system and cultural norms do not recognize women’s captivity within them. The one person who knows what happened to Louise in Texas, the
sheriff, has a glimmer of understanding. But he is unable to break through Louise's reserve or to convince the assembled authority of the law enforcement men in their uniforms. Every effort the women make to free themselves—from walking into the road house, to firing the gun, to blowing up that trucker's rig (the one perfectly satisfying moment in the movie)—only ties them more tightly into the net which finally traps them.

The last frames do not depict an act of freedom because there was only one option, the option available to prisoners. Although this still isn't the ending I would like, I'm convinced that it was the one the whole film required. In those final seconds, the women's few days of escape from not-freedom was unveiled as only an illusion of freedom and the men's freedom which was their model was also revealed to be an illusion. Freedom from constraint and for self-expression is highly regarded in our culture. The pursuit of this misconception drives many of us, personally and collectively, to the edge of a deep cavern. And the cost others pay for our illusion is captivity or exile.

_Thelma and Louise_ may be an accurate portrayal of our society, but I think that there is more truth about freedom in the two fairy tales about love. Although they may be wrong about details and limited by their focus on romance, _Bull Durham_ and _White Palace_ at least hint that real freedom is to be found in relationships. It is freedom with, rather than from or for. Developing an authentic self requires both the constraints imposed by love and the liberty that grows out of it. These constraints produce neither captivity nor exile, so they need not incite revolt or prompt escape. To the contrary, the constraints of this love are made easy by the liberty of love while the constraints which bind us together give direction and purpose to the freedom. Some readers will have recognized that Christ is the model for this freedom also called Christian liberty. Having seen and been profoundly disturbed by this summer's must-see movie, I am all the more convinced that Christian liberty is among the must-retrieve teachings of the church. It offers us true freedom, the sure escape from both not-freedom and the illusion of freedom that our pursuit of freedom from constraint for the purpose of self-expression cannot.
Roger Williams, of course, is the patron saint of American religious freedom. Admiring him is easy; understanding him is not. His writings were passionate, combative, and verbose. Words and arguments spun about his pages, barely constrained by his scholastic proclivity to order from "firstly" to "twelfthly." His prose reflected his life from England, to Massachusetts, to Rhode Island. Cantankerously charming and obscurely brilliant, he confused those contemporaries whom he did not outrage. How does a biographer do justice to such a person?

Edwin S. Gaustad, an eminent scholar of American Protestantism, succeeds admirably. In style, he counters Williams' prolixity with clarity and economy. He lucidly explains abstruse theological points and political niceties while selecting brief quotes which capture his subject's passion and intent. The book itself is superbly organized. Also, the author's scholarship, his sense of the seventeenth century milieu in which Williams functioned, is flawless.

The greatest strength is interpretive. Religious freedom was and is a complex ideal. Thinking out and living that vision were painful and lonely. The author evokes the intricacies of these conflicts by juxtaposing the theme of "exile," a word appearing in six of seven chapter titles, with "liberty." Nuances of "exile" link Williams' Christian pilgrimage with his political and constitutional roles and illuminate both. Understanding Williams through this metaphor prevents psychological or social reductionism as well as triumphant filio-pietism. The portrait is both sensitive and realistic and is clearly a work of literary and historical distinction.

Because religious freedom and the difficulties it provokes are integral to our national and personal experiences, this evocative retelling of Roger Williams' struggle has immediate resonance. For a Christian to read it is to re-encounter the Communion of Saints. For a secularist to read it is to appreciate the agonies and joys of personal liberty.

Richard P. Gildrie


Reading *The Demise of the Devil*, by Susan R. Garrett, is a bit like finally getting to the end of the story about "The Emperor's New Clothes." It is such a relief when someone is finally willing to point out the obvious—in this case, that the New Testament is full of references to the demonic. New Testament scholarship has usually tried to ignore or explain away these references. As Garrett explains in her introduction, this scholarly inattention is largely due to embarrassment. Most scholars see the mythological framework of the New Testament, of which references to magic and demons are a part, as a hopelessly outdated view of reality. Garrett's reading of Luke-Acts shows that acknowledging the presence of magical and demonic elements in the New Testament and regarding such elements as important exegetical data doesn't have to be embarrassing. Her thesis is that "Luke uses... accounts about magicians to make the theological point that Christians wield authority over the devil in the post-Resurrection era." (2) Although Garrett does not address the issue of whether or not Luke's understanding of reality is outdated, her interpretation of Acts raises issues that have a great deal of contemporary relevance.

Even though I thoroughly enjoyed reading the exegetical chapters of the book, I found the first chapter rough going. It reads like the literature review/methodology section of a dissertation which, of course, it originally was. Although some of the points in this chapter, such as the close association between magic, false prophesy, and demonic agency in Jewish and Christian thinking, were important to Garrett's interpretation of Luke-Acts, most of the chapter had little to do with her exegesis in the rest of the volume.

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*The Cresset*
as I finished reading the chapter, I was immensely glad that Garrett was not going to try to analyze the text according to the categories scholars have traditionally used to examine the magic in the New Testament. Instead, she decides that the primary context for interpretation is the narrative world of Luke-Acts. This literary-critical approach produces a convincing interpretation of the way magic and the demonic function in Luke-Acts.

Garrett begins the exegetical section of her book with the statement that "the remarks about Satan in Luke's gospel and in Acts are, if small in quantity, mammoth in significance." (37) In fact, the entire gospel of Luke can be read as a struggle between Jesus and Satan, since Jesus' authority is gained at Satan's expense. Garrett focuses on the issue of Jesus's authority over Satan in three key passages: The Testing in the Wilderness (Luke 4:1-13), The Beelzebub Controversy (Luke 11:14-23), and the Fall of Satan (Luke 10:17-20). In the gospel of Luke, one sign of Satan's authority is the prevalence of sickness, demon possession, and death. So when Jesus returns from the wilderness and begins a ministry of healings and exorcisms, they are accusing him of being a magician. But Jesus' reply leaves no doubt that every healing and exorcism he performs is a loss for Satan and a gain for God, and therefore a defeat of the demonic powers responsible for magic. When Jesus gives seventy of his disciples the authority to preach the gospel, heal the sick and cast out demons, he is prefiguring the time after his death and resurrection when the church will have authority over all the power of Satan.

This understanding of the authority struggle between Jesus and Satan sets the stage for Garrett's interpretation of the three passages involving magicians in Acts: the Story of Simon Magus (Acts 8:4-25), the story of Paul and Bar-Jesus (Acts 13:4-12) and the story of the Seven Sons of Sceva (Acts 19:8-20). In these chapters, the close connection between the defeat of magicians and Christian authority over Satan is examined. Luke understands magic as a form of Satanic power, so Christian authority over Satan is manifested in a particularly powerful way in the confrontations between the apostles and the magicians. Luke also uses these accounts to show that Christians' miracles are not magic, but are an embodiment of the gospel. Christians perform miracles by the power of God; magicians perform them by the power of Satan. Magicians represent all that is hostile to God and the gospel. When Christians defeat magicians, they confirm the truth of the gospel and show that Christ has gained authority over Satan.

The Demise of the Devil is one of the most illuminating and thought-provoking studies of the New Testament that I have read in recent years. Instead of beating a scholarly dead horse that no one outside the field could possibly care about, Garrett takes up a neglected issue and deals with it in a way that ought to appeal to those who are not Biblical scholars, as well as those who are. She has an excellent feel for the text and her exegesis is far richer than a book review can possibly demonstrate. Her argument is clear; by the end of the book, I was convinced that her reading is true to Luke's intentions and faithful to the text. I especially appreciated her reading of the Acts passages and the way she tied them to larger concerns of Luke-Acts. But I was disappointed that she did not tie her exegesis to the larger concerns of her readers.

Like most Biblical scholars, Garrett is content to leave her interpretation in Luke's present and to avoid its implications for our present. In the introduction, she states that one reason Biblical scholars have neglected the issue of magic in the New Testament is that it is "not very relevant in the face of more pressing and contemporary theological questions." (1) Garrett has argued convincingly that one of Luke's concerns is assuring his readers that Christians have present authority over all the power of Satan. What could be more pressing or contemporary than the issue of whether or not the church can claim any kind of authority over the suffering and evil in the world? This is a book worth reading because it raises questions that ought to concern anyone who lives at the end of the twentieth century.

Jenny M. Everts
Nahum 3:16

Your merchants outnumbered the stars in the sky. Grub worms strip, then off they fly.