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Artists, Intellectuals, and the People of God
David Hedendorn

On Becoming a Saint
Michial Farmer

What's OK About Lutherans?
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Larry Norman and the Quandary of Popular Christian Music
Josh Langhoff

VERSE

Damplight
D. S. Martin

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Ray Martin was an artist working primarily in the medium of printmaking, using his virtuoso skills in lithography to create individual prints and beautifully bound artist’s books that frequently integrated his poetry. A commercial book designer and illustrator early in his career, Martin went on to enjoy a decades-long career as a professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His work appears in private and public collections, including the Art Institute of Chicago and Museum of Contemporary Art. The Brauer Museum is fortunate to have many prints and books by Martin in its permanent collection, gifts of the artist and Printworks Gallery.


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whatever is TRUE
whatever is NOBLE
whatever is RIGHT
whatever is PURE
whatever is LOVELY
whatever is ADMIRABLE

if anything is excellent or praiseworthy
—think about such things.

Philippians 4:8
Who Are You?

"Tell me about yourself."

It's a simple request that everyone has fielded at some point. We know the conventional responses: what we do, where we're from. We can talk about family, hobbies, interests. If our interviewer is still curious, we can provide even more information, usually suitably curated for someone we're just getting to know.

Those data points, of course, don't get to the heart of who we are. That takes time. Even after a lot of time, we can still say or do something that confounds those who think they know us well. "Who are you?" they may ask. Or they confound us, and we squint in wonder: "Who are you?" Sometimes we might confound ourselves.

Who are we? And what are we called to? Articles in this issue take on these deeper questions that have more complicated answers.

In his essay, "Updike or Moses? Artists, Intellectuals, and the People of God," David Hedendorf considers how to handle the chasm that can exist between one's professional life and one's church life. He writes about the dilemma of whether to "keep among like-minded peers and neglect the fellowship of believers...[or identify] with the people of God, many of whom don't understand or even respect what we do."

Navigating such diverse communities and environments can cause us to wonder who we really are and where we belong. As we try to make sense of things, Hedendorf suggests that certain people, places, and publications can remind us that we are not alone. These resources, he writes, provide "[n]ot a comprehensive system or orthodoxy, or a hothouse atmosphere of prevailing attitudes and tastes, but stimulating proposals and discoveries that equip us for the world."

I can't think of a better way to describe this issue than that. Yes, you will find our contributors contradict each other at points. In "On Becoming a Saint," for instance, Michial Farmer contends that we are all called "to become perfect (while still remaining finite)"—and that the people around us help form us into saints, as we in turn help form them. A few pages later, Caryn D. Riswold writes in "On Women's Freedom" that Martin Luther's The Freedom of a Christian highlights how Christians are liberated from the exhausting, unattainable impulse toward perfection—therefore allowing them to do good. "If a Christian doesn't need to worry about earning her own salvation," Riswold writes, "she can serve her neighbor more fully." Stimulating proposals, indeed.

Who are we? Jon Pahl suggests that we are the fortunate beneficiaries of the efforts and attitudes of our ancestors; Peter Kerry Powers proposes that we are what we read, and—more than that—we are who we read, how we read, and the questions and assumptions we bring to our reading. We are complicated—which is probably why we tend to stick with conventional responses when someone asks, "Tell me about yourself."

I am especially pleased to feature in this issue something "from the attic," as we do on occasion. In this case, it's really from the University Archives. Sixty years ago, H. Richard Niebuhr delivered the lecture "Martin Luther and the Renewal of Human Confidence" at Valparaiso University as part of the school's centennial celebration. "We human beings grasp and represent all reality...with the aid of analogies, metaphors, ideas, and images," Niebuhr says in his talk. "After a while we never grasp the reality afresh but always see it in the form or image originally used. We even tend to substitute the idea or image for the real." That helps explain why we can confound each other. It also underscores why Luther's direct encounter with the realities of redemption, judgment, grace, and salvation led to such a revolutionary impact. Niebuhr's clear, perceptive reflections remain relevant and enlightening, and it's a thrill to share the text of his lecture with our readers today.

—HGG
As soon as I entered the sanctuary I knew something was up. A small electronic piano had been placed to one side of the altar, to the other side a chair in which a woman softly played a violin. A man moved around adjusting microphones and speakers. I'd never seen either of the two before. My heart sank as I realized we were having a "special service." I'm not a liturgy purist, but I have grown fond of the comforting cadences and the ancient, trustworthy pronouncements. I'm never thrilled when the service veers in some surprising direction. Figuring I must have missed some newsletter item, I settled into a pew and studied the bulletin.

Our guests came from a ministry center (I'm being deliberately vague here, and changing some details) that was affiliated somehow with the denomination. For a half hour they played their instruments and sang, led the congregation in a few songs, and explained the nature of their work at the center. Contributions, we were told, could be made in the narthex following the service. My mind shrank from following the presentation in much more detail than that, but later that day, as if recalling a bad dream, I pieced together my reaction.

The two had been competent instrumentalists and vocalists. Their music hadn't been terrible, merely bland and inoffensive. Trying to characterize the performance now, I keep thinking about Marty and Bobbi Culp, the Saturday Night Live characters portrayed by Will Ferrell and Ana Gasteyer. The couple in church were probably better musicians than Marty and Bobbi, but like the Culps they conveyed an earnest folksiness, and seemed to bask in a limelight that was mostly imaginary. The whole experience, I realized as that Sunday wore on, had been depressingly familiar. I had been here before.

One afternoon many years earlier, during my sophomore year in college, I attended a discussion group that was part of my humanities survey course. About fifteen of us, led by a junior or senior assistant, made our way through a set of study questions. The leader read each question aloud, and we students responded with the answers we'd prepared.

At our school, a denominational institution that preferred the label "Christian college," we examined history and culture from a Christian perspective, and the two-year humanities survey was a centerpiece of this endeavor. Beginning with the first lectures in our freshman year, professors from various departments discussed Western art from a theological point of view corresponding roughly to that of the denomination. We learned to generalize about Raphael, Donne, Rembrandt, Handel, Cervantes, Picasso, Camus, and the rest in a manner consistent with the assumptions pervading the course.

But every now and then a lecturer showed up who wasn't exactly with the program. During the week of our discussion group meeting, our speaker, drafted from the Music Department, had happened to be my band director—the final presider over my troubled relationship with the tenor saxophone. Dr. Jones was charged with delivering the lecture on twentieth-century music, focusing on composers like Stravinsky, Schönberg, and Ives. If there was one overarching idea that Dr. Jones wanted to instill in us, it was that there wasn't
necessarily an overarching idea. These composers were discovering new sounds, he explained. To understand these sounds, we needed to “stretch our ears.” I can see Dr. Jones now, drawing his pinched fingers away from the sides of his head in a stretching motion. *Listen* to these new sounds, he urged us. Explore a different kind of music. Give the initial shock a chance to wear off, and see where the unfamiliar chords and intervals take you. I left the lecture exhilarated and inspired.

In the discussion group, the study guide asked whether the following statement was true or false: “Features of twentieth-century music such as dissonance and atonality express the despair and alienation of modern Western culture.” A voice rang out confidently, without hesitation: “True.” The leader agreed. The class moved on to the next statement.

“Wait,” I said.

I don’t know if “Wait” was exactly what I blurted out, and I don’t recall the precise wording of the study guide statement. But I do remember protesting a bit of glib nonsense that contradicted everything my band director had said. When the discussion leader recalled the lecturer’s actual words, she grudgingly acknowledged that “True” might not be the right answer. Yet everyone, myself included, knew that her amended ruling was wrong. As far as the humanities survey was concerned, “True” was of course the right answer. Dissonance and atonality expressed the despair and alienation of modern Western culture.

For those who devote their lives to creating art, or to reasoning about problems clearly and thoroughly, there are occasions when one inevitably takes offense.

In my junior year I transferred to a large university, a decision I’ve never regretted. But the painful episodes didn’t stop. As long as I’ve attended church and other Christian gatherings, I’ve heard and seen things that make me squirm and cringe. I parry the same questions again and again, usually from those with a limited involvement in the arts. “You write fiction? Oh, you mean like Lewis and Tolkien?” “You write about literature? Um, do you mean book reviews?” The conversations usually trickle off into silence.

I’ve often asked myself whether John Updike or Muriel Spark ever found themselves trapped in these situations. It’s hard to imagine. Updike and Spark professed their Christian faith openly, but spent most of their time, by all accounts, with other famous authors. They wrote for *The New Yorker*, went to swanky parties, enjoyed the pastimes their wealth and celebrity allowed. They squeezed church into the margins of their glamor-
ous lives, when they went at all. They discussed Christianity in interviews, and sometimes dealt with theological issues in their books, but faith didn't help determine their circle of acquaintance the way it does for me and many people I know. They soared high above the tacky music, the trite poetry, the innocently insulting questions.

Why? It couldn't have been just that their greatness excused them from contact with everyday Christians. This elitist explanation strikes me as unworthy of my two heroes. Nor can I accept the slightly less crass elitism, associated with modernists like James Joyce and Thomas Mann, which says any artist is uniquely free, aloof from mundane attachments. Except for a brief infatuation during my freshman year of college, the modernist pose has always felt bogus to me. I do, however, believe that the Christian artist or intellectual has an honorable calling like any other.

Spark and Updike exemplify such callings. Making pictures or music or novels is intrinsically valuable—a form of praise, as Updike liked to say. Being an artist or writer involves certain demands that require no apology or defense.

That being the case, why keep subjecting myself to vapid music, prim moralism, complacent anti-intellectualism? Why endure, as I often did in my younger days, those solemn, wheel-inventing debates about Christian art? Sometimes I want only to escape and do my thing among people who take the validity of art for granted, and who pursue ideas wherever they might lead. I'm tired of wasting time and energy on needless battles.

In "On Not Being a Dove," a chapter in his autobiographical *Self-Consciousness* (1989), Updike links his Christian faith to his views on the Vietnam War that he held during the 1960s. Just as his refusal to condemn American intervention put him at odds with his fellow writers and intellectuals, his faith made him "rather original" in the same circles (141). "I enjoyed the anti-bohemian gesture of my deadpan churchgoing," he admits (142). Not that Updike invested much time or emotion in his local congregation—he describes his attendance as "less than half-hearted" (142), mainly an effort to give his children some religious grounding. He availed himself of spiritual enrichment from time to time, while thumbing his nose at those disapproving doves.

The phrase "deadpan churchgoing" says it all. Sunday worship engages Updike's genuine beliefs, but he wouldn't dream of acknowledging his fel-
low congregants as brethren and peers. His real crowd consists of the secular "bohemians;" the writers and others whom he imagines chuckling at his "deadpan" performance. Like his father-in-law and other "classy" Unitarians he knows (133), the art world delivers him from "that greasy heaviness of Lutheranism, the gloom of its linoleum-floored Sunday-school basements and the sickly milky tints of its stained-glass windows" (132). In *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), Updike probably cringes along with Rabbit at—what else?—the "childish felt banners" in Rabbit's dead lover's church (372). Updike's solution to the tatty decor and dreary company of church is to stick to his brilliant social set, far removed from the folks he visits on Sunday mornings.

I probably wouldn't portray my hero so harshly if his conduct weren't challenged by a powerful counterexample. In the "roll call of faith" in Hebrews 11, the writer devotes particular attention to Moses, who "refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin" (Heb. 11:24–25, ESV). I take it that Moses, had he embraced the fiction that he was related to Pharaoh, could have passed for one classy Egyptian. He was good-looking and physically imposing. He had all the advantages that could smooth his way in society. Instead he identified with the people of God, an oppressed rabble of slaves and nobodies. He chose obscurity and hardship over pleasure and prestige.

Moses shines as a different kind of hero, willing to accept a lowering in social status for the sake of his faith. Who knows, he might have turned out to be a celebrated painter, depicting the intelligentsia and their gods on Pharaoh's mausoleum walls; but he cast his lot with the stubble gatherers and brick makers. He didn't hold himself aloof from the people of God.

Moses and Updike frame the dilemma I've confronted all my life—a dilemma I suspect many Christian artists and intellectuals share. We can fulfill, like Updike, the demands of our art or research, keeping among like-minded peers and neglecting the fellowship of believers. Or we can identify with the people of God, many of whom don't understand or even respect what we do. Achievement and gratification apart from the Christian community, or an embrace of that community while living with mediocrity and a kind of exile— is this the choice we face?

In the late nineteenth century the movement known as pragmatism came into its own, associated with the American philosophers William James, John Dewey, and Charles Sanders Peirce. But asking what difference an idea makes, and putting practical results above abstract principles, have been rules of thumb for centuries. I've always considered St. Paul a particularly nimble pragmatist. Paul ultimately confesses Jesus Christ as Lord, parting ways with the "anti-essentialist," "anti-foundationalist" strain of pragmatism. In his dealings with the complex social world of his time, however, Paul adapts to whatever situation he meets, unconstrained by strict rules and categories. Presenting himself as "all things to all people" (1 Cor. 9:22), he amends his diet so as to satisfy both Jews and Gentiles, navigates the rocky channels between Jewish and Roman law, disputes calmly with synagogue leaders and Greek philosophers. He's the perfect example of how to follow Christ while thriving among different kinds of people.

As an alternative to the Updike-Moses dilemma, Paul rescues us from an impossible choice, while fitting the lives we actually live. Most of us, after all, won't win Pulitzer Prizes and hobnob with famous authors, nor will we be called to renounce a comfortable life and liberate an enslaved people. Like Paul, we'll shuttle from one social circle to the next, figuring out
what's appropriate in the moment. Sometimes we're in a worship service, or at the men's Bible study, or having dinner with a group of Christian friends. Another day we might deliver a paper at a national conference, submit a poem to a prestigious magazine, jury a show of regional paintings. In each instance we're faithful as the situation requires. We fulfill our callings as artists and intellectuals, and we maintain fellowship with the body of Christ.

Belonging to the Christian community is great if it means chatting with that sweet older lady at coffee hour, or keeping it real with a salt-of-the-earth plumber who couldn't care less if we paint pictures or houses. But then there are other times.

Imitating Paul sounds praiseworthy, practical, and sane—especially if our back-and-forth journeying leads to agreeable places. Belonging to the Christian community is great if it means chatting with that sweet older lady at coffee hour, or keeping it real with a salt-of-the-earth plumber who couldn't care less if we paint pictures or houses, or bringing a meal to the woman with a broken leg who thanks us for our time. Likewise, it's thrilling to mix with prominent people in our fields who stimulate our thinking, don't raise their eyebrows at a bit of R-rated realism, and applaud our riskiest, most challenging efforts.

But then there are other times. You find yourself nodding politely as a self-described "bookworm" raves about the latest Christian self-help manual. You're introduced at a meeting as not a writer but a "wordsmith." And if you're a biologist, geologist, or atmospheric scientist, I can only imagine what it's like being lectured on the folly of evolution or climate change by someone who just saw a "really powerful" video during the adult Sunday school hour. Awkward encounters aren't the exclusive province of people in the arts and humanities.

Nor will every venture into the secular realm be pleasantly bracing. At an ice cream parlor one evening during grad school, I heard myself being gossiped about at a neighboring table, by a fellow student who described me as a "born-again Christian"—to a certain extent welcome news to my ears, but at the same time a blunt and crushing putdown in the era of Bakker and Swaggart. On a less personal, but more common level, there are those bleak times when certain "projects," vitally important to those around us, offer no foothold to a religious believer. Whole avenues of thought remain blank and impenetrable, simply because we believe there is a God.

In J.M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), for example, a famous novelist offers these remarks in a speech called "What is Realism?:"

> There used to be a time, we believe, when we could say who we were. Now we are just performers speaking our parts. The bottom has dropped out. We could think of this as a tragic turn of events, were it not that it is hard to have respect for whatever was the bottom that dropped out—it looks to us like an illusion now, one of those illusions sustained only by the concentrated gaze of everyone in the room. (19–20)

Christians can have differing responses to postmodernism, but I think most would feel frozen out by the "we" in this passage, just as unbelievers would feel frozen out by my use of "we" in this essay. It's hard, or at least it doesn't come automatically, for a theist to think along with an assertion like "The bottom has dropped out." Jonathan Culler, an exponent of deconstruction during its heyday in the academy, writes, "Since deconstruction treats any position, theme, origin, or end as a construction and analyzes the discursive forces that produce it, deconstructive writings will try to put in question anything that might seem a positive conclusion and will try to make their own stopping points distinctively divided, paradoxical, arbitrary, or indeterminate" (259–60). Culler's radical skepticism, much in
vogue during my grad school years, turns criticism into an inherently corrosive activity. How can a Christian join a discussion that, from the outset, repudiates "anything that might seem a positive conclusion"?

In short, if choosing between Updike and Moses is untenable, then shuttling like Paul from one sphere to the next might be just about intolerable. In both settings, at various times, we find ourselves alienated, up against a harrowing sense of not belonging. (In the Michaelmas 2018 Cresset, Caroline J. Simon gives a highly nuanced account of feeling like an "odd duck" at a public university, at church, and, at least potentially, at a Christian college.) How can we sustain this perilous back-and-forth between the exciting, sometimes threatening larger world and the pilgrim people of God?

Lately I’ve been thinking again about the Christian college where I spent two restless years. The place could be maddening, as my afternoon in the humanities discussion group shows. But such institutions, along with conferences and journals that harbor Christian artists and intellectuals, have something to offer those who follow Paul’s route, dividing their time between two worlds. Yes, it can be hard to find a full-time home at a Christian college or on the Christian conference circuit. Sooner or later the insularity and the tendency to distort take their toll, not to mention the loss of the wider picture. What these colleges, magazines, and conferences can provide is a respite from the struggle. They’re way stations—places to pause, replenish, and catch our breath—in the midst of our demanding travels.

By replenishment I mean first of all the soul restoration that even people living “the life of the mind” require. Christians who create, write, teach, and exchange ideas need a break from keeping our guard up. We need assurance that it’s okay to be us. And sometimes, frankly, we need emotional support when the Jonathan Cullers get us down. We’re also replenished by our fellow believers’ ideas—not a comprehensive system or orthodoxy, or a hothouse atmosphere of prevailing attitudes and tastes, but stimulating proposals and discoveries that equip us for the world. More than anything, a sojourn at a Christian college or conference, or time spent reading or writing for a Christian journal, reminds us we aren’t alone. The simple awareness that companions labor alongside us can rejuvenate us for our calling.

A sojourn at a Christian college or conference, or time spent reading or writing for a Christian journal, reminds us we aren’t alone. The simple awareness that companions labor alongside us can rejuvenate us for our calling.

When I was taking courses toward a Ph.D. in English during the early 1980s, I lived an almost unbearably divided life. My department, both faculty and students, was under the spell of literary theory, at that time establishing dominance in American universities. Hopefully and somewhat naively, I tried to pick my way through the maze of trends, searching for an approach that would sort with my beliefs. My classmates viewed my Christianity as one more -ism in the fray. My teachers were surprisingly helpful and tolerant. But I always felt uncomfortable and out of place, a bassoonist in a bluegrass band. Meanwhile, I belonged to a small conservative church that had a heavy-handed emphasis on community. Many of the members shared apartments and houses. The leaders tended to be intense young men in some stage of seminary study. Other members worked in the sciences, or were beginning professional careers. My weekday struggles with French poststructuralism had about as much to do with church life as did my roommate’s work on DNA sequencing in a microbiology lab. You just left that stuff at the office and praised the Lord.

I did have a couple of thoughtful church friends with whom I discussed intellectual matters. But as I recall that period of bifurcation now, what probably got me through it more than
anything else—besides my wife, but she came later—was my friendship with two painters, Beverly and Richard, recent MFAs who attended or had friends who attended the church.

**Mostly I remember Richard and Beverly talking quietly and seriously about what they did, who inspired them, what they hoped to do—two artists whose faith undoubtedly informed their lives but who had little use for prescriptions and institutions.**

When Beverly needed someone to sit for her, and even said she'd pay, I gladly obliged. For several weeks, while Joni Mitchell played on the stereo, I donned my old blue sweater and watched Beverly paint. Those mornings in her studio existed in no time or place, far from the snide sparring in the English department and the exhausting certitude of church. When the painting was finished I returned the money, and, after several decades with my parents, the likeness—moody, youthful, with a startling abundance of hair—now graces a wall in our study.

Richard's studio conveyed that same sense of joyful escape. Every now and then he invited me and sometimes one or two others up to the attic to see how his work was going. All sorts of oddities littered sills and shelves, and hung from rafters: rocks and shells, animal skeletons and skulls, any object with a suitably curious shape. Canvases of all sizes and in all stages of completion leaned against the walls.

I knew nothing about painting but what I'd learned years earlier, in that two-year undergraduate humanities course. I hope I had the sense not to say very much. Mostly I remember Richard and Beverly talking quietly and seriously about what they did, who inspired them, what they hoped to do—two artists whose faith undoubtedly informed their lives but who had little use for prescriptions and institutions. They didn't worry about a "Christian approach" to painting, and they took being misunderstood at the church for granted. If we encouraged or supported each other in our respective labors, it was in the way of spontaneous friendship.

Christian colleges, conferences, and journals give essential nourishment to artists and intellectuals who follow Paul's example. It's important to know that these institutional resources exist as we have dealings one day with the secular world, the next with the body of Christ. But thank God for the unscheduled, unsponsored friendships that shape us imperceptibly over long periods of time, or energize us through a single offhand remark. Wherever we meet them and whoever they are, these kindred spirits keep us going with timely insights, and preserve our sense of possibilities. They're inestimable gifts, reminding us, when we're tempted to doubt it, that we belong among the people of God.

David Heddendorf lives in Ames, Iowa. His essays can also be found online at [Front Porch Republic](http://frontporchrepublic.com).

**Works Cited**


On Becoming a Saint

Michial Farmer

"There is only one tragedy in the end," goes a quote usually attributed to Léon Bloy or Charles Péguy: "not to be a saint." The panoply of saints in the Christian liturgical traditions reminds us that our goal—our telos, the thing we were created for—is to join them; our purpose is to become saints, which is to say to become like God, which is to say to become perfect (while still remaining finite). In more formal theological terms, we might say that our ultimate goal is to be totally sanctified—made perfect, made fully human at last, the rift of the Fall bridged at last, once and for all. It is the work of a lifetime, and even more than that if Purgatory exists.

St. Ignatius of Loyola tells us that everything in the universe was put there for our sanctification, and that we must cast aside everything that doesn't help us accomplish that purpose. Thus the process of becoming a saint, as the Book of Hebrews says, demands that we "lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely" (12:1, NRSV). This is the fundamental task of our lives. It also happens to be the most difficult thing in the world.

There are a number of contradictions—or let's call them tensions—in the process of becoming a saint. In The Seven Storey Mountain, Thomas Merton says that it is fundamentally a matter of asking to be a saint, and he says that this is one prayer that is always granted (Merton, 1999: 260–261). In that sense, becoming a saint is a simple thing. But simplicity is not facility, and I think that what Merton is getting at is that becoming a saint involves not a prayer but a long lifetime of prayer—a long lifetime of praying the same grinding, hopeless prayer: "Lord, make me a saint." Our age is an age of distraction—but then every age is an age of distraction from this central, most important desire. One of the major patterns of the Hebrew Bible is the cyclical distraction of God's chosen people, their inability (and, by extension, ours) to want to be saints for long. There are too many other things to want, too many things that would be good and beautiful if we didn't insist on making idols of them. It was God, after all, who told the fleeing Israelites to take the Egyptian gold with them; their sin was taking that good gold and melting it down into a calf to be worshipped. This is our eternal struggle, to allow the good to be the enemy of the perfect. As the old hymn "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" beautifully puts it,

Let thy goodness, like a fetter,
bind my wandering heart to thee:
prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
prone to leave the God I love;
here's my heart, O take and seal it;
seal it for thy courts above.

Thus the prayer is enough to make us saints, but it must be prayed ceaselessly and in the face of every force pulling us away from our highest good. It requires a species of holy simplicity that is anything but simple to attain.

Another tension is that sainthood is a matter of the individual soul but can only be pursued as part of a community. This is what Thomas Aquinas would call a truth of natural reason, which is why Aristotle understood it very clearly.

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without any direct knowledge of the God of the Bible. As he wrote, “He who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity” (Aristotle, 1984: 1253a). We cannot become virtuous without being around people who will help make us virtuous. The same goes for becoming a saint: The people with whom we live in community—formal or informal—

When we love someone, we are able to forgive them. In doing so, we learn (a) that God has forgiven us for our own multitude of sins; and (b) how to forgive even those whom we don’t love, whom we can’t imagine loving. And so we are sanctified, piece by piece.

are the chisels God uses to shape us into saints. Sometimes this takes place consciously, as when Pope Francis calls the family “the first school of human values, where we learn the wise use of freedom” (Francis, 2016: 7.274). In this sense, part of the role of Christian parents is to begin shaping their children into saints and to give them the desire to finish the job. The same goes for many other Christian institutions: churches, Christian colleges and high schools, monasteries, and intentional communities all (at their best) use their boundaries, their common goals, and the encouragement of their members to help one another become saints.

Often, however—perhaps even more often—the process is unconscious on the part of the person serving as God’s chisel. Perhaps they serve as a model of saintliness without even being aware of it. (As we shall see, most saints are not terribly aware that they are saints.) More often, however, they are a sort of grindstone, with their faults, limitations, and neediness rubbing up against us. Because we love them—and because we want to be saints, of course—we swallow the vices that would cause us to respond with disgust or anger. Over time, we are reshaped into saintlier figures, and at some point, we sheepishly realize that we were also grindstones, rougher and heavier than our loved ones. In this sense, marriage is the grindstone par excellence. When my students ask me for advice about getting married, I tell them to marry someone who is a better person than they are but who doesn’t think that’s true. That mutual esteem will be a great help when you’re fighting: You’ll take your annoyance at your spouse and see it as your own fault (which it always is, at least partially). And if they, too, think you’re better than them, they are unlikely to take advantage of the situation.

Loving someone whom you recognize as a sinner is also helpful for recognizing their sins as your own. Czeslaw Milosz’s poem “Initiation” expresses this truth beautifully. He falls in love, “in the phase of life / When our scornful reason is the judge of others” (Milosz, 2001: ll. 2–3), with a vain and gluttonous woman. Their love is deep, powerful, and transformative, and it gives him a clearer view of himself:

Whatever was naïve and shy in her
Or fearful in the disguise of self-assurance
Moved me, so that—we were so alike—
In an instant, not judging anymore,
I saw two sins of mine: vanity, gluttony.
(Milosz, 2001: ll. 9–13)

When we love someone, we are able to forgive them. In doing so, we learn (a) that God has forgiven us for our own multitude of sins; and (b) how to forgive even those whom we don’t love, whom we can’t imagine loving. And so we are sanctified, piece by piece.

Another way that other people help us to become saints comes through their occasional helplessness. I don’t have children, but my friends who do have often reported being struck by the absolute need of these tiny beings put in their care. When I see parents of newborns and they tell me that they haven’t slept through the night for weeks, I am amazed at the weary joy that they express in taking care of their
children. And while I am certain that they don't feel that joy at every moment—while I am certain that they have dark moments when they are frustrated with their bawling offspring and when they perhaps even wish they hadn't been born—I am equally certain that their joy, however imperfect, is the fruit of the spirit, that their child's absolute, demanding helplessness has forced them to burn away at least some of their own selfishness.

Likewise, many of us will be forced (I will not be so sentimental as to call it an opportunity, though on some level of course it is) to be caregivers for our parents or spouse or some other loved one who can no longer take care of themselves. This must be one of the most painful experiences there can be. I watched my own mother pour herself out entirely in taking care of my grandmother in the progressive throes of Alzheimer's disease, and the stress and pain almost killed her. But her love for her mother burned through her anger and frustration, and I am certain she is a saint in a way I can't even imagine, having not made that sacrifice myself. In the end, my grandmother needed a level of care that my mother could not provide, and she had to go to a nursing home. I think there is a saint-making quality in sending our loved ones into professional care, as well, if only because it reminds us of the limits of our own abilities. And this is especially true if, like my mother, we have actually hit those limits first.

Thus, the joy of becoming a saint is always twinned by the painful process of actually becoming one. Dante's *Purgatorio*, probably the best thing ever written about Christian sanctification, illustrates this point wonderfully. To an outside view (especially a non-Christian one), Purgatory looks an awful lot like Hell, which Dante and Virgil, his guide through the afterlife, have just left: its denizens are being physically tormented in ways appropriate to the patterns of their sin during their lives. But the torments of Hell are eternal and cyclical: Paolo and Francesca, for example, condemned for their lust, will spin around in their horrible whirlwind forever. The pain of Purgatory, on the other hand, is directional and temporary (even though people are often there for thousands of years). The lustful have to run through enormous walls of flame while reciting examples of chastity. But while it takes a long time for most people, they slowly make progress toward sainthood. And, perhaps more remarkably, they sing songs of praise and penance while they do so: They know where they are going, and they are joyous to be on the road there, even though it is a long road full of suffering. In fact, it is the suffering that assures them they are on the right road.

**Vigilance always risks sliding into a certain sort of neurotic self-obsession incompatible with holiness.**

Dante is only following St. James's lead here: “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2–4, NRSV). In other words, it takes suffering to become a saint, but that very suffering gives us the joy of sanctification. No wonder so many early Christians were so eager to be martyred.

If I'm correct that becoming a saint is about the ceaseless prayer to become a saint, then we're ultimately talking about a kind of eternal vigilance—eternal self-consciousness, it might appear, a constant weighing of our actions and motivations. And so arises another tension, because that vigilance always risks sliding into a certain sort of neurotic self-obsession incompatible with holiness. One of Christ's great paradoxes demonstrates as much: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 16:24–25, NRSV). Sainthood thus has a self-forgetting quality that is dissonant with the self-reflection we associate with it. Madeleine L'Engle points out that self-consciousness is an impediment to
human flourishing, which does not flow immediately from the intellect: “The people I know who are the most concerned about their individuality, who probe constantly into motives, who are always turned inwards towards their own reactions, usually become less and less individual, less and less spontaneous, more and more afraid of the consequences of giving themselves away” (L’Engle, 1972: 31). Surely there is a morbid quality to much of our inwardness that is more likely to lead to the psychiatrist’s couch than to the saint’s medal.

But like the other tensions of sainthood, I think this one is not as dramatic as it might initially appear. At its heart, the prayer “Make me a saint” is not really a form of self-consciousness, and when it is, it becomes a pernicious Pelagianism: “I will make myself a saint by the sheer force of my will and effort.” Such efforts are doomed to fail; the New Testament and the traditions of the Church are quite clear that our efforts cannot secure salvation for us, and indeed, unaided, they can’t sanctify us, either. If we try to become saints by a constant re-evaluation of our motives, it won’t happen. But the prayer “Make me a saint” is ultimately a prayer to forget myself, a prayer that my motives, my pettiness, my vulgarity, my distraction—that I myself will not stand in the way of my sanctification as I so often do.

There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black n—— in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. (O’Connor, 1971: 508)

Thus, sainthood is more radical than we could possibly suspect: We develop virtues—real virtues—only to realize as we go through the process that those virtues were mere stopgaps on the way to the heavenly virtues that Christ has in store for us. Becoming a saint means the constant loss of something dear to us, and the gradual receiving of our true selves in recompense.

**Works Cited**


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**GETTING THE BITTER OUT**

I refuse to let any bitter root remain in this small patch of land I am tending. To the beets and parsnips and carrots, I will speak sweet things, coax every pale rutabaga to burst forth from the seed in one long exclamation. Every day, I will risk stings to scoop honey from the comb, letting it drip onto the earth’s skin like a leaky faucet whose steadiness will still save the parched throat. I will tell each turnip of the sugar that’s coming when its thin slices rest, roasting in the pan. I refuse to wallow in self-pity for all that this garden has not given me yet. I will gather each strong shoot with gentle hands, then and simmer, releasing scents that slake hunger on their own. And I will plate and purple beets beside carrot coins that draw out the rosy hue of each radiant radish. Surely then out, broiled out, steamed for me to do with this lot slowly, savor, and swallow.

Lisa Rieck
ORTHODOXY

"It's what's inside the shell that matters,
And it's alright if readers play with shells." — Czesław Milosz

My bounds were drawn in pleasant places
where my father called me out.

Running while he worked I was free to imagine
my way across infinite worlds, out of breath

at those lines inscribed for me:
the cut of the creek, the bank of

the river, the fallen fence shown to me
as to Job: I was the tide, the sea

to whom Father said, "This far
you may come and no further."

Of course I confounded my landscape,
testing the pitch of his voice and patience

making him transgress what he'd inscribed
to scoop me up and place me back beside him.

But how much room there was for this
explorer of mysteries to be forgiven.

Lyle Enright
What's OK About Lutherans?

Jon Pahl

Once he would gladly have given everything to be rid of this agony [of despair], but he was kept in waiting; now it is too late, now he would rather rage against everything and be the wronged victim of the whole world and of all life, and it is of particular significance to him to make sure that he has his torment on hand and that no one takes it away from him... What demonic madness—the thought that most infuriates him is that eternity could get the notion to deprive him of his misery.

—Søren Kierkegaard

We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure, but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world. To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.

—Jack Gilbert

Historical narratives—those stories we tell about how our ancestors have negotiated the ruthless furnace of this world, as Gilbert puts it, can become self-fulfilling prophecies. When those narratives depict decline, they tend to evoke despair. This is true whether those depictions of decline are accurate or not (with accuracy of course depending on the criteria one uses to measure success or whatever might be the opposite of decline; call it, for the sake of argument, "progress"). In any event, to reiterate—narratives of decline tend to evoke despair, which, as Kirkegaard taught us, produces reactions in the either-or forms of fight and flight. Neither reaction is authentic, that is, in keeping with the human as spirit-in-flesh, but both reactions are widespread.

When a historical narrative of decline breeds despair, an institution, congregation, or individual might retreat into the basics of everyday existence that seem to provide solace, hunkering down in the comfort of their familiars. This may in fact be the stubbornness that offers delight. Alternatively, an institution, congregation, or individual might react to the despair of decline with a futile and even Quixotic fight—a rage against everything as if a congregation, institution, or individual was “the wronged victim of the whole world and of all life.” Each of these reactions to despair might be characteristic of some Lutherans in the United States, which is my primary field for inquiry.

I do not want to dismiss the quite real reasons that some might see decline among Lutherans—whether demographic, political, cultural, sexual, liturgical, theological, or what-have-you. Name your decline and hang onto it, if you must. But I want to explore a different kind of question: what's OK about Lutherans today?

My approach is historical, but I encourage you to take your own disciplined approach to the topic and come up with your own answer. Succinctly, then, my answer in the form of a thesis is this: Lutherans in the United States today represent almost surely the most widely literate, financially secure, historically aware, culturally open, theologically informed, and socially engaged group of believers in the five-hundred-year history of Lutherans, and among the most widely literate, financially secure, historically aware, culturally open, theologically informed, and socially engaged group of believers in the history

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of Christianity. That we do not recognize these facts I am quite willing to attribute to demonic madness, which is of course nothing new in history but always manifests in distinctive, historically-specific symptoms that require distinctive, historically-specific modes of exorcism.

**Literacy**

In the sixteenth century, which we recently celebrated in an orgy of Reformation nostalgia, the literacy rate was, by one estimate, 1 percent of the population. Allow me to reiterate, for emphasis: in Luther’s Germany, maybe only one out of a hundred people could read anything. If you recall that the *95 Theses* were posted in Latin, you realize that the number of those who could decipher that iconic document can be reduced even further. Luther, to his credit, recognized this gap—and his *Small Catechism* was one remedy, as was his quite specific recommendation that every village have a school for both boys and girls. One economic historian even suggested modifying Max Weber and specifying that the Protestant ethic was really the Protestant *reading* ethic.

In the Americas, then, Lutherans took Luther’s advice about books, and worked with believers of many other persuasions to establish a norm of universal schooling that many of us now simply take for granted. Securing the universality of that norm was no small accomplishment. It required organization, advocacy, and deep investments of practical resources. Many Lutherans have, by virtue of a two-realms theology that acknowledges the value of secular excellence, been completely comfortable supporting public schools and sending their children to them. Others (notably the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod) have chosen a different course and established private schools. But the point remains the same across the board for all U.S. Lutheran groups: literacy has been valued and supported—at least until a certain point.

That point takes us into the topic of gender, about which I’ll share two stories that may suggest something like progress. The first is about my Aunt Gertrude Wastel. Gertie, born on a farm outside Shawano, Wisconsin, in 1918, attended school through eighth grade. At that point, her parents (my grandparents)—good German Lutherans—thought she had had enough learning and ought to join the workforce. Similarly, my mother, Barbara, born in 1935 and raised among Norwegian Lutherans on a farm near Gillett, Wisconsin, wanted to go to college, but her parents did not support that desire. In contrast, my father, Fred, born in 1931, was pushed to finish high school and then to attend Valparaiso University.

Today, such gender-based exclusions from access to education are almost unimaginable among U.S. Lutherans, although I suspect the prejudice behind those exclusions still exists in some contexts. Nevertheless, in my experience over the past few decades in Lutheran higher education, I have observed that more female *students* (if not faculty and administrators) than males serve as leaders at undergraduate institutions such as St. Olaf College, Gustavus Adolphus College, and others affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I am willing to wager a similar dynamic takes place in Lutheran campus ministries and at many of the nine LCMS college campuses across the country. And in recent years, the number of women attending ELCA seminaries has reached, if not surpassed, the number of men.

I do not want to get bogged down on the matter of Lutheran advocacy for women’s education. The point is simply this: American Lutherans have dramatically changed the rampant illiteracy that once characterized their kin and other Christians in early modern Europe and early modern America. This is undeniable progress, akin to the changes in the economic well-being of ordinary Lutherans in the Americas.

**Finances**

Sticking with our Weberian theme, then, the history of Lutherans and economic life suggests that by many measures, Lutherans have done well as industrialization and market economies have expanded. Many observers have lauded the Nordic model of economic development; those Lutherans in Norway and Denmark and Sweden and Finland and Germany have flourished in
market economies since the sixteenth century. But what about Lutherans here in North America? There are plenty of statistics, but two vignettes illustrate the historical trajectory I see.

In 1652, Governor Johan Printz of New Sweden (now Delaware and Southeastern Pennsylvania) coveted the hand grain mill of one of his subjects, Clemet the Finn. So Printz took it. When Clemet understandably protested, Printz—who was over 300 pounds and a veteran of the Thirty Years' War—beat Clemet to a pulp, in church. He then sentenced Clemet to eight days in prison, and then "hard labor" on Printz's farm, for "some weeks." Clemet's fate was an extreme case of the economic norm among many of the first Lutherans in the Americas. Some were slaves. Some were indentured servants. Some were refugees. Many were peasant farmers. All were immigrants. Most were poor.

Today, by way of contrast, most Lutherans are economically OK. For instance, to stay with anecdotes, last year I was invited to a dinner honoring James Scott upon his retirement from the Thrivent Financial Board of Directors. Nearly 100 guests attended this event at the Ritz-Carlton in Philadelphia. It was OK. And to delve very briefly into one simple statistic, currently Thrivent (still largely representing Lutheran constituents) posts assets under management/advisement of $136 billion dollars.

More substantively, perhaps, as signs that Lutherans are OK economically, are the educational, medical, and service institutions Lutherans have built. Pastors routinely lament congregational giving, but I suspect that Lutherans exemplify what Robert Putnam and his team reported on in American Grace: that people of faith in the United States actively participate in civil society and charitable endeavors. (There's a dissertation or three waiting to happen on the histories and economics of Lutheran social ministries such as Lutheran World Relief and the other agencies of Lutheran Services in America.)

At the same time, given the country's rising inequality of income and wealth since roughly 1979, many Lutherans in the economic middle class have suffered. Many other Lutherans—those in working class and service vocations, those without the privilege of a quality education, and those who have fallen into the prison-industrial system—have suffered even more as social compacts have attenuated and unions have been systematically undermined. But these changes are reversible, and even taking into account these detrimental trends, the general economic well-being and daily lifestyle of the average Lutheran today is undoubtedly better than that of her counterpart in the era of Clemet the Finn. Finally, if the ELCA's social statements carry any weight as indicators of historic Lutheran commitments, and I believe they do, then sufficient, sustainable livelihood for all is the admirable ethical telos toward which U.S. Lutherans ought to (and, at least to some degree, already do) orient their institutional, congregational, and individual economic action.

**Historical Awareness**

A third, perhaps surprising, aspect in which Lutherans are OK in North America today is in historical awareness. Many years ago, University of Chicago historian Sydney E. Mead observed that Americans (by which he meant generally U.S. citizens of European descent) by and large lack any sense of history or tradition. Today, Mead's observation manifests frequently as amnesia about anything that happened prior to the last tweet.

Lutherans, by contrast, do retain at least some sense of historical awareness, both right in our name and running throughout central congregational practices such as scripture reading, preaching, and the sacraments. Even more, those practices now bear the indelible mark of the historical consciousness that has characterized modernity since the rise of the discipline in the
late nineteenth century. Congregations and individuals now read scripture (if decades of seminary education have accomplished anything) with at least some awareness of the gulf between ancient and contemporary contexts. And while today's preaching may not be as beholden to historical-critical exegesis as it was twenty years ago, it's the rare Lutheran preacher who doesn't bring some historical insight into her sermons. As for the sacraments, one of the truly significant accomplishments of Lutherans since the 1960s (and the Second Vatican Council) has been the rediscovery of the historic liturgy—including in many cases weekly communion. Such historical awareness of tradition as a guiding pattern, or "the living faith of the dead," as Jaroslav Pelikan elegantly put it, differentiates Lutherans from those traditionalists who, again in Pelikan's terms, manifest the dead faith (or we might even say more tragically, the killing faith) of the living.

One of the virtues of historical awareness is humility (and I am aware of the irony of speaking as a devotee of the discipline who also routinely violates this virtue in practice). Historical reasoning makes one aware of precedents, limits, contingency, and causes beyond the immediate and circumstantial. It is no surprise that Lutheran historians have been well represented in the field over recent decades—Martin E. Marty, L. DeAné Lagerquist, Jaroslav Pelikan, Betty DeBerg and many others. Finally on this point, not all of the Reformation anniversary celebrations were mere nostalgia. My colleagues Tim Wengert, Kirsi Stjerna, and others put together with Fortress Press The Annotated Luther, six volumes that advance key aspects of sixteenth-century theological writings for a new generation of English-language readers. Such historical awareness is not only OK; it is in fact a vital aspect of how Lutherans can contribute to a healthier public theology.

**Public Theology**

Speaking of public theology—there are those ELCA social statements, which, whatever you think about how they have been used (or not) in congregations, reflect a historical record of theological deliberation and sophistication that is truly unprecedented in the history of American Lutheranism. Much has been made of the supposed "confessional" integrity of prior versions of Lutheran theological reflection (take your pick from among the writings representative of the Ministerium of Pennsylvania, General Synod, General Council, or Synodical Conference, down to the ALC, LCA, and LCMS), but most of them reflect rather starkly parochial worldviews not up to speed with contemporary scientific, social scientific, and humanistic understandings of their era (in contrast to Luther's own embrace of the humanities). Similarly, many if not most of the statements that characterize Lutheran public theology from the sixteenth century until the very recent past also were not as much deliberative documents reflecting robust debate as theological tours de force, penned by a single (or several) prominent "experts," usually seminary professors.

Now, nothing against my predecessors at Philadelphia or Gettysburg or any of the other dozens of seminaries that dot American Lutheran history, but much of the "reasoning" in these prior arguments (see the debates over predestination or the lodges in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Lutheran circles) reflected internecine pissing contests marked by dogmatic hair-splitting. Many of the most hotly debated topics (dancing, for instance) suggest pale efforts by Lutherans to catch up to American evangelical moralizing and denominational (or congregational) politics. Such obtuse reasoning came from representatives still reflecting a former state-church tradition not fully attuned to democratic processes.

In other words, the sharp differences between Lutherans in the United States today—notably between ELCA and LCMS Lutherans—reflect (ironically) democratic progress. Lutherans have found that we do not have to take on face value the authority of any single voice or source. This is—in contrast to, say, mid-twentieth century German Lutherans—a very good thing.

It suggests fertile ground for future Lutheran work in ecumenism, interfaith activism, and resistance to empire—which is, I believe, a contextual contingency our first Christian ancestors would have understood. Put as a question: if the story of the twentieth century of U.S. Lutheran history
was the unification of many diverse immigrant churches into two large national churches, what will the story of the twenty-first century be?

It is always perilous for a historian to turn predictive—so I shall resist that temptation. But U.S. Lutherans have been at the forefront of patient ecumenical collaboration; the kinds of rapprochement between Roman Catholics and Lutherans, as evident in the 2017 Lutheran World Federation publication *From Conflict to Communion*, are impossible to imagine without the contributions and impetus of U.S. Lutherans. On the national level, there are signs of thawing in the LCMS (especially among young people), and the hottest issues that have bedeviled Lutheran unity—notably gender and sexuality—may be cooling (again, among young people) in ways that can make progress possible. And pressures that have necessitated interdenominational and interreligious engagement on the national and international levels—from terrorism to militarism—are now in play even on the local level. Likewise, technologies from air travel to social media have connected representatives of faith traditions in unprecedented ways, and made cooperation and resistance both possible and exciting.

All in all, Lutheran public theology centers on the notion of *vocation*: the ways we apply our gifts and skills in particular times and places. It is in their vocations—as nurses and doctors and lawyers and engineers and parents and soldiers and students—that millions of U.S. Lutherans consciously struggle to articulate and to engage their faith in meaningful ways as citizens.

Of course, some cultural diversity exists among Lutherans. Lutherans also experience diversity through media and popular culture in ways that have changed attitudes on the ground, if not yet in the pews or in liturgical practice.

For instance, consider the role of film, music, and television in U.S. Lutheran lives. I haven’t seen the study on Lutheran media habits because it hasn’t been conducted, but anecdotally, Lutheran youth, for one demographic, have moved well beyond Bach and Ingmar Bergman in their musical and cinematic consumption.

In my own effort to explore how Lutherans might look to media to better understand race, I offered a class in 2016 at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia on the topic “Do Black Lives Matter in the Media?” That painful historical study (have you seen *Birth of a Nation*?), led one student (now preacher), Lenny Duncan, to produce a documentary film, *Do Black Churches Matter in the ELCA?* In good Lutheran fashion, Duncan’s answer to his question is a paradoxical both “no” and “yes.” It is both an indictment and
a prescription. Duncan has followed up that film with a book: Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the U.S., due out in April.

The film's music was provided by Tangled Blue—Aimee and Joel Pakan, who would not (statistically) be likely to be counted as advocates of diversity or movement beyond Lutheran monoculture, but who recently wrote and recorded a liturgy that highlights the harmonies and rhythms of the African American Indian cultures of the Tremé neighborhood in New Orleans, where they lived for six months. They exemplify an openness and willingness to move beyond Lutheran monoculture.

But the film is, finally, Duncan’s. As an African American man who is outspoken about his prior incarceration, Duncan has been active among many of the urban synods of the ELCA and urban districts of the LCMS, the myth of a Lutheran monoculture has been exploded by liturgies every Sunday in literally dozens of languages.

Among many of the urban synods of the ELCA and urban districts of the LCMS, the myth of a Lutheran monoculture has been exploded by liturgies every Sunday in literally dozens of languages.

In a movement called decolonizing Lutheranism. Decolonizing seeks many goals, but one in particular speaks to a historical point:

Since early Christians were never bound to respectability and social perceptions of right behavior and often boldly contradicted these standards by lifting up the lowly and the downtrodden, #decolonize-Lutheranism believes that we must all do likewise. Because of this, every member of the church is to be aware of and respect all of the voices in the room, not just the most evident or numerous, for each sings a part in God's chorus.

This metaphor of a chorus is a helpful way to recognize and to celebrate the existing cultural diversity among Lutherans. Among many of the urban synods of the ELCA and urban districts of the LCMS, the myth of a Lutheran monoculture has been exploded by liturgies every Sunday in literally dozens of languages, and in marvelously diverse music, clothing, and other arts. The kinds of intercultural experiments documented several years ago by Heidi Neumark in Breathing Space are beginning to bear fruit.

Social Engagement, Faithful Living, and Justice

Finally, on the matter of what's OK with Lutherans in the U.S. today, let’s talk about social ministry organizations as examples of faithful Lutherans living on behalf of greater justice and peace. As made clear in the essays in Carter Lindberg and Paul Wee’s The Forgotten Luther: Reclaiming the Social-Economic Dimension of the Reformation (Lutheran University Press, 2016), Luther had the quaint notion of a community chest to address the kinds of needs that would today be met by social service institutions. Very few of the initiatives that Luther imagined and proposed, and that in some cases were instituted in various cities and towns in early modern Europe, carried over to North America. Lutherans in New York and Pennsylvania and Georgia and the Virgin Islands were by and large on their own economically.

By the mid-late nineteenth century, however, most Lutherans in the United States were aware of something called "inner missions." Many of these agencies might have a deaconess working in (or running) a hospital or orphanage, for example. These were often started by or based within a congregation, which allowed ordinary Lutherans to learn about, contribute to, and get involved with these agencies. Unfortunately, it also meant that these agencies drew from a narrow economic pool, exhibited ethnic and linguistic parochialism, and frequently perpetuated a patronizing paternalism that necessitated the rise of more standardized professional practices (as found, for instance, in the emerging discipline of social work associated with Jane Addams and the Chicago School).

Today, Lutheran Services in America repr-
sents 300 agencies across the United States with revenues of nearly $21 billion. Much of this funding (varying from agency to agency) comes from state and federal grants, in addition to individual donations. Governmental ties surely bring reporting burdens, but they also require professional standards of accountability and best practices to which LSA members, in my observation, have sought assiduously to meet.

More substantively, perhaps, while governmental cooperation and the adoption of professional business practices by LSA members might appear to signal the "secularization" of agencies and even a diminution of Lutheran identity, this is not necessarily the case. If we understand Lutheran identity as inherently relational (focusing on others) rather than tribal (focusing on our own) then perhaps the expanded scope and reach of Lutheran agencies beyond "inner" mission intent makes intrinsic (and even theological) sense.

Take the case, briefly, of Lutheran World Relief. LWR originated as a Lutheran response to Lutheran need: after World War II, one-fifth of the world's Lutherans were homeless, and far more suffered economically. In cooperation with the U.S.-led Marshall Plan, and in coordination with other Lutheran and ecumenical agencies, U.S. Lutherans organized LWR to ship clothing, blankets, food, and other commodities to Lutheran communities across northern Europe. Originally intended as a temporary relief effort, LWR endures today because U.S. Lutherans developed a global perspective and came to understand that ecclesiastical commitments entail social responsibilities.

Today, the majority of LWR projects do not serve Lutherans, but serve where need is greatest—in Sudan, India, Guatemala. The LWR website clearly and forcefully articulates the organization's Lutheran identity. And LWR has embraced a goal of "sustainable development" that moves far beyond collecting and shipping blankets and care packages, while still recognizing the important role these activities play to engage local Lutherans in service.

If we think of the church in four concentric circles—congregational, synodical, church-wide, and social ministries—it is to the credit of Lutherans, and not at all a sign of "decline," that social ministries are the one aspect of the church that has grown in qualitative and quantitative ways over the past few decades.

The devil's most effective temptation, as Paradise Lost makes clear, is to elicit sympathy by fixating our attention on suffering; there is no end to the suffering of the world. Yet to yield to this temptation invariably leads us to fixate on our own suffering, and thus to neglect to perceive, much less to appreciate and to enjoy, the real gifts of delight (the Edens, if you will) that exist in our lives. History, as a record of the living past, is no exception to this temptation to obsess about our own fragility and victimization. As Steven Pinker contends in The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence has Declined, it is proximity and perspec-

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demagogues can exploit; there is no absence of modern-day messiahs offering to make Lutherans great again.

Certainly, apocalyptic doom is a dread worth acknowledging, and I believe the issue that demands the most urgent and collective action from Lutherans, Christians, and all people of faith, is climate change. A Sixth Extinction truly looms as the Melancholia of our grandchildren's future. But however stony the road our ancestors trod, we can also, I hope, be encouraged to face our own struggles by recognizing how far we've come, by faith. Recently, the African Descent Lutheran Association celebrated its thirtieth anniversary with a gala Eucharist at Lutheran Church of the Holy Communion in Philadelphia. In that service, we poured libations to our ancestors—to those literal and metaphorical parents and grandparents who went before us. It is in that spirit that I offer this meditation of what's OK about Lutherans in the United States—lest, as Gilbert put it, in our attention to injustice we wind up only praising the devil.


Endnote

For another translation, see Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* (Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 82: “Precisely upon this torment the man directs his whole passion, which at last becomes a demoniac rage. Even if at this point God in heaven and all his angels were to offer to help him out of it—no, now he doesn’t want it, now it is too late, he once would have given everything to be rid of this torment but now that’s all past, now he would rather rage against everything, he, the one man in the whole of existence who is the most unjustly treated, to whom it is especially important to have his torment at hand, important that no one should take it from him—for thus he can convince himself that he is in the right. This at last becomes so firmly fixed in his head that for a very peculiar reason he is afraid of eternity—for the reason, namely, that it might rid him of his (demonically understood) infinite advantage over other men, his (demonically understood) justification for being what he is. It is himself he wills to be; he began with the infinite abstraction of the self, and now at last he has become so concrete that it would be an impossibility to be eternal in that sense, and yet he wills in despair to be himself.

Ah, demoniac madness! He rages most of all at the thought that eternity might get it into its head to take his misery from him!”

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THE POET DREAMS OF THE NUN & THE ARCHITECT

You who never met
who built an invisible castle who built a hidden city
who left one order to build another who named one catacomb after another
From her Prologue: From his Preface:
"May this account render Him glory and..." "These remarks were intended to appear..."
living stones dead bones
To build the unseen, remove the rubble
to pave a path to God to pillar collapsing streets from beneath
Holy the stone the builders rejected Holy the rejection, holy the acceptance
Holy the stone that yields water Holy the city without residents
Holy, holy, holy heaven Holy preserving of earth
Make holy the hope of stones

Anna Elkins
WORKS OF LITERARY CRITICISM ARE LITTLE bought and little read. Even in the heady days when graduate students believed literary theory would save the world when literature itself had failed, literary scholarship depended completely on a trickle-down economy of cultural influence. Still does. A good book might conquer its hundreds; the great book, with a large advertising budget, its thousands. But those are legendary and few.

Readers are hardly at fault for this state of affairs: critics largely write for one another for all kinds of good and not so good reasons. However, readers would do well, occasionally, to read more than the online book review to find the next hot thing to read this summer. By way of discussing three new works on African American literature and religion—Wallace Best's *Langston's Salvation: American Religion and the Bard of Harlem* (NYU, 2017), M. Cooper Harriss's *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Theology* (NYU, 2017), and Josef Sorett's *Spirit in the Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics* (Oxford, 2016)—I hope to encourage readers to read beyond the review, indeed to read beyond themselves, taking up works that tell them not only what to read, but that also help all of us as readers inhabit new ways of reading.

Unlike breathing or the beating of the heart, reading is a skill developed within particular cultures, each with its own values and peculiarities, and each with its own notion of excellence. At its best, literary criticism models forms of readerly virtuosity that stretch our imagination beyond the straightforward pleasures of enjoying a good story. The best criticism allows us to know literature within a cultural ecosystem of reference and connection. In the normal course of things, we pluck books from the Barnes & Noble bookshelf or the Amazon algorithm as we might pluck up a flower in a field, enjoying (or not) the pleasure of the text. Literary criticism reads the role that flower plays in the field. It considers the ways it depends on or perhaps destroys other features of the field, or perhaps the ways other cultural ecosystems consider it a weed or an invasive species to be eradicated. While reading literary criticism is not always a walk in the park, doing so can make our pleasures more aware and engaged, delivering enhanced or other pleasures, much as we might take pleasure in not only the scent of the air, but in being able to name the flowers and the trees and understand our relationship to them and theirs to one another.

The three books taken up here differ as forms of reading, each with different virtues. Together they signal a new and deepening awareness of the religious and theological dimensions of African American literary history. Such dimensions should be evident, but clearly, they are not. As Josef Sorett rightly points out, "the fields of religion and literature largely proceed along separate trajectories" (1), to the deficit of our understanding of both. My own work has noted that the "separate but equal" status of religious and literary studies has clearly harmed our understanding of American literature and its cultural contexts, and it seems to be part of Sorett's argument that the study of religion has been harmed by too little attention to the participation of literature and other cultural practices in the formation of our religious ideas and observances.
The appearance of these three books also points to the welcome diversification of the study of religion and literature itself. The very idea of “religion and literature” has been dominated historically by European and European American literary forms, theological frameworks, and ecclesiastical and religious traditions. Consequently, one must say, it has been dominated by an implicit whiteness. For the past twenty years, the study of religion and literature has been slowly diversifying, not quite keeping pace with the rapidly changing religious and cultural landscape, but changing nonetheless. These books punctuate and underscore that change, insisting that we see our literary present and past differently. They suggest as well that we must become more self-reflective about the ways we read, understanding not only that reading has religious dimensions, but that these religious dimensions have political and social incarnations and consequences. These books ask us to think not only about how we are readers, but also to think about how we are raced and how we are religious, and what those three things might have to do with one another.

Both Best’s Langston’s Salvation and Harriss’s Ellison’s Invisible Theology are studies of a single author. We get a rich picture of the relationship of religion to the literature and life of Hughes and Ellison respectively. Because a writer’s reputation usually grows from a handful of signature pieces, the nuance of a literary life can be reduced to a talismanic work or two, or to a concept that stands metonymically for the corpus as a whole. Wallace Best especially does good work in showing that Hughes thought deeply and wrote often about matters of religion throughout his life, despite the common perception of Hughes as irreligious or anti-Christian. Although it never seems to me that Best clarifies what he means by Hughes’s quest to understand salvation on his own terms rather than that of his Christian upbringing—“Langston’s Salvation”—he demonstrates that Hughes regularly addressed questions of ultimate meaning, the nature of God, the problem of God’s absence in the face of black suffering, and the hope that God might yet speak. Moreover, Best notes that Hughes may have been more of a churchman than critics or casual readers usually realize, at least later in life. He devoted his late career to the writing of gospel plays such as “Black Nativity,” “The Prodigal Son,” and others. While he refused to have his funeral in a church and insisted on no preachers speaking words over him, he was a member of St. Phillip’s Episcopal Church in Harlem, the longtime spiritual home to others of the black intellectual elite such as W. E. B. Du Bois.

At times, Best may strain too much to find in Hughes a devoutly religious man when Hughes himself preferred being as opaque in matters of personal spirituality as he was in matters of sexuality. Best sometimes takes at face value the elder Hughes’s judgment on his own poetry as an agnostic younger man, particularly the period of Hughes’s socialism. Consequently, Best tries to create a picture of a consistent religious self in Hughes where I doubt one actually exists. Indeed, it’s unclear that consistency could exist in the course of his or any life. Faith, like all else in our Heraclitan existence, changes, waxes and wanes, grows and fractures and repairs itself again over the course of a life. Nevertheless, Best is surely right that Hughes engaged with religion regularly, and his spiritual wrestling was lifelong, and from all accounts deeply felt and authentic. Best’s singular focus on the author models a reading that recognizes no work stands on its own as an island, but can and should be read within the context of an author’s
entire career, since writers "read" themselves as much as they are read by others.

More so than Best's reading of Hughes, M. Cooper Harriss's effort to help us understand Ralph Ellison as literary theologian butts against the wall of his subject's own reticence. Unlike Hughes, who produced a plethora of religiously related material throughout his life, Ellison's theology really is invisible in much of his published work and even in much of the archive. Harriss's book is in large part an effort to make manifest the invisible, to tease out a theology implied by context and allusive references when it is not explicit in the work at hand. Harriss's ingenuity effectively puts Ellison in critical conversation with major theological figures of the mid-century such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, as well as with literary and literary-critical co-travelers such as Albert Murray and Nathan Scott. This approach leads Harriss to see Ellison as a literary-theological thinker and creator of the first order.

Although many readers will, like me, enjoy thinking about Ellison in these contexts, I came away doubting that Ellison really is a literary theologian incognito. For instance, a long and very interesting chapter charts Ellison's thirty-five-year relationship with Nathan Scott, a foundational figure in the study of religion and literature. The records of that relationship make clear that Scott wanted to "foster Ellison's theological orientation and to promote him as a viable literary religionist" (Harriss 101). It is less clear that Scott succeeded. Scott only came to know Ellison in 1959, seven years after the publication of Invisible Man had established Ellison's reputation. After Invisible Man, Ellison published a number of brilliant and still relevant essays, but struggled to mold the clay of his thought and experience into a second novel that would embody his deepest urgencies about race, Americanness, modernity, and, to some degree, even religion. The novel remained unfinished at his death in 1994. Oddly, in Harriss's portrait, Ellison appears as an increasingly important figure on the scene of religion and literature in the 1960s and '70s, even while he is having more and more difficulty writing, or at least completing, any literature at all.

Somewhat more troubling, to my mind at least, is Harriss's tendency to oppose Ellison's work to almost the entire corpus of African American literature in the last half of the twentieth century. In discussing Ellison's writer's block, Harriss accepts Ellison's rationale, laying it at the feet of a history beyond the powers of literature to encompass:

Unlike the relative stability that [C. Vann] Woodward ascribes to the long Jim Crow era, the occasions of Ellison's second novel [1952–1993] exhibit remarkable fluidity. History would not sit still for Ellison, an author engaged in "the seemingly impossible task of rendering in fiction the American experience in the second half of the twentieth century." "Why did I have to be a writer," he asks Morteza Sprague in his letter written upon learning of [Brown v. Board of Education], "at a time when events sneer at your efforts?" .... Finally, as discussed in the last chapter, by the mid-1960s the novel carried added burdens of depth and resonance amid a literary context that Ellison believed no longer valued such properties. (124–25)

My eyebrows screw in skepticism. The period of Ellison's travail is also a period of remarkable achievement in African American letters.

The list could go on. And on. A stunning list for any time, for any people. History did not sit still for these writers. If they don’t tell us everything, they tell us many vital things about what it means to be an American in the latter days of the twentieth century. To suggest that the works of Toni Morrison or Rita Dove or Yusef Komunyakaa or Charles Johnson do not bear to us through literature the depth and resonance of the human condition is to use terms like “depth” and “resonance” in ways not commonly understood in the English language.

To be generous, Harriss is at great pains to defend Ellison from the charge made in the 1960s and ‘70s that his work was passé and not pointed enough in protesting the hard issues of race—in short, not black enough. At multiple points, Harriss mentions that Ellison was thought of as an “Uncle Tom” by young black activists in the 1960s and that an African American librarian had told a patron that “Ellison is not a black writer.” Such attacks were surely unjustified. However, it surely does not follow that African American literature since 1953 is best characterized by a hot-headed nineteen-year-old or an ill-informed librarian.

I mention this oppositional tenor because it seems deeply connected to the concepts of religion and literature that pervade Harriss’s book. Indeed, Harriss tends to explicitly equate blackness with the merely material, and so necessarily less than the invisible ultimate concerns that are the appropriate focus of religious and theological reflection. As noted, Harriss does an important service in pushing against the tendency to read Ellison only against the measure of a separate black literary or religious reality. But this genuine virtue cuts two ways. Niebuhr and Tillich come to represent a sense of genuine religious and theological seriousness or ultimacy over and against any idea of blackness whatsoever.

As a result, I wondered about other invisibilities than those Harriss put at the center of his book, particularly the invisible power of whiteness, of taking culturally specific traditions of theological or religious or literary reflection and practice and treating them as if they were timeless and universal instances of the divine.

It would have been interesting to have read Ellison against the background of not only Tillich and Niebuhr, but other African American religious modernists such as Howard Thurman, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and Sr., or even Martin Luther King Jr., in more detail than Harriss provides. This larger conversation is hinted at, but is mostly cut short, ironically by a schematic that suggests that the work of the European American modernist theologians elucidates the invisible character of religious spirit, especially when compared to the merely material and therefore necessity lesser denizens of blackness in the 1960s and beyond. Racial matters that preoccupied black writers are, in this schema, clearly less than ultimate concerns, a form of Tillichian idolatry that most African
American writers other than Ralph Ellison seem to evince. Thus, Harriss's book reads in a way that does not ask us to be aware that even our greatest theologians, as well as our interpretations of those theologians, are embedded in a racial history and context of meaning. To say this is not to say that our reading and our religion is only and always about race—whiteness or blackness—but it is to say that our racial history is invisible and omnipresent throughout our reading and religious experiences, and perhaps nowhere more invisibly, and thus more powerfully, than in our experience of whiteness.

To my mind, this points again to the need for reading "beyond the review," and, in some sense, of reading beyond ourselves. We need to read literature beyond the contexts of what we most love and with which we are most familiar, and we may even need to read in ways with which we are unfamiliar. We are taught how to read books, and books also teach us something about how to read. This is a process of habituation that the literary theorist Paul de Man rightly reminded us leads to both blindness and insight; our history as readers enables us to read and understand and enjoy books, sustaining a tradition through reading. However, our traditions also blind us to different ways of reading, different forms and dimensions of pleasure, different knowledges, different ways of construing ultimate concerns.

Literary criticism, done well, can help us see ourselves and our literature anew. Of the three books at hand, Josef Sorett's Spirit in the Dark most fully achieves this challenging goal. Sorett does not so much give us facts—though there is plenty of that. Rather, he dislodges us from our usual ways of thinking about both religion and African American literature. This makes his book perhaps the most important and powerful statement to date concerning religion and literature in the African American tradition. Indeed, at the risk of grandiosity, I think Sorett's may be one of the most important recent works of African American literary criticism and simultaneously one of the most significant works in the field of religion and literature.

As Sorett shows, it has been common to understand African American literature as a purely secular affair, and to understand blackness or race as purely secular concepts. He takes explicit aim at this manner of thinking, seeing African American literature as developing a “racial aesthetics” that is in constant dialogue and tension with what he calls “Afro-Protestantism.”

Despite arguments to the contrary, African American literature has since its advent and across its history been cut from a religious cloth—even during the moment in which Benjamin Mays diagnosed a growing secularization. To be sure, there is a robust tradition of religious dissent and critique within African American letters. Black writers have certainly documented the ways that Christianity helped authorize the social order embedded in white supremacy. Yet the relationship between Christianity and literature in African American culture has been anything but exclusively one of oppositions. In fact, the very organizing logics, aesthetic practices, and political aspirations of the African American literary tradition have been decidedly religious. In short, black literature is religious. Better yet, it is an extension of the practice of Afro-Protestant Christianity. (Sorett 2)

As a scholar of African American literature and religion for thirty years, I often responded to Sorett's book by saying, “YES! EXACTLY!” But almost equally as often, I find myself saying, “I didn't know that,” or “I never thought of it that way,” and even the envious “I wish I had thought of that.” There are illuminating discussions of every major period of African American literature since the Harlem Renaissance. Although Sorett admits early on that he is largely covering the “usual suspects”—the canonical figures of African American literary history—the effect is not one of simply rereading familiar figures, but of resituating the entire way in which African American literature might be conceived. Even the old stalwarts seem uncannily new as we sense the ways they are embedded in a complicated network of
Sorett's book grows increasingly profound the deeper it goes into the twentieth century. A significant chapter on African American Catholicism analyzes the conversion of an unusual number of important African American writers and thinkers to the Catholic faith, a fact that Sorett links to the new ways many African American writers, preachers, and theologians were confronting questions of universality and particularity. Perhaps the strongest chapter in the book is a very important and extensive analysis of the Black Arts Movement, one that made clear to me just how short a shrift it is usually given in discussions of African American literature, often being shrugged off as "mere" cant and protest. Sorett shows just how serious the religious and aesthetic practice and theorizing of these writers actually is, linking it to both protest against and continuity with the traditions of Afro-Protestantism from which it springs. Perceptive readings of Amiri Baraka show how Baraka navigates the tensions he experiences with the specifics of Afro-Protestant practice.

Drawing clear lines between content and form, Amiri Baraka privileged the latter (spiritual/black forms) over the former (Christian/white content). In doing so, he highlighted the contributions that black people made both to American Christianity and jazz music. Moreover, in making this distinction he identified in black music a unique religious tradition that neither began nor ended with Western Christianity or the United States. (183)

Sorett goes on to note that, like Baraka, Larry Neal "privileged the forms of the black church over its content; cadence and rhythm were more important than doctrine or theology. He was much 'more concerned with the vibrations of the Word, than with the Word itself'" (186). Though Sorett does not make this point, I was struck by the ways Baraka and Neal resonate with the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, whose study of the so-called Sorrow Songs posited in music a deep and unitary connection to African roots, more important ultimately than the words that had been corrupted by an intervening Christian history imbued with white supremacy. Seeing the quasi-Victorian Du Bois with his preferences for Aristotle and grand opera mirrored in the rebellious jazz, soul, and blues personae of writers like Neal and Baraka was only one of a multitude of instances throughout this book in which I found the familiar made uncanny, the distant made familiar.

Sorett could have done a bit more with the agonistic character of the relationship between African American literary tradition and the practice and social power of Afro-Protestant churches. His use of the term "Afro-Protestantism" allows a blurring of the distance between, on the one hand, the material work of churches with their specific traditions of thought and culture and, on the other, literature and other arts with their very different traditions. To my own mind, the development of a racial aesthetics that Sorett charts is significantly undertaken to recreate African Americans as a different kind of people, with different kinds of cultural and literary leaders, and different kinds of cultural practices and values than those that have been received from the tradition of "Afro-Protestantism" proper, even while necessarily drawing on the fund of Afro-Protestant cultural resources to do so. By analogy, it is quite appropriate, even necessary, to see that while Malcolm X was a Muslim, he was also an "Afro-Protestant," at least in cultural form. But at some point should we see that such forms are no longer meaningfully Christian since they carry forward meanings so different from their original cultural location? If yes, when? Sorett's brilliant reading of Aretha Franklin's performance of "Spirit in the Dark," urges us to understand African American cultural
production as the church outside the church, such that African Americans remain a churched people regardless of whether their attendance is in a sanctuary or a night club. This is a compelling story. It also provokes the question of whether and when such forms cease being "Afro-Protestant" and become merely post-Christian.

Still, these are questions that Sorett's way of reading raise, a way of illuminating African American literature and religion that allows us to see in ways we could not otherwise. This opening into literature—performed each in their own way by Best and Harriss as well—gets us outside our usual frames of reference, our usual ways of undertaking our own cultural performance as readers. We begin to ask questions about how we have been taught to read, about what difference it makes to us as readers that we are raced in particular ways as white or black or brown, or have become religious in a particular way as well. How do those facts—easily forgotten while sitting cross-legged in an armchair with book in hand—shape the ways we value books and the pleasures and even understanding that they bring? We ourselves are part of a cultural ecology through our acts of reading. How we read might be one means, however small, of changing that ecology, and ourselves, for the better.

JUDAS

How many times does the lamb die? How many
Times do you dismiss that your calculation
Will make a change? Perhaps you don't think any.
It may be that you risk humiliation
Because you think a shekel more or less
Is like the rough, lost greeting of a kiss:
So what. You never thought it would be terror.
You never thought his goodness was in error.
So why? You can't explain it to yourself.
In the end, the heaviness of your betrayal
Is all you think about; hangs on the wall.
You move from non-belief to your belief
The way that others pin their character
On ruin, then look up. The tears are pure.

Kim Bridgford
A Presbyterian man picked up the hymnal in his pew. He opened it to the first blank page—the flyleaf—and wrote, “What are you laughing at?”

He passed the book to his daughter, Elizabeth Onderdonk. The two of them were sitting in a service at the First Presbyterian Church of Jamaica, Long Island, New York, sometime in the years just after the Civil War. It was not a short service, but Presbyterian propriety wouldn’t allow for a whisper, nor the laugh the young woman was trying to stifle.

She took the hymnal and wrote a note back to her father. “Bumble Bee,” she wrote, referring to another congregant in their secret family code, “has struck an attitude.”

The history of hymnals is filled with this sort of marginalia. Worshipers typically bought their own hymn books, for personal use, including private notes. Surviving copies of worship books, saved by antiquarian societies and aunts, archivists and amateur historians, are replete with marks that record fleeting moments in long-gone pews.

“You ought to stay awake,” someone wrote in one hymnal in Massachusetts. Another person complained about a Congregationalist minister’s mispronunciations. The reverend kept saying “to” like “ter,” and it was very annoying. In another book, someone doodled a man with smoke coming out his hat. A Unitarian noted the place in one hymn where he cried when it was sung at his father’s funeral.

Hymnals are different from other books. They exist in a curious sort of social space, connecting worshipers to each other, to their tradition, and to God. The book is a religious object and can command a sense of reverence. But it’s also personal. It’s a private space and a place for thoughts to wander. It’s something to fiddle with when a sermon seems interminable.

Christopher N. Phillips talks about this as the “social life” of hymnals. “Hymnbooks,” he writes, “were part of the everyday social practices of hundreds of thousands of English-speakers across two centuries ... Singing and reading from hymnbooks is obviously important in church, but the use of hymnbooks to carry things to and from church, to have silent conversations when speaking aloud is forbidden, and to remember departed loved ones, are also significant practices.”

Phillips’ new book, The Hymnal: A Reading History, published by Johns Hopkins University Press, is a study of these sorts of practices. He’s interested in how hymnbooks were handled. An English professor at Lafayette College, in Easton, Pennsylvania, Phillips has looked at thousands of hymnals from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, examining “the combination of ephemeral wear and pious preservation.” He’s not interested in hymns as such, but religious reading and “historical poetics,” a field that combines the study of poetry reception with book history and lived religion.
This is, at times, a frustrating project. Phillips tells a very fragmented story. The "linked chapters" jump around chronologically and make different arguments that go in different directions. Phillips occasionally tries to pull everything together by making this a story about his research. He starts one chapter, for example, by writing that "In the Library Company of Philadelphia's main reading room, if you request the title *Picture Hymns*, you receive a small archival box." Open the box, and you find what the title says: cards with engraved hymn texts and decorative pictures. They're in good condition and well cared for. There are no surprises. *The Da Vinci Code* this is not.

At other moments, though, something snaps into place in The *Hymnal*, and a whole history comes into view. It's a history of contingencies and small choices, innovations and personal relationships, forming and transforming religious communities, spiritual practices, and the social reality of their religious lives.

That history starts, Phillips writes, with a kid bored in church in the 1680s. The bored kid was Isaac Watts. He grew tired of the psalms, which, at the time, English Protestants considered the only acceptable songs for worship. Watts's father, a minister, challenged the boy to write something better. So Watts started writing hymn after hymn after hymn. By the time he became a minister himself, he was also an accomplished religious poet. He published *Horae Lyricae* ("Sacred Lyrics") in 1706.

"Yet mighty God indulge my tongue," he wrote in one poem. "Nor let they Thunders roar, / Whilst the young Notes and vent'rous Song / To Worlds of Glory Soar." The title? "Asking Leave to Sing."

This was experimental poetry, both powerful and well received. It wasn't just the quality of the verse that captured attention of churchgoers, though. Watts also invented the technology of the hymnbook. As Phillips explains, Watts introduced "new crucial innovations" and "subtle paratextual additions" that opened up new "ways of using and living with the texts he made." For example, in *Hymns*, the 1707 follow-up to *Horae Lyricae*, he came up with a system of cross-references, so that one poem might lead a reader to another, and then another. He also cross-referenced the poetry with scripture verses, so readers might move from *Hymns* to the Bible and back again. Another innovation, key to the future of hymn books, was the index of first lines. Now, as Christians read and internalized this devotional poetry, they only had to remember the first line to find the poem again.

*Hymns* was a big hit across the ocean in colonial America. The Puritan minister Cotton Mather started using Watts's hymns as "paraliturgical texts"—that is, poetry to accompany a sermon. A hymn could be a sermon in miniature, repeating the main points of the longer disquisition, and doing it in easy-to-remember rhyme. Mather published lots of sermon pamphlets and started printing hymns alongside the sermons. He wrote some of his own religious poetry, but really loved Watts's best. When he got a revised and expanded copy of *Hymns* in 1711, Mather wrote, "I receive them as a Recruit and Supply sent in from Heaven."

Other Puritan ministers started publishing and distributing their sermons as pamphlets, too, and they also included Watts hymns. By 1740, there were at least seven ministers in Massachusetts alone who regularly published Watts. Puritan ministers like Jonathan Edwards couldn't seem to mention Watts's name without attaching a superlative like a title. It was never just "Watts," but "the Excellent Dr. Watts."

The sermon pamphlets and the accompanying hymns were typically read aloud at home. Puritan fathers used them to lead their families in devotion. Since they were at home, people also felt free to experiment with singing these hymns. In church, only psalms were allowed. There was no new worship music, no songs of, as Mather had
once phrased it, "Humane Composure." But at home, in that semi-private space, it seemed OK to try to sing these hymns and express new religious feelings. People found the experience incredibly moving.

A younger generation of American Puritans grew up singing hymns, and these songs resonated with them. In the language of the more recent “worship wars” that wracked American Protestantism in the twentieth century, the hymns felt authentic, the psalms too formal. The hymns spoke to and from the heart, the psalms for a tradition passed. When these young people got the chance, they brought their new music into church and made it part of their worship.

The minister Samuel Buell, for example, got invited to fill Jonathan Edwards's pulpit while Edwards was away. Buell—young enough to be a little rash—decided to change the church’s music while he was in charge. His hymn singing was reportedly so thrilling that some were driven "to ecstasy."

Edwards objected to the musical innovation, and when he returned, he tried to restore the old order. He couldn't quite reverse the innovation, though. Hymns had their foothold. Edwards struck a compromise, and the Sunday afternoon service was given over to the new worship music.

"Hymnody," Phillips writes, "was something of a rebellious youth movement."

Hymnody was also a space where religious identities were crafted. As the practice of hymn singing became more accepted, and then institutionalized in various churches, the hymnbook came to be an object that connected people with a tradition. A hymnbook was like a membership card for a religious community. It signified your belonging. Methodists had their hymnals. Baptists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists had theirs. And if a religious group didn't have its own hymnal, could it even be a real church?

By the early nineteenth century, producing a hymnal was often a first official act of a new religious community. It was a declaration of incorporation: "We are now a people." The African Methodist Episcopal Church, for example, was established in 1816. Within two years, the church had a published *The African Methodist Pocket Hymn Book.*

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, similarly, made a hymnal a top priority. Emma Hale Smith started working on the hymnal in 1830, the same year her husband published the Book of Mormon. She borrowed hymns from other churches, but also collected new songs from the first few followers of Joseph’s special revelation. The work continued through the early persecutions, mob violence, and Smith's difficult pregnancies. It was finally published in 1836. That year, the first Mormon temple was dedicated in Kirtland, Ohio, with an original Mormon hymn, "The Spirit of God Like a Fire Is Burning."

The minister Samuel Buell, for example, got invited to fill Jonathan Edwards’s pulpit while Edwards was away. Buell—young enough to be a little rash—decided to change the church's music while he was in charge. His hymn singing was reportedly so thrilling that some were driven "to ecstasy."

By the nineteenth century, hymnals came to be so strongly identified with a religious community that church splits produced competing hymnals. Phillips recounts how the division of the Methodist Episcopal Church over the issue of slavery produced dueling hymnals.

The Southern Methodists seceded from the church in 1844, forming the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. In 1847, the Southerners produced a new hymnal, *A Collection of Hymns for Public, Social, and Domestic Worship.* In the preface, the new hymnal critiqued the Northern church and its tolerance for abolitionists. The new hymnal would be "truly Wesleyan, or rather Scriptural," especially in "the prominence given to those subjects which are of the greatest importance in the Christian life"—a jab at Northern Methodists’s concerns for what we might call social justice issues.
The Northern Church, in turn, organized a hymnbook committee in 1848, and produced a new and improved hymnbook the next year. *Hymns for the Use of the Methodist Episcopal Church* was notable, among other things, for being the first hymnal informed by modern textual scholarship. David Creamer, author of the first scholarly hymnological study in the United States, had a nearly complete collection of all of John and Charles Wesley’s verse, and was able to restore the original Wesleyan texts. In the process, he helped the Northern church assert its claim to the authoritative Wesleyan tradition.

As each new faction of American Methodism was established,” Phillips writes, “its hymnbook became the site for its symbolic self-image.”

What was true of the churches was true, too, in the pews. When people like the Onderdonks, in Long Island, picked up their hymnal in the middle of a long service, they felt a sense of reverence for the religious object and they felt a sense of ownership, too. The book was theirs. The book was them. It was a record of their religious lives. After her father bought the hymnal, Elizabeth filled the margins with dates noting when their church sang a particular hymn. The practice annoyed her father to the point that he wrote next to one Watts hymn, “don’t mark this book anymore.” Then later he just gave her the book, and she kept it—a record of ephemeral wear and pious preservation.

Elizabeth Onderdonk died in 1917, a few weeks before her eighty-eighth birthday. Her hymnal with the note from her father—“what are you laughing at?”—would be preserved in the Long Island Historical Society for nearly a century until Christopher Phillips came along, looking to write a history of how hymnbooks were handled.

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AS IF IT NEVER HAPPENED

As if the collar never loosed around my neck, the gold of Egypt laid

across my lap, the sea ripped, howling, in half. As though the words were never

etched into the stone by the same divine finger that burned the bush,

stripped sandals from my feet, pointed me back to the teeth of the Nile.

We chose to live through years of plagues; locusts climbing from

our mouths, the stink of holy cattle rotting on the plains, years of waiting

at night for fire in the desert, forgetting the blood smeared on our foreheads,

doorsills, feeling alone—as all who live in darkness feel lonely.

Arah Ko
“Rock” Songs: Larry Norman and the Quandary of Popular Christian Music
Josh Langhoff

Half a century ago Californians suffered a spiritual awakening. Like most awakenings, this one involved confusion over what was real and what was not, and it prompted a whole lot of stumbling around in the dark. The young Baby Boomers living through the tumultuous middle chapters of Rick Perlstein’s Nixonland—a barrage of Vietnam, assassinations, protests, and perpetually heightened contradictions—sought transcendence. Transcendence might arrive via the fruits of modern chemical science or the study of ancient religious practices. Whether you were (as Tom Wolfe wrote in The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test) an acid freak, an Indian freak, or a sex freak, the important thing was to transcend. Which explains how, amid the freaky taxonomy that formed near the corner of San Francisco’s Haight and Ashbury streets in the late ’60s, there evolved an unlikely species of young, anti-establishment Christians. Haight-Ashbury might have been their address, but their spiritual home was at the intersection of Evangelical and Hippie. They were either beholden to the squarest corners of middle America or destined to subvert them, no one was really sure which. It was the dawn of the Jesus Freak.

“Despite his ‘resemblance’ to the current popular image, Jesus was not a freak,” complained future John Lennon biographer Albert Goldman in a 1972 issue of LIFE. Writing nominally about Aretha Franklin’s Amazing Grace concert, recorded that year at a Los Angeles Baptist church, Goldman spent most of the article sneering at the Freaks and their quest for enlightenment. He concluded, “[Jesus] was either a god or a great man, hardly a frightened, restless kid.” In fact, by the early 1970s, Jesus had become a meme, the subject of hit musicals and a Time cover, shouted out in songs by the Doobie Brothers, Paul Simon, and James Taylor. “To me, Jesus is a metaphor,” Taylor told Time (Haines, 247). In pop culture, Jesus had transformed. Once an object of sincere devotion, his cultural presence confined to swords-and-sandals epics, he’d become a dropped name, a teetotaling wingman, an unusually well behaved Merry Prankster.

This transformation seems to have reached its crux in 1969. On the one hand, the year boasted heartfelt Jesus-pop hits from country singer Lawrence Reynolds (“Jesus Is a Soul Man”) and Oakland gospel singer Edwin Hawkins (“Oh Happy Day”). On the other hand, Jewish singer Norman Greenbaum wrote his good-natured heresy “Spirit In the Sky”—“Never been a sinner, I never sinned / I got a friend in Jesus”—as a quick songwriting exercise, an homage to country star Porter Wagoner and the swagger of cowboys in classic Westerns. When Los Angeles singer Linda Ronstadt released her solo debut album that year, she included a swinging cover of the 1950s country song “We Need a Whole Lot More of Jesus (and a Lot Less Rock & Roll).” Her powerful voice obliterated the line between sincerity and archness.

Who knows where she’d learned the song? Maybe from psychedelic band People!, one-hit wonders from the Bay Area who’d closed their 1968 debut album with their own, considerably less swinging version. It was more arch than Ronstadt’s, even, but with a twist: the group’s main songwriter was a devout Christian who had just left the band. Larry Norman had grown up in the Bay Area as part of a born again evangelical family. He never strayed far from the church, but found himself drawn to art, especially rock’n’roll—writing poetry, forming bands, and making home recordings with his sisters. He performed with People! for the two busy years
leading up to their first album, but eventually felt forced out by his Scientologist bandmates. Along the way, he hung out with members of Buffalo Springfield and Moby Grape and turned down a lead role in the musical *Hair*. After leaving *People!*, Norman moved down to Los Angeles and joined the staff of Capitol Records, writing songs for more hippie rock musicals, a job so bizarrely opportunistic it sounds like a parody of the late 1960s. He also roamed the city streets, witnessing and serenading people for Jesus. In the summer of '69, Capitol invited him to record a solo album. It was here that he made history.

With *Upon This Rock*, Larry Norman invented the Christian rock album. He also invented the practice of giving Christian rock albums terrible dad puns for titles. His songs sounded like mainstream rock but addressed Christian life from a kaleidoscope of perspectives, creating templates that generations of Christian songwriters would use. The rollicking “You Can’t Take Away the Lord” repurposes the message of “Blue Suede Shoes” for a youth group singalong. “I Don’t Believe in Miracles” depicts a personal epiphany, paving the way for songs like 4Him’s “I Know You Now” and half of Bruce Cockburn’s catalogue. “Sweet Sweet Song of Salvation” is a meta-praise song that never quite accomplishes what it’s instructing you to do, like Rich Mullins’ “Sing Your Praise to the Lord.” Even goofy Old Testament tales like Keith Green’s “So You Wanna Go Back to Egypt” spring from “Moses in the Wilderness,” where Norman mutters illiberally about “dirty ‘Gyptians” and ends the song by advising, for no discernible reason, “Never borrow money needlessly.” Fighting the flu during the recording sessions, Norman punctuates that last line with a cough like some disheveled financial adviser.

*R*ock remains one of the weirder major label albums. According to biographer Gregory Alan Thornbury, Norman demanded creative control from his label and got it, producing the album himself, only to be “horrified at the final product.” Besides the coughing and muttering, Norman pounds out atonal clusters at the piano and shrieks out some of his high notes. (That might have been the flu talking.) His singing voice is high and pinched, with a drawl that connotes “rock’n’roll wiseacre” more than it suggests any geographical location known to exist. His stylized delivery of words is compulsively hearable; he seems to fold his tongue into origami shapes as he sings. Abrupt flute and string overdubs appear where you least expect them. Dubiously dubbed “the Sgt. Pepper’s of Christian rock” by one reviewer, probably because one pizzicato string arrangement resembles the Beatles’ “She’s Leaving Home,” Rock is in fact a straightforward collection of unrelated songs, but the album’s lack of a concept just makes its sudden shifts in mood stranger.

And then there are the lyrics. Being well versed in Biblical apocalypse, Norman could venture further out than any acid-damaged burnout. His spooky vision of the rapture, “I Wish We’d All Been Ready,” would become one of his most-covered songs. In “Ha Ha World” and “The Last Supper,” the food imagery alone is far more terrifying than anything conjured by the voices inside your local psych band’s head. A snake crawls around on a plate. Bread turns to dust. Norman receives a mysterious phone call about his missing chicken while his kitchen’s temperature fluctuates wildly. Upon hearing these songs, bewildered believers throughout L.A. shook their heads and called the health department.

Christian albums existed before *Upon This
Rock, of course, but they occupied a space apart from the pop mainstream—even when they topped the Billboard albums and singles charts simultaneously, like Soeur Sourire's effortlessly charming 1963 folk offerings The Singing Nun and "Dominique." Independent labels like The Benson Company had distributed Southern gospel records, and black gospel artists like the Dixie Hummingbirds and Rev. James Cleveland appeared on jazz and R&B indies. 1968 saw the release of Take the Message Everywhere, the debut album from L.A.-based Andraé Crouch and the Disciples, gospel innovators who would soon gain a big Jesus Freak following by learning to rock out. (That's Crouch's twin sister, Sandra, playing tambourine on Janis Joplin's Pearl.) Message was still mostly soft pop, but rumbling through the basslines were hints of the gospel rock the Disciples would play at Explo '72, the "Christian Woodstock" in Dallas, where they would blow all the other bands off the stage.

Larry Norman's band at Explo was himself. Although his first album had assembled a formidable lineup of session pros, including legendary L.A. drummer Hal Blaine, his shows were generally loose-limbed solo affairs, full of rambling monologues but still magnetic. Throughout his career, Norman would find himself jostled between a genuine desire to collaborate and loyalty to his own unique visions. This tension extended to his view of the corporate Church. "I'm not talking 'bout religion, I'm talking 'bout Jesus," he ad-libbed at Explo during "Sweet Sweet Song of Salvation."

When Norman died in 2008, two things were evident: how little the modern Christian music industry resembles Larry Norman, and how much it still stumbles through those uneasy spaces he opened up.

Larry Norman never arrived at an easy answer to these problems. Two months after releasing Rock, Capitol Records dropped him from its roster. Difficult for labels to market, unwilling to align himself with the institutional Church, Norman would release all but two of his

Thornbury elaborates:

He wasn't taking pot shots at the average pastor, or even traditional theological beliefs. His Moby Dick was institutional Christianity itself. How, he wondered, could you take Jesus... and make him banal? No small irony, then, that his desire to shake up the religious establishment would largely rest on his mastery of the competitive jungle of the major-label record industry. Larry knew it was hard, even for ardent Christian believers, to argue with success. What he may not have realized, so early in his ascent, is that empires under attack tend to strike back. (Thornbury, 59)

Besides the Christian rock album, Norman invented nearly every crisis the Christian music industry has endured over its fifty year history. Christian popular music is like a three-legged stool; its success rests on an uneasy combination of aesthetic quality, commercial appeal, and loyalty to Jesus (or at least to Jesus's most ardent fans). If one of the legs is missing, the stool topples. Bad Christian pop alienates non-Christians and becomes the butt of their jokes. Christian pop that seems too worldly risks alienating the base, as artists from Amy Grant to Sufjan Stevens have learned. And underground (i.e., unpopular) Christian pop often proves unsustainable for musicians, who either can't afford to continue or who question the efficacy of their ministry. If the Christian musician's goal is to win souls and nourish believers, it becomes all too easy to fixate on album and ticket sales as evidence of success. "Christian" "popular" "art" thus becomes an existential dilemma. Is it possible to honor all three impulses at once?
subsequent albums on his own labels. He would also forge uneasy relationships with Christian musicians Randy Stonehill, Mark Heard, Steve Camp, and the band Daniel Amos, getting them started in the industry and alienating some of them along the way. When he died in 2008, two things were evident: how little the modern Christian music industry resembles Larry Norman, and how much it still stumbles through those uneasy spaces he opened up. Worship musicians now find hot new songs in subscription databases. Christian singers regularly score crossover hits and mind their media placement portfolios, while Christian radio exists to be “positive and encouraging.” These things are all tools. Used well, they help faith to flourish. But lurking behind these tools are the testy paradoxes and unanswered questions of Larry Norman, advising us not to borrow money needlessly and coughing in our faces.

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SUAVIATE

I have memorized and recited the abandoned constellations of the universe, but I don't have time for their secrets tonight. I am making my isolation small, folding it corner to corner until it is a paper crane ready to mourn out the window.

My mouth begs the moon for a flood of pale honey until the room is filled with the feathered melody of a radiant stranger. Our kissing rhymes with the forgotten names of God as our conspiring tongues translate each vow of silence. Sometimes we miss our mouths altogether and the air grows sweet as a strawberry in a flute of champagne. I throw myself into the night of his celestial hands, tracing the psalm of his chest with my fingers until the sun pours its useless perfume against all the grey angles of the world, and my brain is all cloud pregnant with baptismal rain.

Joshua Gage
On Women’s Freedom

Caryn D. Riswold

REMEmBER THE FIRST MOMENT WE HEARD Christine Blasey Ford’s voice? It was in front of a bank of cameras on live TV, facing down a mostly male panel of U.S. senators. She was there to testify under oath about being sexually assaulted by Brett Kavanaugh. Because she had successfully avoided all media before that day, most of the public had never heard her voice.

Remember how “girlish” it seemed? The soft tone and high pitch sounded incongruous with her academic and professional credentials as well as her navy power suit. Remember how her probably professionally-done-for-the-camera-that-day hair kept getting caught in her too-big glasses? I was terrified for her. Commentators talked about being disarmed by her voice. Reports indicate that President Trump was surprised at how believable she was, likely because he and others assumed she would be another stereotype—the loud, angry man-hater. Instead, she was a smiling, pleasant, agreeable woman (Lemire et al., 2018).

As her testimony and the morning session went on, she repeatedly sought to accommodate her questioners, asking “Is that okay?” saying “I'm fine now, I have the coffee,” and variations on “I wish I could be more helpful.” Linguistics professor and gender studies scholar Deborah Tannen pointed out how nearly everything about her public voice was gendered feminine: soft, apologetic, accommodating. It played by the spoken and unspoken rules of how women are to conduct themselves and communicate in the public forum (Vesoulis, 2018).

At the same time, the substance of the things she said made other headlines. Perhaps the most recognizable example: “Indelible in the hippo-campus is the laughter.” As many analysts pointed out, Dr. Ford served as her own expert witness because of her training in neuroscience and the psychology of trauma survival. “I was definitely experiencing the surge of cortisol, and adrenaline and epinephrine” (Ducharme, 2018). She talked easily about brain chemicals and their effect on human memory, along with the ways that trauma disrupts these processes. Without hesitation, she claimed the experiential and scientific ground on which she stood and gave nothing up. “With what degree of certainty?” one senator asked about her confidence in her recollections. “100 percent,” she replied clearly.

This too was her public voice.

Tannen and others have highlighted the contrast between her voice in the morning and that of Brett Kavanaugh in the afternoon. He was “loud and brusque, refusing to answer some questions and turning others back on the Democratic senators probing him that followed” (Vesoulis, 2018). When a female senator asked him whether he had ever blacked out from drinking, rather than answer, he flung the question back at her: “Have you?” As women often do, Ford tried to take up as little physical space as possible during her testimony. Kavanaugh demanded as much as possible.

She named her fear in her opening statement. Probably knowing that all of this would happen, she did it anyway. She claimed her terror and sat through it. She put herself and her family at risk, changing the course of her life once more. Some say that she failed, because Kavanaugh was confirmed to the Supreme Court despite her testimony. Others have said that her persistence and her voice made all the difference. The data on women voters and the number of women, people of color,
Christine Blasey Ford rises to give an oath prior to her opening statement on September 18, 2018.

and LGBTQ people who won Congressional seats in the midterm elections shortly after Ford’s testimony at Kavanaugh’s hearing suggest that it did indeed make a difference elsewhere.

Christine Blasey Ford was not in a winning position going into this hearing. No matter what she did, it wouldn’t be enough to convince some people to believe her. If she had chosen to not speak, many would have been left wondering if it could have made a difference. This reveals one of the many double-binds for women in patriarchy: they cannot do enough to be believed and trusted as readily as men. They cannot look exactly right or behave perfectly in order to be fully accepted. They cannot do enough to earn power because they are not men.

Perhaps there is another more liberating dimension of this truth: because women cannot do or be enough under patriarchy, they are free from having to demonstrate perfection. This is reminiscent of Martin Luther’s famous aphorism in his 1520 Reformation treatise The Freedom of a Christian, also translated “On Christian Freedom,” wherein “A Christian

is lord of all, completely free of everything” and “A Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all.” (Luther 1520: 50). The Lutheran tradition has long understood that a Christian is freed from the obligation to earn salvation and merit the grace of God. Because one cannot ever do enough to earn grace, one is freed from even having to try.

What if women under patriarchy could hear and experience this word of grace?

No matter her appearance, her voice, her occupation, her station in life, patriarchy has ways of letting women know that they are not enough. This is debilitating for women, especially when they hold fast to the impulse toward perfection. For Luther, it was debilitating to confront the fact that he would never have certainty that he had done enough to earn salvation. In some ways, Luther burrowed all the way down and dwelled in the harrowing depths of this reality. When he finally came out on the other side, he found this essential, liberating truth. If a Christian doesn’t need to worry about earning her own salvation, she can serve her neighbor more fully.

This reveals one of the many double-binds for women in patriarchy: they cannot do enough to be believed and trusted as readily as men.

Might women in patriarchy be able to do that? Some women. Those of us who, like Ford, have expertise and ability and the resource of other privileges based on race, education, economics, and marital status might be equipped to attend to the needs of others. In many ways, Ford tried to accommodate her questioners. In other ways, she did what she was freed to do: speak her truth and drop some science, with or without the coffee, hair-caught-in-glasses and all.

This is what happens when we let the impulse go and dwell in the fact that we won’t ever be enough. We can simply inhabit our expertise, our
voice, our choices, and our bodies. We name the fear and speak out anyway, “attentive to the needs of all.” We know there is a risk, and we can choose to be vulnerable regardless. Insofar as we are able, when we have personal and structural power to draw upon, we can attend to what is just and right and necessary.

After all, women do know some things about brain chemicals and the science of trauma, about biblical texts and theology, about linguistics, politics, community organizing, and healthcare. In Blasey Ford, we see an example of a woman with a confidence born from the grace of women’s freedom to challenge authority, call out the status quo, and persist through the harrowing depths.

Even when your voice is deemed girlish, when your hair isn’t just right, when you are afraid, and when you know it might not even make the kind of difference you expect.

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Martin Luther and the Renewal of Human Confidence

H. Richard Niebuhr

Editor's Note: Sixty years ago, as part of Valparaiso University's centennial anniversary celebration, the university hosted a series of distinguished speakers from a variety of disciplines. H. Richard Niebuhr, the Sterling Professor of Theology and Christian Ethics at Yale Divinity School, presented the third lecture on March 18, 1959, to a full house in the university's new Memorial Chapel.

This talk, which we discovered in the Valparaiso University Archives, remained unpublished until 2015, when Jon Diefenthaler included it in The Paradox of Church and World: Selected Writings of H. Richard Niebuhr (Fortress Press). In honor of the sixtieth anniversary of Niebuhr's lecture, and because it was not mentioned by the Cresset in 1959, we are including it in this issue for your reading pleasure.

YOU HAVE DONE ME HIGH HONOR IN INVITING ME TO CELEBRATE WITH YOU THE CENTENNIAL OF THE FOUNDING OF VALPARAISO UNIVERSITY AND TO LEAD YOU FOR A LITTLE WHILE IN YOUR REFLECTIONS ON THE PAST AND FUTURE OF A SCHOOL THAT IS DEVOTED TO THE SERVICE OF GOD AND FELLOW MEN IN THE SPIRIT OR WITH THE MIND OF MARTIN LUTHER. BUT NOW THAT I AM ABOUT TO DISCHARGE THE TASK EXPECTED OF ME I AM AWARE THAT THE HONOR HAS TEMPTED ME TO ACCEPT A RESPONSIBILITY I AM POORLY ENDOWED TO PERFORM. I DO NOT BELONG BY LONG ASSOCIATION TO THAT CLOSER COMMUNITY OF LUTHER'S FOLLOWERS WHICH MEDIATES TO ITS MEMBERS ITS RELIGIOUS CONVICTIONS, SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES AND RELATIONS TO REALITY. NOR ON THE OTHER HAND HAVE I BEEN PRESENTED WITH THE OPPORTUNITY OR CHALLENGE TO TAKE PART INTENSIVELY IN THAT DILIGENT AND OFTEN PROFOUND WORK OF SCHOLARSHIP WHICH HAS MADE LUTHER ITS OBJECT IN RECENT TIMES.

The layman in this field is astonished and overwhelmed by the fecundity, the seriousness, the painstaking of an intellectual and religious devotion which, with the aid of ninety volumes or so of Luther's writings is producing many times that number of new studies of the heart, mind, experiences, intentions and effects of the great Reformer. The questions raised about him seem innumerable. The scholars who turn to this mine to extract from it new gold or precious stones belong to many religious organizations; though mostly Lutherans themselves, there are Calvinists and Methodists and Roman Catholics and Friends and men of no institutional religious connection at all among them. Mostly they are probably theologians, but among them one finds also lawyers and literati, psychologists and many historians of culture or of one of its aspects from language to music to power politics. This company overawes me. Far from being able to speak for them, I am not even able to understand them during much of that brief time I spend in their company. So I cannot speak to those of you who are Lutherans and Luther-scholars as one who by training and concern has learned to deal discriminatingly with the profound issues that occupy you. Since I cannot take your ground so far as you are Lutherans and Luther-scholars I must ask you to take my ground with me for this brief hour. It is the ground of one who as a Protestant Christian of a perhaps rather nondescript sort is deeply concerned about the condition of man in our time, and as a scholar equally nondescript and unspecialized, looks to the past to discern there the broad outlines of those great movements which have imparted to men—not less beset by doubts than we are—new force and courage for life's strange journey. These are movements which have given us direction and impetus; hence movements to be carried forward in our day. They are also movements that tend to come to a stop; they issue in institutions and modes of thought which become all too familiar...
to us and lead us to think that we live in a world in which all great possibilities have been realized. We can therefore always think of them in a double way; either they are great creative and revelatory periods whose inventions and revelations we must conserve, or they are prophetic and paradigmatic movements which show forth the kind of renewal we may expect and prepare for in our own future. Among such movements the Reformation is one of the greatest; it takes a secondary place in our history only to the nodal point in our whole human time—the coming of Jesus Christ—and perhaps to that earlier, preliminary junction point in our history when new life came into the world with the prophets and their contemporaries. I propose to you that we look at Martin Luther and the Reformation and at ourselves from the second point of view, with gratitude for the past to be sure, but even more with hope for the future.

The Newness in the Reformation

On one thing all the interpreters of Martin Luther seem to be agreed. He brought a marvelous newness, freshness and openness into our human existence. They seem agreed further on the fact that he was not so much the immediate source as the mediate instrument and channel of that newness of life. But when they deal with his relation to the old, to the heritage he had received and the Christian faith of which he was the heir, they seem to differ more in their interpretations. So do they also when they begin to describe the content and the sources of that newness of life of which he was the fullest, the overflowing channel in his time. These differences, of course, are not necessarily contradictions. We call the rare, gigantic figures that are given to us human beings now again as bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, yet as towering over the rest of us by such names as geniuses and heroes and prophets. But they fit into no categories; not even into a common category save that of greatness; their work is so manifold, their effects on life so many that they must be described in many ways, from many points of view. Yet of course we discern differences of importance and value in the manifold interpretations; though the most myopic may contain moments of truth, there are those which do greater justice to the subject.

What then was the newness that through Martin Luther came into our history and what were its sources? There are those who like Metzdee in some of his utterances see the newness mostly as one of human vitality and its source in a kind of biological elan vital of which Luther was a channel. Here life in all its urgency, in its revolt against the conventions that keep it in strait jackets, asserts itself in primitive power. And, of course, it is true that Luther impresses one as a man of super-abundant vitality, endowed with life force, with exuberant energy despite the many ailments of body and perhaps of psyche to which he was subject. It seems true also that in consequence of his work human energies, including physical energies, that had long been held leashed were given freedom. But when we think of his work and its effects in the spirits and minds of men, individually and in their societies, we shall not long be tempted to say—this was the important new thing and this the source of power—pure physical vitality. Strange psychosomatic creatures that we are, such vitality is often doubtless an accompaniment, perhaps even a consequence of some of our resurrections from sleep or death, but indefinable and diffuse as it is, reference to its presence explains little or nothing.

It is pointed out by others that Luther was the German man in whom the new self-consciousness, the new aspirations, the new language and politics of the German people found their focus and their generative point. The nationalist interpretation of Martin Luther's person and work has had a long history which culminated in recent generations in the travesties of a Hitlerian, Rosenborgian "Deutsch-Christentum" for which Luther's German Bible was almost a new creation, inspired by the German spirit that chose him as its instrument for the revelation of a German God destined to take the place of a Hebraic Jehovah. Apart from such caricatures there is, of course, more than a grain of truth in the idea that one of the new things that came into being through the Reformer's instrumentation was a German language, a German people, a German culture. But other nations also are indebted to that movement.
of which he was the foremost representative. All northern Europe and—because of later developments—North America also can celebrate the day at Wittenberg when Luther first challenged Rome as the symbolic beginning of liberation from the authority of the mind, the language, and the law of southern, Latin Christendom. But to describe the newness of life that came into history with the Reformation as the new birth of national freedom and the rise of new nations is to put into the center of the interpretation something which belongs somewhat in the periphery. That was indeed a part of the newness of life that followed from the inspirations and struggles of the early sixteenth century; the maturation of independent nations and the release of popular energies are inseparably connected with the other generations and generations that then took place, but neither in the intention nor in the results of the Reformer’s work can they be given the central place, except perhaps by nationalists who have no other final term than nation to use in understanding, explaining or valuing human affairs. For this movement affected existence more extensively and more intensively than in its national confines and forms.

We may then direct our attention to the newness which it brought into Western culture in its more spiritual aspects. The great achievement of Luther, says that discriminating and subtle historian Wilhelm Dilthey, lies in the fact that he represented and expressed in the religious and moral life, and then by consequence in political and social life in general, that individualism and that inwardness of personal existence for which the great objective and communal systems of belief and moral rule had left little room. For faith
as obedience to the doctrines of the great church he substituted the heart’s assurance of God’s mercy; for morality as conformity to the requirements of a system of laws he brought into his own and others’ experience the personal morality of the sensitive conscience obligated beyond all human rules to their ultimate source. “Luther divorced completely,” writes Dilthey, “the religious process from the objective imagery (PileDichkeit) of dogmatic thinking and the regimented externalities of the church” (Ges. Schir. II–53 et seq.).

In him, the movement toward inwardness and personalism in religion and ethics that had begun in Francis of Assisi and in the Mysticism came to its fruition. And when this happened in Luther it happened in the German nation and in European culture, for in the lonely monk and lonelier hero

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at Worms and loneliest soul struggling with great temptations the emerging new individual recognized himself; with that aid he discovered himself; this kind of life he reenacted in himself. The newness which came into the world—at least into the Western world—with Luther was the newness of a new personal inwardness, of an intensely subjective life on the part of religious-moral man. Religion now came to be what man does with his solitariness; morality what he does on the hidden stage where the law in the members and the law in the mind carry on their struggle. The new individual is not a mystic separating himself from the world and sense; he takes his place rather in the world of tangible creatures, of politics, economic and ecclesiastical affairs, he is no subjectivist for whom the not-self is a projection from the self. In his own inwardness he meets always an Other, but the other is not the social system of beliefs, dogmas, rules. The Other also is a self who challenges the human self to self-identification and responsibility, who gives to the lonely yet social man freedom from social bondage but also liberty from fear about his own fate.

I have gone beyond Dilthey and also fallen short of him in my effort to describe the newness that came into cultural, religious, moral Western civilization with Luther and his companions in the Reformation, for I have wanted to emphasize the particular point that this great movement did indeed bring forth something new in the style of life. It will not do to describe pre-Reformation man as collective man, as other-directed man, as dependent man and post-Reformation man as individual, autonomous and theonomous, free man. The lines cannot be drawn so clearly. But it seems very true that with Luther and partly through him there came into our historic human existence a new self-understanding of the individual and a new ethos of personal existence. In the later course this individualism expressed itself and developed or degenerated in scores of admirable and also despicable forms—in economic atomism and laissez faire, in political liberalism and license, in varieties of religious subjectivism from Spinoza to Kierkegaard to Feuerbach. To those who see its bad fruits only, the new individualism was a great departure from the desirable standard of human existence. To those of us who cannot quarrel with history but rejoice in the new creations that rise in it out of the eternal fountain of being, this emergence of a new sense and a new reality of individual existence is an object of wonder, however much we mourn over that sin in man which brings corruption to all that is good. Still, as we acknowledge the historic truth that such interpretations as Dilthey’s contain, we raise the question to ourselves: was this individualism of the Reformation the important point in its creative and recreative action? Was it the important point for Luther; is it the important point for us as we ask what can we now derive from him in our present hour of need?

The Roman Catholic historian Joseph Lortz is more aware than many a Protestant of the freshness, the newness of Luther’s reformation. There is about it, as we look at it with his eyes, something
of the character of a summer day's clear sunrise hour, of an April morning. "The ultimate secret of Luther's effectiveness", he writes:

is his own vitality... Life is present only there where there is something that has not been worn out, something new. But everything that belongs to the world of creatures must wither. And to this belongs even the form in which God's Word proclaims to us God's never aging revelation. In this situation the church must over and again realize the word: 'Behold I make all things new.' Now there can be no doubt that the Christendom of late medievalism had become very old in this sense. Its formulæ had been used in an unheard of measure and so had been used up; or otherwise they were new but not derived from the Word of God itself, distilled rather out of other previously derived formulæ; they were strangely complicated, necessarily sterile. Luther sensed this in a measure beyond that of anyone around him... The secret of his success was that he broke through this sterile, antiquated, atomized conceptual language and forced his way to the sources of a new proclamation. He made things new. He spoke a new language. (from Bornkamm. p. 349)

W e can try to describe this kind of newness that Luther brought in another, though not better, way. We human beings grasp and represent all reality that presents itself to us or comes within our reach with the aid of analogies, metaphors, ideas, and images. And our social custom is such on the one hand, our laziness or stupor such on the other hand, that after a while we never grasp the reality afresh but always see in it the form or image originally used. We even tend to substitute the idea or image for the real. Thus having encountered in the past men from the Orient and having called them "yellow man" or "slant-eyed" men, we tend not only to see each individual as a simple specimen of a genus so that all Chinese look alike to us; but we also have in mind a picture of the genus we do not correct.

We do not see an Oriental man but our mind's eye picture, our stereotype of what we once upon a time long ago decided an Oriental looked like. As we all recognize, this common observation about ourselves applies to the whole range of our experiences. We live to a large extent in our world as in a kind of art gallery among representations of the real. Yet it is not often an art gallery containing pictures painted by those who freshly and personally grasped and re-enacted what they encountered; it is more like a room plastered with bad copies of copies of copies of such original paintings. We need only to think of the faded images that are in our minds when we use such words as truth, or spirit, or idea, when we employ the great biblical words and phrases such as kingdom of God, redemption, judgment, grace, and salvation.

The point that Lortz makes and which others have made before him is not the simple one that Luther translated a Hebrew and Greek Bible into the common German tongue, or that he Germanized the Latin man, or that he took the well-known theological theory of man's justification by faith and made it meaningful by using common illustrations and common words to communicate theological subtleties—as young students of theology to day sometimes speak of the difficulty of translating their theology into homiletic language. The point is very different. It is that Luther wrestled for himself and by himself in direct encounter with those realities to which biblical and theological words refer. He knew about conscience not because the doctors had taught him what synteresis and syneidesis meant; he knew about the wrath of God not from commentaries on the prophets; he had met Jesus Christ somewhat as Paul himself had met him, though not by way of vision or in mystic solitude; he knew grace and forgiveness with the knowledge of acquaintance, not with the knowledge about these experiences his teachers had mediated to him. Always with the Bible as his companion, his interpreter, the herald of God's Word, yet in direct relation to that Word, in direct experience of wrath and mercy, judgment and forgiveness he forged a new language, new terms, new metaphors to set forth the real. He could translate the Bible into hard, gripping German not only or even primarily because he knew Hebrew

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and Greek but because he knew the faith and love, the hiddenness and revealedness of God, the cross and resurrection to which Hebrew and Greek sentences referred. So with Luther Western man's religious symbolism and language, the means with

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which he approaches and grasps and understands his God, his sin and his salvation became new. The newness was not that of new wineskins containing old wine, but of new wineskins containing new wine, albeit wine that was the product of grapes long cultivated.

The newness which Luther and the Reformation brought into our historic existence in this respect centered in man's immediate relation to God and Jesus Christ, but it was not confined to that sphere. It may be difficult to trace the relations of the Reformation to the new art which, by means of color and form and sound, gave men new symbols with which to see and understand the meaning of the human face and of nature's various objects. But there seems to be a kinship, as has often been pointed out, between Luther and his reforming companions on the one hand, Duerer and Cranach and Rembrandt on the other. The point again, however, is not so much that the Reformation was allied with a renewal in art; it is rather that the new art was both means to an expression of a new human encounter with the world. Perhaps the situation is similar when we think of the new science that flourished in the wake of the Reformation. Historians usually relate it more closely to the Renaissance and to humanism than to the Reformation. Yet it has been observed that despite all tendencies to conflict on specific points of teaching about the natural world, the spirit of the new science was much like the spirit of the Reformation. It cast off the old formulae, the outworn patterns of interpretation which confined the mind to stereotyped visions of the natural world and to conventional patterns of their interpretation. It forged new symbols after direct meetings with the given phenomena of nature; it saw connections and relations to which minds dominated by old formulae had not been open.

When we consider the Reformation from this point of view as a great revelation in our symbolic, interpretive life, the sense for the newness that was in it and issued from it increases. It was much more than a restoration of a system of religious doctrine and an ethos that had been corrupted by time. It was something rather different from the re-establishment of an ecclesiastical organization that had been ruined by the weather of centuries, the vandalism of unconverted powers, the neglect of the complacent custodians. Its relation to the early church seems like that of the eighth century prophets to the Israel of Moses and Joshua's day. In Luther as in Isaiah the prophecy was fulfilled: "Remember ye not the former things, neither consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing; now shall it spring forth." (Is. 13:13, 19)

The Newness of Faith

The newness and freshness that came into the religious-moral life of the West and hence into the rest of culture is only described, it is not accounted for when it is understood and interpreted as a revolution in the symbolic, interpretative life of the Western mind. Perhaps it cannot be accounted for. There is something as miraculous as spring itself, as the birth of a new person, about the major turning points in human history; or better—there
is something about them like the effusion of the Spirit which comes and goes like the wind about whose whence and whither we remain ignorant. But we may make the attempt to locate with somewhat greater precision the point at which new life, new understanding, new moral sensitivity, and new organization of social existence had its beginnings. That point so far as I can see was in the moment of faith, of confidence, of assurance in Martin Luther's soul and in the spirit of the people of his time. At bottom, in its origins the newness that came with Luther was a newness in man's confidence; what was formed and re-formed in the Reformation was faith in being, confidence in reality, assurance of God's good will, and out of this flowed forth—speaking in human terms only—the root of that renewal which is the mark of the movement. As I try to interpret Luther and the Reformation in this way I am aware that the words and forms of thought I am using are derived not only from his day but from ours and that in interpreting him I am perhaps more intent on understanding our times than his. Yet I trust I will not do him a real injustice since the understanding of human faith and its effects in life that I have is derived, I believe, from him in this sense at least that he remains the teacher who points out to us in and with the aid of Scriptures what this thing faith is in our lives.

When now we speak of faith we have in mind in the first place not a system of beliefs about God and men—necessary as it is to formulate and express our understanding of our total environment and our relations to it in such beliefs. What we mean by it is what Luther always meant in the first place—confidence, assurance, trust. By such confidence men live and without it life comes to a stop. Ultimately the question of human confidence or trust is always a question of confidence in the ground, the source, the nature of total and central being itself—that is, of confidence in the last power, trust in God.

But as Luther so often pointed out, faith as such and God go together. What the heart clings to, what it relies upon, that is its God. And for most men, most of the time the object of trust on which they rely to give worth to personal life and all its works is the social reality in which they seem to live and move and have their being. They have confidence in it as an on-going movement in which their own lives are secured against futility and worthlessness by being made part of this larger, enduring whole. They accept its ethos, its morals, and its beliefs as the true law and true belief on which they can depend. Hence they live in confidence, go about their work with assurance, accept the disciplines of this social life without rebellion, contribute even with enthusiasm to its glory. In this confidence in our community we accept it not as meaningful in itself, or as the last power with which we have to deal, but as representative of the ultimate power. Its beliefs—whether as the religious beliefs of medievalism or as the naturalistic beliefs of modern civilization or as the metaphysical beliefs of a Greek city—are accepted as truth; its laws are reverenced as emanating not from itself but from the nature of Being itself, from God. And indeed it is true that at some time in the past each such society formed its convictions about the true and the right, the just and the beautiful in some critical moment of encounter with reality.

When this ordinary confidence of men in their society as enduring, as representative of the real nature of things, as divine and representative of the divine fails, then life tends to come to a stop. Then issue the questions about the worthwhileness of human endeavor, about the meaningfulness of moral striving, about the value of maintaining by infinite labor the social institutions and organizations. In speaking of the failure of confidence in this fashion I am evidently using the words and experiences of our day rather than those of the Reformation. We speak of meaninglessness and of futility, of nothingness and chance, where the men of that time spoke of death and hell, of the wrath of God and his capricious will. Doubtless
their choice of symbols was wiser than ours. But I believe that there is a fundamental likeness between the failure of assurance about the goodness and meaningfulness of human existence of which we are now aware.

The newness of assurance, of confidence in God and so of confident living which marks the life of Martin Luther and of the Reformation began negatively in a great and spreading doubt, with an eroding process of distrust. The faith by which men had lived, the confidence they had in church and law and the system of beliefs and in their whole structured world was deeply shaken. It was shaken by the revelation of the inconsistencies and hypocrisies of institutions that were not what they seemed or claimed to be, by the great distance that opened between the image they had or presented themselves and their appearance in actual behavior. The holiness of the church and the unity of the Empire became ideals that had no relation to what men experienced in direct relation to them. The social faith was shaken also by the coming into view of actualities and powers, by the experience of forces and realities that did not fit into the established systems of belief and ordered conduct. The rediscovery of ancient learning and classic art, the discovery of America, the new recovery of the Bible—these acted upon many, less as exhilarating prospects of new worlds into which man might enter than as ominous portents of a familiar world falling into ruins. By no act of will, not by a resolution like Descartes to doubt the wisdom of the ancients but by necessity, Luther became the representative disbeliever, the great distruster of his time. The faith of the fathers in church, in the great intellectual structure of beliefs, in the moral laws of society was destroyed in him by no willfulness of unbelief but by what he saw and witnessed and in his singular honesty had to acknowledge. The new confidence that was born in him was conceived in doubt, distrust, in a soul left empty as it were by the failure of that social truth by which his fathers had lived.

The distrust of previous objects of faith went deeper than that. When men lose confidence in the fixed structures of the social life as enduring and trustworthy, as reliable sources of meaning and as fit objects of at least mediate devotion, they tend to turn to themselves. In Stoic fashion they turn to the reason that is in them, to the moral law in their conscience, or to the human spirit which has manifested its power in the past. This is what the humanists in their own way did in the days of the Reformation. In them, faith—robbed of its objects of trust in the social world—sought something on which to rely in the creative powers of mind and in the free will of the moral self. In his own highly personal way, Luther also took that road, only to discover that his will examined under the microscope of Scriptures was neither free nor good. Many a modern sees in Luther a believer who substituted the conscience and inner religious experience, even faith itself, for his objective social structures of the medieval world as the families on which man could not rely. But this is to misunderstand thoroughly the man and the movement who found in human inwardness the foundation on which they could build. There was a deep distrust in Luther of human reason and of human will as powers that could save man from destruction, from the hell of conflict and of alienation, in the self, in the society, in the world, in the relation of man to God. And this distrust also was not willful; it was not based on a determination to rely on, to believe first of all in something else. It issued out of agonizing experience with himself and in himself as he saw himself and knew himself in the mirror of the Scriptures.

The distrust, the suspicion of the finite objects of faith as representative of real power, as able to save his and any life and all life from nothingness, meaninglessness or worse—from continuation in everlasting conflict and an endless movement of disintegration—found their goal in the great distrust; the great questioning of the reliability, the goodness, the faithfulness of the ultimate power on which all being is absolutely dependent, whence all things come into existence, whither they all return. God might be defined by Luther as whatever object Faith relies upon and the heart clings to. But when all the images of God, and all representatives of God became objects of his deep distrust, he stood in the presence of God beyond all Gods, of the power that in cosmic wrath negates the idols and little gods that are not gods. And the
God beyond all Gods appeared to him in no [way] as the kind Father who loves but as dark and inimical power—as God of wrath and destruction. Faith in Luther made no easy transfer from childhood God or church God to Bible God. For the God of the Bible who was the God of being appeared in the Bible as in experience as the hidden Deus absconditus, known in his wrath but not as a God of faith. Now doubt had reached its deepest point. There was no further God for faith, for human trust, to seek, no ground on which to stand.

Luther’s wrestle with the final problem of human faith, his Jacob-like wrestle with God himself was resolved in the strange manner in which it has been resolved over and over again in our history—by the coming into his view of the darkest fact of all—the crucifixion of Jesus Christ—and by its illuminating, lightful sequels—resurrection and session at the right hand of power. How the great reconciliation took place, how God of wrath became God of grace, how confidence was established not in any human or finite power, not in church or even in Bible but in God himself no one has ever made wholly clear in the case of Luther any more than in the case of Paul, or of the early church or of all the others in whose lives such struggles of unbelief, despair, and faith have been re-enacted. We have our theological and our psychological theories. But they seem as far removed from the actuality of life in distrust and faith, before wrath and mercy, as flesheless, bloodless battle-maps in history books are distant from the actualities of Gettysburg or Okinawa. The struggle of faith and despair, the reconciliation of God and man, the victory of a faith that relies on the last, the ultimate power of being, the crucifixion and the resurrection of the self with Christ are enacted in the living self. And there is an almost impenetrable mystery at the heart of every great renewal of faith in a man such as Martin Luther. But one thing seems clear: confidence such as came to birth in him, joyful assurance in the marvelous good will, the glorious mercy at the source and center of all being is not established until the hardest, most difficult barriers to faith have been encountered, have been thrust upon men—as they are in the cross, in the wrath of God falling upon the very best that men can offer in the way of obedience, in the way of faithfulness, in the way of brotherly love.

In the sweep of human history, I must think then of Martin Luther not so much as a restorer of true doctrine, or as a reconstructor of a church threatened with utter ruin, or as true interpreter of previously misinterpreted Scripture. To all this he doubtless also made his great contributions. But I must see him first of all as the soul in whom new confidence in God was born, through whom the gift of faith—not in a God who may or may not exist but in the power and source of being itself—was given once again by the mediation of the pioneer and perfecter of faith, Jesus Christ. And I believe that all the other newness which came with the Reformation—the new vitality, the new social existences and institutions, the new inwardness of individual life, the new symbolic structures by which man learned to understand himself, nature and his destiny—that all this other newness was rooted in the new confidence, the new trust and the glad affirmation of life and all being that accompanied it. I cannot verify this thesis with the aid of extensive and profound scholarship. Take it, I can only beg, as one poor draughtsman’s effort to sketch his personal portrait of a hero of faith.

Conclusion

It may be that we stand near to another nodal movement in human history. Modern man has come to live by faith in the structures of social life, the systems of beliefs, the moral codes and standards that gave concretion to the personal convictions and experiences of the Reformation. He has conceived confidence in the doctrines and institutions that expressed the faith in God given at that time. Many a man to be sure, in the course of the Protestant centuries and in our time has indeed re-enacted or been forced to reproduce the very wrestle of the soul with the God of wrath and grace that Luther enacted as the father of Protestant faith. But to a large extent it seems true that as in all periods of the past a social faith has largely taken the place of the faith that is directed immediately to God beyond all gods. The Kierkegaards may protest all they want to
against the kinds of trust we put in our institutions, our doctrines, our ways of life as impersonal men who share a kind of common mind, a common faith which has small intensity because it is so secure, because it is anchored in such nearby, familiar things as doctrines and churches and very well-known Bibles—so well known that they are taken for granted. Despite such protests against Protestantism we tend to put our trust in it. Or otherwise we live in a more political confidence in the value, the endurance, the meaningfulness of national life, or of Western civilization, of its systems of belief, of its more or less well-ordered ways of behavior in which we play our part and have our personal meaning.

There is no use in crying out against this fact; there is no justice in accusing our fellow men of leading inauthentic existences. There is something authentic and right in all conservatism. There is a grace and providence of God apparent in the manner in which he preserves the past for us and makes us preserve of the past. Even the Reformation was not all newness of life. It maintained or was made the instrument of conserving a large part of its own past.

But despite the prevalence of social faith, in which God is mediated to us in the symbols and the doctrines of the church, in which we rely on social laws believed ultimately to be founded on his will, it has long been apparent that some great cracks are running through our structure. No century is like another but there is something in our time that reminds us of the fifteenth rather than of the sixteenth century. The glad confidence we once had in our civilizations, in our Christendom, in our nations has been deeply shaken. It has been shaken by the great distance that has opened up between our images of ourselves and our actuality in behavior. We have become distrustful in religion itself of our human religion, but vainly seek to separate with Barth true revelation from Christian religion. The new developments in science do not so much open up to us vistas of the future into which we would gladly move forward as threaten the stability of the world-picture to which we have become accustomed.

To a greater extent than was true in late medi-
evalism the formulae and symbols we have used with which to grasp reality, to understand ourselves and God and Jesus Christ have been worn out, have become often as characterless as coins that have passed through too many hands.

Meantime also the power of evil has become so manifest in our world that it has become easier for many a modern to believe in the reality of devils or demonic powers than in graciously forces and ministries. But there is no need to multiply testimony to the presence among men today of deep distrust of existence; it is saddest when it appears in the form of boredom, most agonizing when it comes as despair. The temper manifests itself in our whole society; it invades the churches which try to erect dogmatic defenses against it. But sometimes the very dogmatism of the systems seems to indicate the presence of the foe—distrust, suspicion, despair of life, belief in the infinite distance of God from our common human scene.

In this situation our attitude to Martin Luther and the Reformation may be a twofold one. On the one hand we shall try to reappropriate the truth of that old struggle of man with God, of that new appearance of the cross at the heart of life and of the great reconciler. But on the other hand we shall look forward with hope to the renewal not of the fruits of faith but of faith itself. Such a renewal will not come without travail; no youth will, knowing what is involved, offer himself easily to become its prophet. It will not come by our design or any human will. Yet as we look at our past human story, at Isaiah and Paul and Martin Luther and many another, our confidence in their God and Savior will at least take the form of trust that he will renew our trust. Not as lonely individuals only, but as members one of another. Behold, says the Lord, I will do a new thing.

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