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THE CRESSET

A review of literature, the arts, and public affairs

Michaelmas 2007



Faith That Kills? Reflections on Religion after 9/11
J. Michael Utzinger

The Work of Our Hands: Two Farmers' Reflections
Fred Bahnson and Richard Church

Letting the Cracks Show:
Anne Lamott and the Feminine Style of Rhetoric
Laurie Britt-Smith





THE CRESSET

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Still Shining

A NEW YEAR FINALLY HAS STARTED. MANY readers probably think that the year has been underway for several months now, but those of us who teach have calendars that begin counting months at number eight. Since *The Cresset* is a university journal, we start our year in the fall with Michaelmas, the name for the first academic term in many older universities. *The Cresset* was once more of a church journal than an academic publication. In those days, each year's Issue No. 1 came a little later, in November, closer to Advent—the beginning of the church's year. But *The Cresset* has changed, if only a little.

It should be no surprise that during seventy years of publication, a journal like *The Cresset* should change. For its first fifteen years, it was published by The Walther League, a youth ministry of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. In those days, the LCMS remained something of an ethnic enclave of German-speaking Midwesterners, and *The Cresset* helped introduce these Lutherans into the American mainstream, to international affairs, and to arts, culture, and science. Before long, Valparaiso University took over publication, and, over the years, *The Cresset* changed, along with American Lutheranism and American culture. *The Cresset's* home is now a university, not a church body. The particularly university where it resides is part of the Lutheran tradition, and from this tradition *The Cresset* derives its distinctive character. At the same time, this journal draws vitality from this university's relationships with other excellent Christian universities and colleges, representing other Christian denominations. In its pages, *The Cresset* presents the best that all these institutions have to offer in faith, in reason, and in hope.

In the inaugural issue, O. P. Kretzmann described *The Cresset* as “a small lamp set on the wall of the Church to find things of value in the surrounding darkness.” Its founding mission was

to look out at the culture from the church, but its readers no longer live behind that wall. They have moved out into the broader culture, so *The Cresset* now must speak also to that broader culture. Rather than helping the church find things of value in the culture, *The Cresset* now shines its light so that the culture can see all that is of value in the church. As former editor James Neuchterlein put it, *The Cresset's* function is “...not to prescribe doctrine, but to relate doctrine to life, to search out the elusive but vital connections between Christianity and culture.” *The Cresset* exists because of the belief that those connections exist, that the Christian faith is vital—even integral—to our culture, and it exists because many in our culture would overlook this truth.

We hope that the content of this and every future issue will live up to that mission. J. Michael Utzinger's “Faith That Kills?” considers how many who teach in higher education today misunderstand the role of faith, and in doing so fail to see the positive role that faith can and should play addressing the challenges of our age. In “The Work of Our Hands,” Fred Bahnson and Richard Church offer up the vocation of farming as a practice that can teach us to live out the Gospel in both our bodies and our minds. And, Laurie Britt-Smith's “Letting the Cracks Show” examines the humor of Anne Lamott, a writer who finds connections between faith and culture in places where we will be surprised to find them.

The Cresset has changed, but only a little. Like O. P. Kretzmann, we still look to the words of the Apostle as our guide. “Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.” This remains our mission. †

—JPO

AUTUMN ELEGY

*Now we see the nest,
as red-breasted leaves fly down—
only the wind sings.*

—“October,” Bernhard Hillila

This evening the bright outline of a crescent
moon curves among scatterings of far stars
caught in that net of autumn branches—bark
bare but for the lightest icing of a first frost—
looming high in darkness above our barn shed.
There, where birdsong once built so swiftly
each spring morning or serenaded our summer
afternoons, the sweet choir has been quieted
by this quick chilling, and an early snowfall
already rests like a freshly spread bed linen
along the low slope of our backyard lawn.
Its flimsy film of fine white powder is now
dimly lit by the porch lantern and patterned
with slim lines of shadow cast by a final few
barren stalks yet standing tall in our garden,
as if an illegible set of inked text markings
had been printed on a blank page in the back
of someone's old notebook. When we watch
outside our kitchen window, the overhead
glow from those distant constellations appears
to grow more brilliant as they begin to drift
slowly past that last twisting batch of thinned
limbs still lingering against their blackened
backdrop. Suddenly, even seeing these trees
emptied seems evidence of an abrupt absence;
but the clustered stars leaving their boughs
and this crisp wind lifting through uppermost
reaches lofting above remind my wife and me
of his songs, those poems filled with carefully
chosen words he had spoken not too long ago.

Edward Byrne

Faith That Kills?

Reflections on Religion after 9/11

J. Michael Utzinger

WHEN I WAS A YOUNGER SCHOLAR SEARCHING for an academic position, I was asked by an historian during an interview reception whether I was a Christian.

Puzzled, I answered, "Yes."

"Then, would you kill in the name of Christ?"

Now shocked (but admittedly quite bemused and intrigued), I responded, "No."

The historian smiled, having sprung his "trap," and asked, "Then how can you say that you are serious about your faith, if you are not willing to do the most difficult thing you can be asked to do?" At this point, other faculty members noticed that this individual was alone with me and moved to whisk me away.

I later spoke with this individual again. I might summarize his argument as follows: "If you really believe that your faith is absolutely true, then you are duty bound to spread that message at any cost (even violence). Tolerance is an abrogation of one's religious duty (and love of neighbor, since you are essentially helping consign those you tolerate to hell)—tolerant Christians, therefore, are not serious Christians." My response came naturally. "I am serious because I actually listen to what Jesus said." After all it is hard to imagine how one can genuinely justify violent behavior in the name of a faith that promotes such maxims as "blessed are the peacemakers" or "do not repay evil with evil." He remained unconvinced.

What draws me to this story is not its shock value. Rather, I am interested in why he was unconvinced by my response. He was not calling religious folk hypocrites for not practicing what they preach. Rather, the premise behind his rejection was the assumption that violent religious extremism is the face of vital expressions of religion in the modern world. This conflation of religious violence with religious vitality, I would argue, did not allow him to take religion (mine or

anyone else's) as a genuine human phenomenon. I am further drawn to this anecdote because I do not think that this individual's argument is an anomaly in our current cultural climate or in the academy. And this worries me. I am worried that religion's new found popularity is premised on ideas that ultimately undermine our ability to take religion and religious people seriously.

If religion is alive and well in the current American consciousness, it is not hard to see why. Since the late-1970s, government officials, businesspersons, journalists, and academics have had no choice but to notice conservative, often reactionary, forms of "fundamentalism" rising as a phoenix from the ashes of religion's quite exaggerated death. The formation of the Islamic republic in Iran, calls of *jihad* against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, mass suicide at Jonestown in Guyana, and the formation of the Moral Majority in the United States were but a few examples of renewed religious activity in the world at that time. Fast forward to 12 September 2001, the day after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington; suddenly the vitality of religion in the modern world seemed terrifyingly obvious to all Americans.

In fact, since 9/11 a new popular truism has replaced the idea that religion was a passing stage in human history. Religion has now morphed into something reactive, militant, and violent. More to the point, it has become something too dangerous to ignore. For the year 2006, the top two stories about religion, as ranked by American journalists, concerned religion and violence. The top story of the year was the worldwide violent Muslim reaction to the cartoons about Muhammad published in Denmark. The second was Pope Benedict XVI's indelicate use of a quotation linking Islam and violence (*Religious Studies News*, May 2007). More and more college courses on religion and violence have proliferated over the last decade to meet student

interest and demand. These courses do not explore theodicy, such as theological reflections after the Holocaust; rather, they are exploring the nature of resurgent religion as a violent force in modern society. You can add to this a myriad of popular cultural despisers of religion, such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens making similar claims. Even scholarly works on the relationship between religion and violence have gained popular notice. Both Terry Grose and Bill O'Reilly interviewed Wake Forest professor Charles Kimball, author of *When Religion Becomes Evil*. This book was also named by *Publisher's Weekly* as the top religion book for 2002. Political Scientist Benjamin R. Barber's *Jihad vs. McWorld* was a New York Times Bestseller. And Mark Juergensmeyer's *Terror in the Mind of God* was named world expert's choice by the *Washington Post*. This collection of examples suggests that people are paying attention to religion, and especially to its violent manifestations.

Despite the boon such interest might have for religion departments jockeying for precious tenure lines, I feel uneasy about it, in part because religion's new popularity seems to rest on the very conflation that the historian assumed when he asked if I would kill in the name of Christ: religion is vital only when it is open to the commission of violence. This conflation, I believe, helps undermine Americans' ability to take religion seriously in the academy, in the classroom, and in the public arena. I also believe that those of us who research, teach, or promote proper religious engagement in our society must challenge the academy and the culture to approach the current popular interest of religious violence with suspicion lest it undermine his or her role as a scholar, a teacher, and a citizen.

Before I examine my specific objections, let me be frank. My suspicion of and worry about the idea that violent religious actions evidences

vital religious faith comes from a commitment to a Christian humanism. Of course, one need not be a Christian to be a humanist, nor are all Christians committed humanists. However, I would argue that a humanism that is Christian finds its foundation in the doctrine of the incarnation. Since God became human we recognize the inherent value of all human beings. Further, if humanity has God-given value then the Christian in the academy should recognize that all things human and affecting humanity are worthy of study. Conversely, we must resist the temptation to dehumanize or dismiss someone or some human activity as "the

other," implying that they are not worthy of fair investigation. The term "human" implies that on a very basic level there is the potential to understand someone else because we share a nature with that someone else. With the Roman poet Terence, the Christian humanist asserts that "I am human so nothing human is alien to me." In the end a Christian in the academy studies human beings and human activities with fairness and charity with an aim to see the truth about them as much as possible. All this is to say that the

Christian humanist is not interested in religion simply because he or she is religious or believes in God; rather, religion also has importance because it is a human phenomenon.

Having given this far too brief sketch of Christian humanism, I would like to make a few modest observations about why I think the modern infatuation with religious violence hinders our ability to take religion seriously.

First, the scholar should be suspicious with the popular conflation of violent religion with vital religion without arguments and evidence supporting such a position. Neither the claim that religious vitality is best measured by violent actions nor that religion is inherently violent are self-evident. However, too often these ideas are posited without



An Afghan Mujahideen positions a hand-held surface-to-air missile. August 1988.
Source: United States DOD.

reflection. I want to be clear: I am not suggesting that violent religious extremism does not exist. I am also not intimating that violence has not been done in the name of religion or has not been justified by using genuine pieces of religious traditions. However, such admissions are not the same as creating a compelling case that vital religion is violent.

Theologian Miroslav Volf's distinction between "thin" and "thick" religion provides a helpful framework to show what would be needed to make a compelling claim that vital religion is necessarily open to violence. Volf develops what he calls "thin" religion from Clifford Geertz's concept of "thin description," in which an ethnographer imputes meaning to observed actions, events, or symbols with little or no reference to the cultural systems that created them. According to Geertz, an ethnographer describes "thinly" when she attempts to understand some cultural activity out of context and without reference to the very culture, traditions, and communities in which it actually functions. Analogously, Volf argues that those who practice (and I would add observe) religions "thinly" take certain ideas and practices of a religion and overemphasize or exaggerate them without reference to the tradition as a whole and as believed and practiced over time. The "thin" practitioner or observer, therefore, ultimately creates a caricature of the religion in question. Religion in these cases has not been taken seriously.¹

Volf, however, suggests that truly vital faith is not "thin" but rather "thick." According to him, practitioners of "thick" religion are truly engaged and serious about the faith they profess to believe, because they consult and engage their religion's full tradition over its history (Volf 2002). In order to show that a violent action is the result of "thick" practice, one must show that such violence is a necessary result from a careful and broad engagement with the religious tradition in question by the majority of the adherents of the faith over its history. Admittedly, Volf does not make the strong claim that no violent religious actions are "thick." However, his distinction between thick and thin religion creates a burden of proof upon those who would simply posit that violent religion is vital religion. Further, simply observing that religious individuals have done violent acts throughout his-

tory does not adequately meet the burden of proof with a level of depth and sophistication that should satisfy scholarly inquiry over this question.

I would similarly assert that religion's inherent violence is not self-evident. I believe that William Cavanaugh has rightly argued that any claim of religion's inherent violence would need to show successfully that religion (rather than, say, emerging nationalism, economic interests, or personal lust for power) was uniquely decisive in a violent event or pattern of violence (Cavanaugh 2004). This would require first that a clear definition of religion is employed that did not assume religion's violence. More importantly, such a claim would need to take religion seriously by determining whether the violent act was "thinly" or "thickly" practiced in the manner described by Volf. Finally, one also would need to make a comparative study across history to see if indeed religion seemed to have a decisively violent nature. The onus to prove an argument remains with the arguers in this case, especially since all of us could provide a myriad of counterfactuals, like Jesus, Buddha, Gandhi, or King. Of course, I am not saying that such a study could not in theory be done; however, I have yet to see an argument made with a preponderance of evidence based upon a broad examination of the world's religious traditions to make such a general claim about "religion" compelling.² Anything less than such a study is anecdotal (or, worse, simply reflects the nightly news) and does not take religion seriously in a manner worthy of our academic communities.

Next, I think that the fixation on religious violence challenges our ability as teachers to take religion seriously in the classroom. It seems to me that this fixation is symptomatic of a culture that consumes violence and violent images to cure its boredom. Philip Rieff, in his classic *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, noted that "a social structure shakes with violence and shivers with fear of violence not merely when that social structure is callously unjust but also when its members must stimulate themselves to feverish activity in order to demonstrate how alive they are" (2006, 8). If general members of our society feel "alive," as Rieff says, by participating in or watching violence, we educators feel alive when our students show interest of any kind in our subject. However, we cannot be satisfied with what

I will call the "*Da Vinci Code* syndrome." The "*Da Vinci Code* syndrome" usually sounds something like this: "Well, Dan Brown may mislead people through a clever conflation of fact and fiction, but at least students are asking questions about these subjects for once." While I agree that any question is better than no questions, I also believe that teaching students to ask good questions is better than waiting for them to ask any old questions. I worry that we educators depend too much on popular interest generated by titillating current events, exaggeration of facts, or outright misinformation, hoping these things will bring our students to the academic table of discussion. Instead, we must help students develop the skills to undertake the patient study by which they may interpret the world. I know this is idealistic and may never be fully realized; however, I have too much experience with students who by simply aiming to pass a class manage to fail it. In other words, lacking ideals is the surest way never to reach them (even in those occasional students who make teaching immediately worthwhile). Popularity is a fickle lover. Focusing on religious violence may draw students' interest, but the notice will be fleeting and likely will leave the learning shallow.

Finally, the conflation of religious vitality with violent religious extremism challenges the ability of our culture to take religion seriously in the public sphere. Insofar as the reason to study religion is tied to its violent manifestations in the modern world, it ultimately makes religion a civic problem that needs a cure rather than a natural human endeavor that might contribute positively to society as a whole. Using the religion-is-violent thesis, the cultural despisers of faith argue that the vitality (and hence the danger) of any religion that proves itself resistant to the corrosive acids of modernity is its adherents' unwavering and unreasonable commitment to its own "truth." Enlightenment thinkers called this form of commitment "enthusiasm." Enthusiastic commitments that grant assent to beliefs not proved by the light of unaided reason provided the mythic explanation of the so-called "wars of religion" that ravaged Europe's population at the hands of Protestant or Catholic armies during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. According to such thinkers, one could avoid religion's deadly vitality by tempering one's assent to any religious

proposition in proportion to its reasonableness. Perhaps not surprisingly, these thinkers wished to push traditional religious propositions from the category of truth and knowledge to the realm of private individuals and their opinions. Further, it was argued that the easiest way to save civil society from religion's enthusiastic potential was to extricate it from the public sphere. Those convinced by such a view would certainly find compelling one of my colleague's bumper stickers, which reads, "The last time we mixed church and state, people were burned at the stake."

By not challenging the conflation of religious vitality and violent religious extremism, we encourage individuals and societies either to exploit religion by attempting to harness the unbridled passion it supposedly possesses or to neutralize it by privatizing or disenfranchising it. In the words of historian Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, "Whenever it has any use of belief, our age presses religion into the service of power. The rest of the time it banishes faith from any position of authority" (Quoted in Rieff 2006, vii). Neither religion's manipulators nor its civilized detractors wish to see a full fledged tradition engage the culture in which it resides. Its enthusiasm, they argue, is just too potent. Although much more should be said, let me simply state that the Christian humanist should not be satisfied with a view of religion that ultimately encourages the chaining of God's blessing to the service of the state or barring religious voices from the public sphere. The manipulator encourages misunderstanding in order to funnel religious vitality away from its divine focus. Religion's detractors seek to create a litmus test of disbelief in order to protect themselves from their own caricature of men and women of faith.

In the end what is lost is the very positive role that religion might play to help our social ills or perhaps must play in a world plagued by "thin" religion. Vital faith, as de Tocqueville observed, has the potential to challenge our American materialism and individualism that corrode our social fabric. Such religion demands that we feed the poor. It claims that, rather than consumers, we are human beings with more value than our credit line or checkbooks. It challenges the powerful by tending to the oppressed. A vitally religious person may even put his or her life on the line to expose

injustice or protect the innocent. If we banish religion from the public sphere, we should rightfully wonder whether we will be able hear the call of the next Dorothy Day or Martin Luther King Jr. And wouldn't that be our loss and to our discredit? Further, if we banish religion from the public sphere, we banish those most able to expose "thin" religion and encourage "thick" religion in a world that is increasingly turning to religious resources to express their dissatisfaction with political injustice, social inequality, and economic disparity. In this sense the real danger may be not taking religion seriously by refusing to engage it on its own terms. As R. Scott Appleby recently observed, the best hope for reducing violent religious extremism resides within those deeply committed to religion itself. "They would be," he suggests, "de facto cultural and religious ambassadors armed with the most essential tool in the diplomat's repertoire: insight" (2007, 40).

I have argued that by focusing on violent manifestations of faith our members of our culture do not ultimately take religion seriously. Further, we have a duty as intellectually honest scholars to challenge "common wisdom" that conflates religious vitality and violent religious extremism with weak and anecdotal claims. Rather, we must demand arguments with compelling evidence. As teachers we must encourage our students to value the patient search for truth about the nature of religion over the excitement of titillating details we hear in news stories. And as citizens we should be careful not to banish religious individuals or groups from the public sphere based upon their faith. To do so will leave us with fewer motivated individuals to address the serious social, political, and economic ills facing our society and, worse, may leave us without representatives that would be most able to converse with those religious people we increasingly seem to fear and misunderstand the most in a post-9/11 world.³✦

J. Michael Utzinger is Elliott Associate Professor of Religion at Hampden-Sydney College, Virginia. He served as a Lilly Fellow in the Arts and Humanities at Valparaiso University between 1999–2000.

Notes

¹ Volf discusses practice not observation; however, I believe his use of Geertz could be applied to observers as well as practitioners.

² Some studies have been done on monotheistic faiths, although they too have been seriously criticized, obviously suggesting that such arguments are not self-evident. For a recent example, see Gnuse 2007.

³ A version of this paper was presented at the Lilly Fellows Reunion Conference in Indianapolis in June 2007. The author wishes to thank Robert Benne, Scott Huelin, Jana Bennett, James Simms, and Saranna Thornton, all of whom made helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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The Work of Our Hands

Two Farmers' Reflections

Fred Bahnson and Richard Church

But we urge you, beloved, to... aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.

1 Thessalonians 4:10-12

WE'RE SHORING UP AN OLD TOBACCO BARN. When we're finished the lower level will be a hog shed where Rich will keep his feeder pigs. But we're far from done; the posts holding the south wall's sill have collapsed. We get out the jacks, position them under the sill, and begin cranking. The entire south wall rises. Hay scraps and mouse droppings spill from the second-story floor slats. Old boards still remember the shape they once wore, and with a few more cranks the wall returns to almost square. We move quickly now. With jacks in place we dig new footings, then pour concrete around the posts that will hold the wall permanently in place. By day's end we are tired. After putting away the tools, we head up to the house and join our families for supper.

We swap labor, working on each other's farms on the odd Saturday. It's an old form of exchange: work a day for me; I'll work a day for you. We get more accomplished this way, but it's not simply the end product that matters. We're building lasting bonds of friendship forged from shared physical labor.

Both of us were trained as academics, yet both us also claim the title "farmer." Rich owns a small pastured-meats farm. Fred manages a church-supported community garden. We both seek to run our farms with old knowledges that rely on hand tools and community in lieu of the solitary tractor and plow. And so our work now requires the use of both our minds and our bodies. It's a balance we have come to cherish. The

work of our bodies leads to the work of reflection, and vice versa, which causes us to suspect that there's something to be found in the activity of farming that's missing in what commonly passes for "physical activity."

Despite living in a culture that looks down on those who labor with their hands, we have come to believe that good work must involve our bodies. In pursuit of this work, we are attempting a social descent out of the isolated confines of the life of the mind, into the communion of those who labor with their bodies. It is an awkward descent. We lack the practical skills basic to those who labor. We speak the language of the elite, a dead give away that we are not from the community we seek to join.

Yet we work on the land. And our work has changed us, leading our bodies—and our thoughts—away from the bankrupt mentality of the consumption economy toward a godly economy of abundance and Sabbath. Further, given that we worship a God who took on flesh, we have come to believe that physicality isn't something of which to be ashamed nor something to be shirked; it is one of God's blessings. Yet as with all of God's gifts, it carries *terms of usage*. It matters what we do with our bodies. This is our aim in the work we do together on our farms and in this essay: to explore the significance of the work of the farmer to the life of Christian discipleship.

The Good of Bodies

Any discussion about good work, however, begins with the question of bodies themselves. Why do we have bodies and for what should we use them? How one answers this question is crucial to one's understanding of the gospel. As we understand it, bodies were at the heart of the early church's sense of itself. The *body* became a necessary and defining metaphor for the church's

understanding of itself and of who Jesus was. The one the church called Christ was made of flesh and bone. The church itself is “the body of Christ” in Paul’s words (1 Cor. 12).

The formation of bodies then became essential to the church’s life. We have both come from evangelical roots. We both “accepted Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and savior” as children. But contrary to modern Christian practice, in which this anemic intellectual assent to Jesus suffices as faith, the church throughout most of its history has insisted that the life of discipleship entails *the formation of one’s body*. To be Christian is to conform oneself not only mentally and spiritually—but bodily—to a cruciform existence. It is within the church’s sacramental life, a set of practices largely incoherent within the modern church’s account of faith, where we undergo this physical formation. We do not merely accept Jesus verbally but bodily, allowing the church to bury our bodies—then proclaim them raised—in the waters of baptism. We eat the bread and drink the wine that the church declares the flesh and blood of Christ. Faith was and remains about what one does with one’s body, which is why we think it is not surprising that the first questions on which the Acts community was called to opine was not that of creed but foreskin and diet (Acts 15).

Of course, creeds flow from practices such as circumcision and eating. In fact, as we understand it our ability to know is determined by our physical practices, which means that unless our bodies are rightly formed, we cannot *know* the goods of Christianity. This is how much is at stake; our physical lives and the activities that shape them make us who we are. Habits are identity. As the Orthodox poet Scott Cairns suggests, the worry is not so much that we be saved from hell as saved from our habits. Salvation *is* sanctification, and the tedious rituals of worship are the means by which new and holy habits are formed.

A Theology of Farming

But one’s formation should not be limited to the sanctuary. It should extend to the fields in which we labor and by our labor are remade. To work in the fields is to take part in an ancient drama beginning with Adam and Eve, whose Garden mandate is ours as well: “to serve and

to keep” the fertile soil on which all life depends (Gen. 2:15). Serving and keeping the soil, that is, gardening or farming, connects us to the primordial story in a way that’s embodied. We are in God’s good garden of the creation, we have damaged it by our hubris, and we must bear the consequences. Therefore, as we see it the life of Christian discipleship can never escape the work of serving and keeping the soil and the garden.

To return to the work of garden and pasture is to learn again of our sin and of God’s grace. The Fall is real; the ground is cursed, especially the variety locals here call “Carolina Clay.” Our life on the farm has been a return to this struggle. We fail often. It is the reality of farming. The rain does not come, then comes too much. The sun shines but also burns. A beet crop fails; lambs die. Our work seems cursed at time, the victim of the heat of the Carolina Piedmont and our own lack of knowledge. When we hear each Lent, “from dust you came and to dust you shall return,” it’s a reminder that despite all our efforts we often labor in vain.

Yet in the midst of this struggle, grace emerges. Our daily bread is grown from the fruits of our labor. Food is not a mere commodity that the industrial economy manufactures in a laboratory but is rather the continuation of God’s good creative activity. Food is soil, the *adamah* by which the *adam* is fed (Gen. 2:7); it is still the rich *humus* that feeds the *human*. And so we have come to believe that tending the garden can be good work as well, because on the best days such work anticipates the communion of human, beast, plant, and soil to which the Prophets allude and the new creation of which Paul speaks in 2 Corinthians. When plants break forth from dormant seeds, when new lambs are born out of hidden wombs—with the paltry assistance of our labor—we see a fragmented reflection of grace itself. A fallen creation still bears the imprint of its faultless creator, and through participating in this creation we catch a momentary glimpse of the coming restoration of all things in Christ.

I, Fred, run a church-sponsored garden. The garden has grown from a vision of communion and reconciliation. Part of that reconciliation involves being a host site for kids working off their community service hours earned after

having run afoul of the law. Many of them are amazed to simply watch a plant grow. They come on a given Saturday to dig a raised garden bed, amend it with chicken manure, and plant tiny seeds. When they return after weeks of rain and sun they see new life springing forth from those seeds. Often they can't name it as such, but they have seen the gifts of God made manifest by the work of their hands.

This is why we work with our bodies, serving the fertile soil. Because in doing so we aim to serve in the manner of Jesus. Creation itself is sanctified by Christ's embodiment and our mode of being in the world is displayed in Christ's bodily life, culminating in the cross. To claim the full humanity of Christ is to claim that Christ's body, even in the resurrection, was formed from dust. The soil of the garden is further sanctified by incarnation. As our mentor Stanley Hauerwas suggested in a sermon preached at the baptism of Rich's son and step-daughter, "Jesus' body is the new land." For the children of Abraham, their inheritance was the *land*; for followers of Jesus, our inheritance is the new land of Christ's body whose visible form is the church. This land includes all of creation, which Christ created and redeemed. Soil, crops, our place on earth, all count within the purview of God's care and our call to care. Our mandate is still to serve and to keep the fertile soil just as Christ served with and sacrificed his body; and that service is both to the soil of our gardens and the soil of Jesus' body, the church. The goal of such serving and keeping is that our lives become a sustained note of praise.

So too the tedious work of farming, we believe, conforms our bodies to a cruciform existence. In farming we are broken, given to others, and renewed by the very act of giving. Manual labor, especially the work of cultivation and care of the fertile soil, is part of the formation necessary to know God and rightly engage our fellow creatures and the creation. As we reclaim the tasks of caring for "the least of these," be they plant, animal, or person, our pride is reshaped. We learn that there is no task that we are too good to per-

form. Likewise, there is always time enough in the kingdom of God to serve the least of these.

I, Rich, also work as a lawyer. My time is bought and sold in six-minute increments. Those six minutes are highly valued in the market economy. Six minutes on a contract is more valuable to the market economy than the six minutes a migrant farm worker spends picking tomatoes. Likewise, my time is valued without regard to season or Sabbath. The church's calendar of sacred time, the biblical gift of Sabbath to human and land are ignored. But, of course, the market economy's accounting of time and value is wholly corrupt in God's economy. Creation names the goodness of time given by God for holy work. Thus, working on a farm is an antidote to the misshaped notions of time embedded within the practice of law. Mucking out a birthing pen, carrying fresh water to a sheep pasture, observing the passing of seasons with the work and limits appropriate to them—all help retrain us to understand sacred time and value.

Misshaped Bodies

In contrast, our culture, in which bodies are alternately glorified and degraded, encourages the pursuit of physical activities entirely disconnected from any coherent goal for a human life. For example, we each have come to believe that the expression of our physical lives prior to becoming farmers was directed toward misbegotten



Sharecroppers chopping cotton near White Plains, Georgia.
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ends. For Fred it was mountain climbing; for Rich, endurance running. Both of us became immersed in athletic sub-cultures that, while focused on the body, did so in a way that was disconnected from the practices necessary to sustain them or a common life.

Rock climbing and running in the context of America are bourgeois pursuits, done for the sake of pleasure that benefits none but the doer. Hauling one's body up a 20,000-foot peak in the Bolivian Andes or running 26.2 miles of asphalt—such “sports” require tremendous and gratuitous outputs of physical energy and drain the human body. Climbers and runners can't stop to eat, can't afford to direct blood flow to digesting normal



West Texas farmer prepares to sow millet.
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food. Instead, they eat numerous small servings of highly-processed energy packs. Not food but a laboratory-made conglomeration of molecules, rendered both palatable and addictive by injecting glucose and caffeine and given a catchy package and brand name.

Likewise, alpine climbing and distance running both require immense outputs of emotional and spiritual stamina. We say “spiritual” because these are not just pursuits of the body but of the soul. To subject one's body to hunger, thirst, extreme temperatures, long hours, and even days that vary between extremes of pain and bliss, loneliness and camaraderie, adrenaline highs and ennui, is to engage in an act of spiritual devotion. To narrow one's life's focus to a single climb or

long-distance run—effectively *offering* one's life to such a pursuit—is to assume a posture not dissimilar to worship. And for what purpose? Who is served in these extended trips of body and soul, or rather, to whom are such acts of supplication directed? As we understand it now, to engage in such “sport” is to genuflect before foreign gods. They were frivolous acts made to appear heroic by a society that tells us we have time and energy to waste, a society of pleasure-seekers who must finally admit that we have no clue what we should be doing with our bodies.

But more common than extreme over-use is extreme under-use, whereby bodies become abstractions, parodies of their former selves. A culture such as ours is paradoxically obsessed with both sport and lassitude. Should we desire it there is a machine designed to “free” us from nearly every physical task—including the tractor to replace the scythe and hoe. Thus, we are “free,” and in fact damned in a culture of ever increasing production requiring commensurate increases in consumption. Industrial agriculture has replaced malnutrition with obesity. While other countries starve, Americans eat themselves to death. What slavery, the Industrial Revolution, and now Information Technology all share in common is this same mistaken assumption: that there can be in this world an end to physical work, if not for everyone then at least for the privileged. As Garret Keizer writes in *Harper's*, “[A] culture that has as its highest aim the avoidance of anything remotely resembling physical work must change its life. If you want an inconvenient truth, there it is: that the very notion of convenience upon which our civilization rests is a lie that is killing us.”

The Body of the Other

Any culture that does not value manual labor, such as farming, demonstrates a fundamental disrespect for the body. Such disrespect would be one matter if it were limited to the way we treated our own bodies. But of course, the history of American slavery is enough to teach us that such disrespect isn't limited to individuals and their personal habits. As Wendell Berry has shown in *The Hidden Wound*, such disrespect of other bodies is inexorably linked to disrespect of the land and of people. Berry argues that whites destroyed the

fertility of the land *because* they imposed its work on others, thereby relinquishing the *experience* of the land as well. “The white man, preoccupied with the abstractions of the economic exploitation and ownership of the land, necessarily has lived on the country as a destructive force, an ecological catastrophe, because he assigned the hand labor, and in that the possibility of intimate knowledge of the land, to a people he considered racially inferior; in thus debasing labor, he destroyed the possibility of a meaningful contact with the earth.”

Likewise, other bodies are needed for the times when mechanical bodies can't do the work we refuse to do. When someone is needed to clean up our children's messes, grow and harvest our food, or scrub our toilets, we need only pay other people, whose bodies are now at our command. We used to call those bodies “niggers.” We now call them “Mexicans,” a catch-all word naming not so much nationality as social standing. Berry calls this *niggerfication*—making someone do the work you think yourself above doing. In my (Fred's) part of the North Carolina Piedmont, there is widespread understanding that the most unpleasant jobs are best hired out to “Mexicans.” When needing to get a ditch dug, a floor scrubbed—really any task where the doer might get soiled or sweaty—people speak of needing to “git me a Mexican.” The resonance of ownership remains in such language in which the other is given no particular name but is reduced to cultural object. Having bought the “Mexican's” labor, his or her body is yours. The phrase *git me a Mexican* is simply a culturally-acceptable update of *git me a nigger*. Let the Mexican get his hands dirty, let his sweat darken the wood on our shovels.

As we see it, those whose affluence insulates them from the gift of laboring in the fields and garden continue to miss out on what the Mexican, and the black man before him, may have gained in the process of being forced to do that work. Says Berry: “It seems to me that the black people developed the emotional resilience and equilibrium and the culture necessary to endure and even enjoy hard manual labor wholly aside from the dynamics of ambition. And from this stemmed an ability more complex than that of the white man *to know and to bear life*. What we should have learned willingly ourselves we *forced* the blacks to

learn, and so prevented ourselves from learning it” (emphasis ours).

This is of course dangerous ground, for we are not the people to name what may or may not have been or is being gained by African Americans or Mexicans in the physical labor they have had forced upon them. Yet we have had the chance to observe these matters to some extent. I, Rich, was a member of an African American congregation for a time before moving to our farm. That church was founded at the end of the Civil War as a place of worship for freed slaves, and the church had a long memory of its past saints who left the fields of slavery and reentered them as share croppers, which was slavery of a different sort. Farm stories were



Farming a field near Eutaw, Alabama.
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prominent in that community still, even though the church was now largely upper middle-class. But there was a paradoxical nature to the stories told there. The community regularly celebrated the virtues learned in the demanding heat of tobacco farming. Yet it also celebrated having left that labor behind. It is this duality with which we are trying to struggle. African American communities are right to name their life on the farms of America as slavery. But we also wonder if something vital has not been lost in the exodus of African American communities away from the land. We cannot help but wonder this: does African-American religious life thrive in part because African American communities still have a living memory of what it means to work with one's hands?

Nonetheless, as we name the necessity of manual labor and encourage others to return to the fields, we must note both the joy of that work and the ways our own ancestors made that good work into a form of abuse for others. That history cannot be ignored. For example, as I, Fred, struggle to create a place of reconciliation between blacks, whites, and Latinos in our church's community garden, I must remind myself that for African Americans the fields have not always been a place of restoration and healing. My own ancestors took the gifts of manual labor, turned them into a burden, and set that burden down upon unwilling shoulders. Thus, my black neighbors may view the chance to take up a hoe with me, the great-grandson of a slave owner, as an offer of limited appeal. Likewise, we both have to live within our own experience of white, middle-class affluence. Our return to the land has been and remains by choice. For us to take up the farmer's hoe is a very different act than for a person who has no other option.

Conclusion

Farming is a form of work that is sorely missing in a world of assembly lines and bureaucracies. Essayist Scott Russell Sanders puts it this way: "When the freedom and craft have been squeezed out of work it becomes toil, without mystery or meaning, and that is why many people hate their jobs. Toil drains us; but good work may renew us, by giving expression to our powers. Work shapes our body, fills our thoughts and speech, stamps our character." To learn the good and mysterious

work of farming is to be trained into the life of the body of Christ and that mystical union of creature with Creator for which we aspire.

It's been three years since we rehabilitated that old barn, and despite our limited carpentry skills the barn still stands. The new posts we sistered to the old sill have become a favorite scratching post for the hogs. Those hogs have been sustained on the pasture that surrounds that barn, and in turn the pasture—fescue, timothy grass, and clover—has grown particularly lush from the hog's manure. The hogs have also sustained our families, when we have broken bread and shared the flesh of those hogs around a common table. For this work of our hands and its fruits, the only proper response has been to praise God from whom all blessings flow. †

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Letting the Cracks Show

Anne Lamott and the Feminine Style of Rhetoric

Laurie Britt-Smith

IN JANUARY 2006, I FOUND MYSELF IN WASHINGTON, D.C., at a conference with the very serious title of “Politics and Spirituality, Seeking a Public Integrity.” The crowd of around 1,300 was comprised mostly of graying, well educated, left leaning, liturgical Christians, many of whom had been peace activists since the 1960s. This was the type of audience for whom the first speaker’s opening line, “Welcome to the Imperial City!” just killed. The first two featured speakers were old hands with well honed rhetorical skills, and after they finished the crowd was feeling somewhat inspired but a bit restless—a little bored with the same ideas, the same words most had heard many, many times before. However, as a young man rose to introduce the third speaker, buzzing whispers of anticipation began to bounce around the room. After his final comment about the healing grace of humor, the crowd broke into a lively applause. Slowly, a small white woman with spiky dreadlocks, sporting stylish horn-rimmed glasses that gave her a cool, “I’m an author” look, took the stage. She grinned around her slight overbite and, for just a second, the tip of her tongue graced the gap in her front teeth. She began, “My goodness all these intelligent, caring Christians in one room. I can hardly believe it.” This prompted hearty applause and laughter. After acknowledging the people in the “cheap seats”—the overflow room—she continued, “Before I begin, I should apologize to any Republicans who may be here. If you’ve read my stuff, you know who I am and what I’m about. If you haven’t... well, it’s not my fault you are here.” This was Anne Lamott, looking and sounding very much like I had imagined she would.

For those unfamiliar with Lamott, she is a leftwing, feminist, naturalist, politically active, Presbyterian, single mother—whose most prized material object is a fraying red cord blessed by the Dalai Llama that she wears around her right wrist.

She is a walking contradiction of formative forces and literacies. Although Lamott has written several novels, she is best known for her non-fiction writing. In her essays she captures the paradoxical challenges of being a female intellectual in our culture while maintaining her sense of humor, making her audience laugh, and occasionally cry, with her. She pulls from multiple strands of experience and ideologies, weaving rhetorically complicated essays that reveal the humor and enlightenment in things both mundane (her forty-ninth birthday) and heartbreaking (losing both her father and best friend to cancer).

Lamott’s writing is web-like and feels organic, as if she simply has written whatever has come into her mind. That this is not the case is made clear in her book, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. This reflective and instructive book—a must-read for anyone who writes or teaches writing—takes its title from an incident when her brother, doing the classic kid thing, left an assignment about birds undone until the weekend before it was due. Immobilized by his panic at the size of the project, he looked to his father, silently pleading, “But how will I get this done?” The answer, “Bird by bird, buddy, just take it bird by bird.”

That story is part of a spiraling introduction to her discussion of the writing process, a discussion that is mingled with bits of collected poetry, prose, and her own life experiences. The largest theme in *Bird by Bird*, which she circles back to several times, is probably the most serious issue writers face: learning to trust your own voice and giving yourself permission to use it. She writes,

Mark Twain said that Adam was the only man who, when he said a good thing, knew that nobody had said it before. What you have to offer is your own sensibility, maybe your own sense of humor or

insider pathos or meaning. All of us can sing the same song, and there will still be four billion different renditions. (181)

However, as much as Lamott writes about finding one's voice, and her "make no excuses" approach to addressing the conference, in her writing she often deflects the most profound statements onto other speakers. It is always her father, her Jesuit friend Tom, her Pastor Veronica, a poet, or some other person who speaks with the most confidence and wisdom. She always represents herself as the perpetually screwed-up, neurotic female character, even though she is the author, the one who has cobbled the voices together, finding meaning along with the humor in the ridiculous, sometimes maddening, circumstances of her life.

This is in keeping with what Karlyn Kohrs Campbell has identified as the "feminine style of rhetoric" (1989). Although Campbell specifically examines the oratory of early feminist speakers, her work is useful in considering how any woman writer builds a relationship with an audience. Although this style is not used exclusively by women (for example, a close analysis of most contemporary male stand-up comedians reveals that they are masters of this form of story telling), it did arise out of women's experiences as they struggled to find an acceptable public style of oratory. Before these earliest of feminine speakers could present their anti-slavery and suffragette positions, they had to convince the audience, both male and female, that they had a right to speak at all. Instead of relying on the classic structure of rhetorical argument—which most of these women were not familiar with anyway as it was a subject taught at universities they were not permitted to attend—they found that a conversation binding the audience to the speaker was the best strategy for being heard.

Campbell describes this style as the process of craft learning as applied to the rhetorical situation. Whereas the traditional male model for rhetoric is more confrontational, often described as a type of battle to be won, the feminine model is based on a long tradition of passing on life skills, of keeping traditions alive, and of sharing advice. The rhetorical voice is more personal in tone and relies heavily on personal experience and anecdotes. It invites the audience to test their experiences

against the experience of the speaker/author in order to achieve agreement through identification with the author. The goal of feminine rhetoric is not to achieve a sense of victory over the audience—to persuade them that one's position is correct—but rather to empower the audience, to inspire them to believe that they have a credible voice—that they matter, their opinions matter, and thus to negate the insecurity that allows the status quo to operate unchallenged. The representation of insecure Anne, who is always in the process of learning through experience and reflection, is also always tacitly asking for acceptance so that we—both Lamott and her audience—can come to an understanding about the topic at hand, be it the writing process, politics, childrearing, family relationships, experiences as a woman in our culture, or spirituality. She uses the voices of others to provide the wisdom, or sometimes controversy, in her writing as a way to deflect the appearance of confrontation with her readers.

Lamott is unflinchingly honest in her discussions—a requirement for humor to work, and for an ethos of credibility particularly in the feminine style when so much depends on the audience coming to identify with the author's experiences. Yet it is still shocking to read a woman who openly discusses the more unpleasant bits of life. Good girls—especially Presbyterian church ladies—are not supposed to talk about their drug use, alcoholism, eating disorders, sex lives, abortions, or disgust and loathing at the patriarchal nature of our current political climate. In her essay "Ham of God," Lamott tries to calm herself on the morning of her forty-ninth birthday. This is a difficult birthday for women anyway, but for Lamott it was an especially trying time due to her frustration with the United States' involvement in Iraq. She writes of her struggle to meditate and pray:

I closed my eyes, and got quiet. I tried to look like Mother Mary, with dreadlocks and a bad back. But within seconds, I was frantic to turn on the TV. I was in withdrawal—I needed more scolding from Donald Rumsfeld, and more malignant celebration of what everyone agreed, in April 2003, was a great victory for George W. Bush. So we couldn't find those stupid

weapons of mass destruction—pick, pick, pick. I didn't turn on the TV. I kept my eyes closed, and breathed. I started to feel crazy, and knew that all I needed was five minutes of CNN. I listened to the birds sing outside, and it was like Chinese water torture, which I am sure we don't say anymore. (*Plan B*, 7)

Her humor is found in the self-effacing reporting of her thoughts and actions. Once readers identify and laugh with the speaker, they are not so apt to be defensive when the conversation turns to the two most notoriously confrontational topics in our society, politics and religion. *Plan B* is an angry book. Lamott tries to hold to her faith in a peaceful, loving God in a culture that ignores its own social problems and is increasingly violent. In most of the essays in this text, her anxiety is resolved as she is able to see God quietly at work through her relationships with others. "Ham of God" is a reference to a series of odd circumstances, including her inability to find any sense of peace at home, that lead to her winning a ham—a meat product she refers to as "pink rubber"—which she then is able to give to a friend in desperate need who also happens to absolutely love ham. The story of how it all happened is also linked to a meditation on the desert: a place where there seems to be no life at all—until the rain comes and you see that life really is all around you all the time. Nature remains her most steadfast anchor to her beliefs, and it is unusual for her not to interweave that evidence into her narratives.

Lamott's writing is layered and interconnected so that individual essays revolve around single incidents and can be read as stand alone pieces, but they are also tied to themes, characters, and events in other essays, often in multiple texts. This overlapping extends even to the titles of her last three books of non-fiction, the earliest work being

Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith, followed by *Plan B: More Thoughts on Faith*, and her latest, *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*. The repetition of "Thoughts on Faith" communicates to her readers that she is continuing and deepening the conversation, updating us on the people she has introduced in the past and letting us know how she is coping with the changes in the world since we last checked in. *Grace (Eventually)* is not quite a sequel to *Plan B* or *Traveling Mercies*, any more than those books were sequels to *Bird by Bird* or *Operating Instructions*, a work that revolves around the birth of her son Sam,

and her first non-fiction book. Although the attentive reader will recognize the same people and events in each text, there is no linear pattern to how the essays appear.

In step with the feminine style of building a relationship with the audience, her stories revolve and evolve each time they are retold. For example, *Grace* opens with an essay that takes the readers back to Bolinas, California, in the early 1970s, where a twenty-something Anne is dealing with multiple addictions and a failed, toxic relationship that leads to an unexpected moment of found grace and

spiritual awakening. Although the awakening is not from a Christian source—and if it were she never would have read it at the time—it represents a step toward what she eventually will discover about grace. The essay sets the theme of the collection—the sudden appearance and then gradual development of grace in one's life—and establishes the tone and style of a feminine argument. Her strategy is to connect to the audience by telling a revealing story about herself, sharing a very intimate and real moment while also making a statement that there is such a thing as grace and here is how it works. New readers are able to understand the essay as a stand alone piece, but her loyal readers will connect that moment to others they already have read. She discusses her life in Bolinas many times in the course of her books, but this is a new story, a new revelation.

Lamott's strategy is to connect to the audience by telling a revealing story about herself, sharing a very intimate and real moment while also making a statement that there is such a thing as grace and here is how it works.

The result is that reading her work is like building a friendship. In general women gain knowledge of each other in similar fashion, paying attention to new details, new twists, and new insights through ongoing conversation.

Additionally, most of her essays are structured inductively, another hallmark of the feminine style as identified by Campbell. The threads of thoughts, events, and reflection often appear only tangentially connected until a crucial point near the end of any given piece when everything falls into place. In “Junctions,” which appears late in *Grace*, she spends several pages setting up her “thesis.” She has woken up on a “bleak Sunday” when the morning news is full of dreadful predictions of the imminent launch of North Korean nukes. She heads to church, where she finds little comfort, and so decides to take a hike in the California hills, which have grown brown in the summer heat. As she moves through the piece, she discusses politics, environmental issues, motherhood, and aggravation at people who don’t properly curb their dogs. All these observations suddenly coalesce as she considers the ancient majesty of the hills and states:

Saint Paul, who can be such a grumpy book-thumper, said that where sin abounds, grace abounds, and I think this is Paul at his most insightful, hopeful, faithful, when it comes to politicians and to me—if by “sin” we mean strictly the original archery term of missing the mark. I realized just then that sin and grace are not opposites, but partners, like the genes in DNA, or the stages of childbirth. (241)

She concludes the essay with a memory of how the pain of labor is also connected to acts of great mercy and kindness on the part of those who were with her during that event. How sips of juice gave her hope and energy when she felt she was about to give up. The linking of a spiritual ideal to the earthly example of childbirth is a uniquely feminine move and gives the essay meaning, eventually.

Although this style can be very appealing to some, it has been known to irritate readers with a preference for more linear storytelling. I became aware of the irritation when I used Lamott’s essay

“Overture: Lily Pads” from *Traveling Mercies* and Richard Rodriguez’s “Credo” from his book *The Hunger for Memory* in my literature class to discuss writing about spirituality. Rodriguez, who was born and raised in a devout Catholic home, writes elegantly about the church and how it structured his everyday life. “Credo” means we believe, and that is what Rodriguez writes about, discussing his belief and his relationship with that belief. He uses the image of the calendar as his structural metaphor and the essay reads as a straightforward chronological retelling of events. Lamott’s essay, in contrast, uses several metaphors from nature, the controlling one being that of the lily pad and the complicated jumps she has made from place to place on her own spiritual journey. She explains the metaphor in a brief paragraph at the beginning, then the essay jumps to an image of a lone palm tree growing in a railroad yard, where it has no business being. This eventually turns out to be a reference to herself and her spiky hair, blooming in the most unexpected of places—a Presbyterian church. In between comes a series of scenes where she is taken in by various people of faith—Catholics, Christian Scientists, Jews, Buddhists, Episcopalians—who are very different from her intellectual, atheistic, politically active parents. Each group shelters her, teaching her something, until she jumps to another scene of challenging moments: her struggles with alcohol and cocaine, serially dating married men, the death of her father, the birth of her son, followed by more interaction with people of faith, and back and forth. It is lovely, funny, and complicated. I am not claiming it is better than Rodriguez’s piece, just very different.

My students loved discussing the pieces and were taken in by the openness of both authors’ representations of such a personal topic. However, a good third of the class was made up of young men who were seniors studying aviation. Although this was a sophomore-level class, they had waited until the last moment to take care of their English requirement. To a person they responded that Lamott had really cool scenes and that they loved her honesty. Actually, they were quite shocked by her honesty. However, many couldn’t follow her structure and were confused by the piece. They preferred Rodriguez’s writing because “it made more sense.”

The majority of the young women in the class however loved the piece and wanted to read more. The structure was a non-issue. During a class discussion, when one of the young men started explaining his confusion, one of the girls just looked at him with disgust and said, "Come on, she told us what she was doing up front. Guys never listen." The fact that she said "listen" instead of "pay attention" or "read well" is, I think, more than a dialectical quirk. She caught on to the conversational quality of the writing, and whether consciously or not, she was listening to her reading and reacting to the feminine style of the rhetoric in a feminine way.

The difference between the authors' styles was also felt in the general mood of the class. The discussion of the Rodriguez piece was more tense, and not because his essay lacks humor, although it is not as intentionally funny as Lamott's writing. The Catholic students were very edgy about any criticism of "Credo," because it offers a fairly celebratory take on being Catholic. To say something negative about it was to say something negative about their sense of community, their sense of identity. Lamott's depiction of Catholicism is much less positive. Her first lily pad is her interaction with a Catholic family and their mother who "wore each new baby on her breasts like a brooch" (5). She describes her interaction with them with great affection, and a little fear, recalling that their father was also an alcoholic who frightened her one night when he stormed into her friend's bedroom and began slapping the girl on her face and shoulders. She writes, "Looking back on the God my friend believed in, he seems a little erratic, not entirely unlike her father—God as borderline personality" (7). I thought this line would surely start a small riot, but surprisingly, they all laughed.

"Lily Pads" is at its core a conversion story, but one that doesn't hammer the audience with the need to convert. When Anne finally breathes her "Sinner's Prayer," "Fuck it: I quit . . . All right you can come in" (50), the students, regardless of faith tradition or non-belief, were able to understand how she got there without feeling they had been directly confronted. Her humor, which so often is self-deprecating, combined with her appreciation and respect for all the people of faith and non-faith who had influenced her journey, makes

the moment understandable. She isn't preaching: she's just talking.

Humor really is a healing grace—just like the young man who introduced Lamott at the conference on social justice said. During that speech Anne referred to laughter as "carbonated holiness" and as the only way to get through the challenges put on us by society and self. Whether she is discussing women's issues, politics, or issues of faith, we laugh, and Lamott is able to make her point, not because she has set herself apart as the grand observer of life but because she chooses to portray herself as a down and sometimes dirty participant who asks the hard questions, often struggles with the task at hand, and is the first to admit her own imperfection. She often quotes Leonard Cohen who sings, "There are cracks, cracks, in everything, that's how the light gets in." Because she is willing to do just that, let her own cracks show, her writing creates appealing, rhetorically interesting, and honest representations of the complexity and somewhat neurotic nature of American life. ♣

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rereading old books

Endo Shusaku's *Silence*

Harold K. Bush Jr.

MY FIRST READING OF ENDO SHUSAKU'S *Silence* occurred while I was living in Japan and thinking about the possibilities of evangelical Christianity expanding its horizons in that rather stubborn and insular society. I had been given the novel by a Japanese friend, one whose passions were largely devoted to God, His kingdom, and the propagation of the gospel within his homeland.

I had read of other, similar accounts of the persecution of Christian communities, but the scenes of martyrdom in *Silence*, based on the real events in southern Japan of the early seventeenth century, touched me powerfully in my initial reading almost twenty years ago. The plot involves the journeys of two Jesuits in search of answers about the disappearance of a colleague. The book contains many scenes of torture. The Japanese rulers found increasingly imaginative ways for punishing human beings, so these scenes are diverse. Mostly I was moved by the staunch faith of the persecuted believers, even in the face of the most hideous forms of public humiliation and pain.

Given the vision of intense and implacable Japanese faith depicted by Endo in *Silence*, one might suppose that a wonderful and unique Japanese church ultimately would prevail and grow. However, this has not been the case. Japan remains the Asian nation with the fewest numbers of active Christian believers (excepting North Korea, a very special case). Unlike its neighbors South Korea and China, for example, which have seen rapid and almost astonishing growth in their numbers of believers during the past twenty years, the Japanese church has remained a negligible cultural presence, with almost no real growth in numbers of believers. The ruthless Japanese lords depicted in *Silence*, in retrospect, seem to have been successful in essentially wiping Christianity from the face of Japan for over four hundred years now.

Among many other topics, *Silence* takes up the question of why the Japanese have remained resistant to the growth of the Christian gospel. As the terrifying and sadistic magistrate Inoue puts it, Japan is a kind of swampland in which certain kinds of trees are simply unable to take root and grow. This particular image of Japan as a swamp, repeated several times in the book, has remained one of the tale's most controversial moments, and it has provoked much debate among the Japanese themselves as to the nature of their culture and the viability of Christianity to prosper there.

And yet the explanation by Inoue, notorious for his methods of torture used to induce the apostasy of the priests, fails to acknowledge the early, almost unbelievable blossoming of the Christian church in southern Japan, where the novel is set. Also, Inoue's grim analysis seems especially disingenuous, since it fails to acknowledge that his own bloody persecution of the faithful has contributed to wiping out Christianity within his domain. As a result, his analysis must appear rather ironic to the reader and surely this is part of Endo's strategy. Despite this many have read Inoue's cunning observations as somehow containing real explanatory power.

As an historical account of real events, the novel resonates most powerfully in two ways: it provides an inspiring historical account of a Christian community of massive numbers and widespread cultural influence that prospered for many decades, particularly on Kyushu Island; and it depicts the severe backlash of the brutal Japanese leaders once they decided that the Christians ultimately represented a threat to their power. The novel dramatizes the exploits in particular of one Jesuit priest, Fr. Rodrigues, who has come to Japan long after these persecutions have commenced, partly to work for God's glory in serving the flock and partly to discover what has happened to one

of his former teachers, Fr. Ferreira, who is rumored to have apostatized.

The story is especially memorable in depicting the internal trials of Fr. Rodrigues as he journeys through Japan with the aid of the underground believers and faces the possibility of his own capture and torture. It is also quite disturbing in its depictions of the various kinds of mistreatment to which the ruthless Japanese authorities turn: tying captives to posts at low tide before the oceans begin to rise slowly; burning dozens of believers and their children together in huge fires; wrapping believers tightly in mats and dropping them into deep waters to drown; or, perhaps most notoriously, binding and suspending them upside down into pits of refuse and human excrement, with tiny slits cut into their foreheads or behind their ears through which they will bleed to death, ever so slowly.

When Rodrigues is captured and imprisoned, they put him in a urine-filled hut within earshot of some of these pits. At first he does not recognize the sound that he hears at night, mistaking it for snoring. It turns out to be the low moans of the men being tortured, suspended upside down in the filthy pits. Rodrigues is told by the cruel interpreter overseeing him that if he simply will recant and tread on the symbol of Christian faith, the *fumie*, these bound believers will be freed, and so will he. Thus his own decision has great consequences for those being tortured just outside his room.

Throughout all of this, of course, Rodrigues prays fervently but hears nothing in return, only the silence of God. Silence is indeed the major motif of *Silence*, and certainly the book's title can be considered one of the most fitting one-word descriptive titles in all of world literature. "Behind the depressing silence of this sea, the silence of God. . . . the feeling that while men raise their voices in anguish God remains with folded arms, silent" (61). As we all do when faced with egregious moral wrongs or the seemingly random acts of natural disasters, the novel repeatedly broaches the uncomfortable question of God's apparent silence, and thus apathy, in the face of evil. "And like the sea God was silent. His silence continued" (68). As the story progresses we hear Rodrigues's thoughts as he questions God: "A man had died. Yet the outside world went on as if nothing had happened. Could

anything be more crazy? Was this martyrdom? Why are you silent?" (119). Indeed, passages like these occur so commonly throughout the narrative that one begins to think that Endo is overdoing it a little. The technique works insofar as the questioning and the doubt do actually grow in intensity as the plot thickens.

Strikingly, the silence in *Silence* is not always just about God's apathy for the human condition. The novel also provides occasions of more edifying, even sacred silence, a feature of the story that is easily overlooked. All of us have experienced a variety of silences in our lives, and some of these silences can be quite wonderful: within the sanctity of a church or at a beautiful spot in the mountains. The silence of God can often be awesome and amazing. And there can be a perceptible silence even when there is clearly much ambient sound—as during a walk at dawn along the seashore when the waves are lightly pounding the sand or on a nature trail when there is wind in the trees and birds singing. We hear these minimal and delightful sounds and yet still recognize the silence just beneath them. Silence in the presence of God can be a source of edification and peaceful reflection, and the Psalms provide many meditations that enjoin believers to enter into such silence: "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalms 46:10).

On a few occasions Endo's novel evokes these sorts of silence. For instance, the novel contains numerous splendid depictions of the pastoral beauty of Japan. Also, Rodrigues remarks frequently upon the Bible's silence regarding the facial features of Jesus, about how little we know about the physical appearance of the Messiah. The face of Jesus, which Rodrigues imagines is silently gazing upon himself, is a source of hope and peace: "Those soft, clear eyes which pierced to the very core of a man's being were now fixed upon him" (103). But sometimes this sublime face becomes a source of shame and conviction as well.

It is also worth noting (though, again, sometimes overlooked) that on at least two occasions in the novel, Rodrigues evidently succeeds in hearing the voice of God. The first occurrence is when the narrator states, "the answer seemed to come to his ears: 'I will not abandon you'" (106). The voice of God is qualified on this occasion, however, so a careful reader is not able to tell if it truly is the

voice of God or if it merely “seems” to be. But Endo does not qualify the experience that happens just at the conclusion of the story proper. Rodrigues does in fact succeed finally in hearing the voice of God, who states: “I was not silent. I suffered beside you” (190).

Thus does the novel greatly complicate any facile notion of what silence itself might actually signify. And just as the story proper ends, with Rodrigues seemingly triumphantly hearing the voice of God, Endo masterfully provides an appendix, which is written in the form of a government report about the subsequent history of Rodrigues. The appendix serves to diminish the sublime power of hearing God’s voice and is extremely appropriate in qualifying the value of these purported supernatural events. Rodrigues has apostatized, after which he is essentially swallowed up by the machinery of the Japanese society. He is provided with the Japanese name of a man who has died, along with the dead man’s widow as a wife, a particularly egregious swipe at the priestly vows that he has now forsaken. He is shipped off to the capital Edo (later renamed Tokyo) to work on prescribed tasks for the leaders of the government. In the end Rodrigues (or, more accurately, Okada San’emon) is given a Buddhist funeral and, in the tradition of such rites, a posthumous Buddhist name. He is cremated and his remains are buried in a Buddhist temple.

All of these co-optations Rodrigues accepts silently, seemingly without protest. The effect of this appendix is one of total resignation, in silence, to a dominant regime of truth that the gospel of Jesus Christ appears powerless to change. Endo’s masterpiece ends with the complete silencing of the man who has staked his life on hearing God’s voice and speaking God’s truth.

Word recently has been made public that director Martin Scorsese is turning this great novel into a film scheduled for release in 2008. Though Scorsese has made some remarkable films, his latest works are filled with a gratuitous overemphasis on sheer violence. An example is his latest,

The Departed, a film of mindless horror that seems altogether void of any discernible redemptive value. *The Departed* certainly has a lush look, and, obviously, Scorsese and his team have the practical aspects of filmmaking down pat. But for all its dazzling, technical excellence, *The Departed* has no soul, no inspirational merit. Nevertheless, it was nominated for, and won, a number of major film awards. Go figure. In any event, Scorsese’s recent efforts make one wonder how Endo’s great tale will translate to the screen in his hands. As such, if you have any inclination, I would strongly urge you to read the book for yourself before seeing Scorsese’s adaptation.

Indeed, it is time for a serious reconsideration of the accomplishments of Endo’s novels, including *Silence* and, if one is out looking for bigger game, the longer and more intricately worked out historical fiction, *The Samurai*. *Silence* is perfect for reading groups, since it is short and provokes intense discussion. For Christians it certainly reminds every person of the price that has been paid for the propagation of the gospel. But even more audaciously, *Silence* features one of the sternest accounts of the problem of evil in modern fiction. And evil and suffering have become predominant philosophical concerns for our contemporary setting. (And maybe this explains Scorsese’s attraction to *Silence*.) As such, *Silence* is one of the most challenging stories that any of us can read—especially because Endo refuses to provide any sort of contrived theodicy for the sake of believers. Maybe he simply did not have one to give—which if true, would be a stunning personal confession in its own right. As such, *Silence* strikes me as a particularly honest self-revelation of its author. Whatever the novel’s larger implications, we must admire Endo for that. †

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YOU ARE HERE

I believe in God when it's only me
and Lucy in our own green wood.
The white tip of her tail. A kingfisher
skimming the pond. OK, and Barb
and the kids and a few of our friends.
Say a village. But not all the faces blurring by
on the freeway and the endless mothers

jostling at the mall in their bulky parkas
and the farmers coming in from the centuries
to drink a cup of buttermilk, all their widows
keeping lilacs on all their grassy graves,

or the land and the birds and the beasts
on the land, forest after forest primeval
seething with snakes and bacteria for eons
too glacial and cataclysmically slow
even to contemplate, this one small planet
whirling in the great mass of stars
and the other galaxies blurring in that poster
with the arrow pointing at this one tiny dot
of light because that's the only place you are
and ever can be: *You are here.*

Where the kingfisher is gliding
over the pond, and the mist is lifting,
and Lucy is trotting along the shore
on her four proud white paws.

Christopher Anderson

Return to Greil's Island

J. D. Buhl

IT WAS A POPULAR PARTY QUESTION IN THE 1970s: "If you were stranded on a desert island and could have only one record album with you, which would it be?" Preeminent rock critic Greil Marcus took the question seriously enough that when a publisher approached him with the idea of editing a desert-island book, he agreed. Twenty of the day's best music writers contributed essays, fantasies, and passionate defenses of favorite albums to *Stranded*, published in 1979. With Van Morrison and the Rolling Stones garnering two pieces each, and others—from Linda Ronstadt to the Ramones, the "5" Royales to the Ronettes—receiving equally convincing prose, the book was an immediate hit. It almost as quickly went out of print.

When *Stranded* reappeared in 1996, it already anticipated an update. Robert Christgau admitted in the new foreword, "a younger fan will almost certainly find much of this music classic, but old-fashioned." Were he to do a sequel himself, he would enlist not only black critics and more women (of which there were none and five, respectively), but gay critics (then "maybe disco too would get some respect") and younger writers.

It didn't happen until this year. The 2007 edition of *Stranded* is followed onto the shelves by *Marooned*, a new collection edited by Phil Freeman that asks twenty writers of subsequent generations the same question. The answers will send you scurrying to do some research (and some shopping) before the day of exile arrives.

Most welcome are the jazz picks of Geeta Dayal (Alice Coltrane's *Journey in Satchidananda*), Greg Tate (Miles Davis's *Bitches Brew*), and Derek Taylor (Sonny Rollins's *A Night at the Village Vanguard*). Most disturbing are the several heavy metal selections—the title alone of the Scorpions' *Virgin Killer* makes me shudder. Other essays will acquaint you with 1980s and 1990s bands and hip-hop artists you may have missed.

Freeman states up front that "*Stranded* is no longer anything like an accurate representation of the pop music universe.... I don't personally know a single person who listens to a lot of the *Stranded* artists with any kind of regularity." Yet many treated in *Marooned* could have been "*Stranded* artists." Elton John, the Meters, Dionne Warwick, and even the Cars are chosen for companionship. The most surprising is Kandia Crazy Horse's choice of Stephen Stills's *Manassas*, released in 1972. Her unique investigation of this expansive double LP ("a vital cure for the Invisibility Blues"), from the perspective of a "twenty-first-century Pale Fox, a trickster without nation and no blood but purple," extracts the blues at its heart. She writes of how the "inchoate, cradle-era discovery of [Stills's] music has been central to my love of every other style of music... that came after."

It is such evocations of the particularity of personal experience that makes for Freeman's caveat, "In reading these essays, you're going to learn as much about the writers as the records," an assertion true of its predecessor.

The two books also offer readers opportunities to learn about themselves. Marcus writes in his foreword to *Marooned* that "each reader... will find his or her epiphany, one that says, *yes, this is how it is, this is what I've always felt*—or that says, *no, I didn't know that, I never understood that, I may never understand it, but now I know it's there, and maybe, when the time comes, in my own life, I'll recognize this moment for what it is.*"

Marcus ended *Stranded* by acknowledging a related question circulating at the time: "Were a Martian to land on Earth and ask you the meaning of rock and roll, what would you play to explain?" Thinking at first that a spin of "She Loves You" might do it, he decides his choice of an artifact that could represent all of rock and roll "is all of rock and roll." His version of it anyway. He sup-

plies a fascinating list of singles and albums (some with commentary, others without) that rethinks the story of rock and roll "in terms of spirit, not sales." Freeman returns to "Treasure Island" and submits his own list to bring the Martian up to date. Together these terse overviews catalog the items necessary for any earthling's thoughtful pop library.

Otherwise, neither book strives for historicity or advocacy. Freeman recalls that none of his contributors wrote, "This is a really good album, deserving of wider attention.' They all said something like, 'When I was [ten, or thirteen, or twenty-one], this album ate its way into my brain.... Here's why I don't ever want it to leave.'"

I have in these pages (Easter 2005) discussed the difficulty of deciding which albums could be considered "favorites." Setting aside for the moment any encounter with an inquisitive Martian, how would I answer the more daunting desert-island challenge?

First, *Manassas* already has been taken. So I bring to mind other recordings, such as *The Allman Brothers Band at Fillmore East* or Rod Stewart's *Every Picture Tells a Story*, albums that continue to thrill and enthrall. Such creative achievements never fully conform to our needs; more likely the expectation is that we will conform to theirs. They hang just outside our lives, even as they feed them, maintaining the autonomy that is integral to their artistic merit and sense of timelessness. No matter how often you play them, they always sound new.

One is already alone in this scenario. We run the risk of narcissistic self-involvement in selecting a record so thoroughly imprinted with our memories that it no longer can sing its own truth.

I was reading a Christian magazine recently when this typo made an impression on me: "companion peace." If my companion on a desert island is a piece of pop product, then it should invite peace of mind. Better yet, it could suggest the peace that passes all understanding. Such an aural companion would need to evoke both the human spirit and the Holy Spirit, the tension and release of life in Christ. It could not speak only to a certain

time or certain feelings, but speak to all times and feelings, as with the voice of creation. It would need to *breathe*.

I'm thinking John Coltrane. The obvious choice would be *A Love Supreme*, but another collection seems even more appropriate. *Transition* was a hodge-podge, released after Coltrane's death. The CD version consists of four tracks dating from 1965: "Transition," "Welcome," "Suite," and "Vigil."

It would be necessary to transfer my inner turbulence to something outside myself that could give it tangible expression. The quartet's interactions in the title track would do. Throughout the twenty-two-minute "Suite" (an effusive five-part work devoted to prayer, meditation, and affirmation), the group plays out all the freedom and unpredictability that is jazz. Here I could place myself in that still, small space created by the difference between the beat and the pulse of a composition.

"Welcome" is the most beautiful piece in Coltrane's oeuvre. His tenor saxophone rolls out such openness that even in exile I could feel at home. The song, he says, addresses "that feeling you have when you finally reach...an understanding which you have earned through struggle. It is a...welcome feeling of peace."

"Vigil" is a personal favorite, a roiling duet between Coltrane and drummer Elvin Jones. Coltrane explains that "Vigil" implies "watchfulness against elements that might be destructive—from within or without." Sitting on a desert island waiting to be rescued would be one long vigil, wouldn't it? It was another jazzman, Art Blakey, who said, "Music should wash away the dust of [a person's] everyday life." There would be much dust to wash away in this circumstance. I would want to be reminded of all that I was missing in a peaceful and demanding way, one that gives melodic shape to God's embrace: the only embrace I could hope to enjoy in such straits. ♣

J. D. Buhl often feels that he is already living on a desert island.

film

The Lost Action Hero

IN 1993 ACTION HERO FANS WERE PUZZLED WHEN clips from Olivier's 1948 *Hamlet* appeared in an Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle called *Last Action Hero*. Those in the know, of course, realized that the clips provided ironic commentary on the film's title and Schwarzenegger's reputation. For Shakespeare's play revolves around the fact that Hamlet is anything but an action hero. Unable to revenge his father's most foul and bloody murder, Hamlet instead takes on an antic disposition, acting an artificial role rather than acting as an authentic hero. This pun on "acting"—playing a part versus taking real life action—informs *Last Action Hero* as it does *Hamlet*. But it also informs a more recent (and much better) film about an action hero.

Hollywoodland, released last year, is about Superman—or rather, it is about the man who acted the role of Superman on television from 1952 to 1958: George Reeves (played endearingly by Ben Affleck). Though allusions to Hamlet appear nowhere in the 2006 film, I would argue that *Hollywoodland* captures the essence of Carl Sandburg's evocative poem "They All Want to Play Hamlet." For, according to Sandburg, actors want to play Hamlet not only because Hamlet is the actor's actor but also because he is "in the saddest play the inkfish, Shakespeare, ever wrote," and "all actors are sad."

While Hamlet contemplates suicide several times in Shakespeare's play, George Reeves appears to take the name of action and actually do it. In *Hollywoodland*'s opening scene, the first statement we hear about the Superman star comes from a cop inspecting his sad death: "the fiancée said he was depressed; she told his pals he'd do it." As the film develops we discover that, like Hamlet, George suffered from knowledge that his mother betrayed his father. In George's case his mother told him a lie—that his father shot himself—when in actuality

Crystal Downing

he ran away with another woman. George, then, like other sad people, chooses to become an actor. As Sandburg puts it,

They all want to play Hamlet.
They have not exactly seen their fathers
killed
Nor their mothers in a frame-up to kill...
[But] this is something that calls and calls
to their blood.

In order to fulfill the call in his blood, George puts on an antic disposition, acting like an actor. The first time in the film that we see him alive—in a flashback to 1951—he is an unknown, acting like he can afford drinks at a glamorous Hollywood party. When Rita Hayworth enters the room, he finagles his way into one of the many bulb-popping photographs taken of the star, standing right next to her seated figure. After a beautiful woman comments on how he "just made it into the picture," George maintains an act: "Was someone taking a picture? I hadn't noticed." This woman, Toni Mannix, becomes enchanted as George reprises for her his bit part in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), striking histrionic poses that she guesses as portraying "noble, stoic" and "heroic."

Eight years George's senior, Toni is like the star in *Gone with the Wind*—Vivien Leigh. However, Diane Lane's marvelous Toni is more like the Vivien Leigh of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, a film that debuted in 1951, the same year in which the scene that we are watching is set. Reminding us of the aging Blanche DuBois seeking to charm a younger man, Toni is as histrionic in her responses to George as he is in his various poses. And this is key to the theme of *Hollywoodland*. It is not just professional actors who pretend to be what they are not. In the land of Hollywood, they all are playing Hamlet. And they all seem sad.

This, then, is not your generic biopic. Though *Hollywoodland* sticks quite closely to biographical facts—including the unsolved mystery of George Reeves's death—the film is actually about, well, Hollywoodland: a place where people in all walks of life put on acts to get what they want. In fact, long before we ever see Ben Affleck's portrayal of George Reeves, we are introduced to Adrien Brody's Louis Simo, a down-and-out private investigator who tells lies in order to uncover information. Louis's surname, pronounced Seem-o, is an invention of the filmmakers, as though to signal the setting of the film: a place where nothing is as it seems. We are reminded of Hamlet's first speech, in which he distinguishes playing a part from authentic sorrow over his father's death:

Seems, madam? Nay, it is, I know not
"seems."
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good
mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black, . . .
That can denote me truly. These indeed
seem,
For they are actions that a man might
play,
But I have that within which passes show,
These but the trappings and the suits of
woe. (1.2.76–78, 83–86)

Hollywoodland, then, is about stripping away trappings and suits to get at that which passes show. Significantly, when we first encounter Simo, he is being hired to do surveillance on a woman who works in a Hollywood costume warehouse: a place of trappings and suits of disguise. Her suspicious husband, convinced that his wife is just putting on a show of faithfulness, wants Simo to get underneath her disguise. Later, Simo will find her literally underneath disguises, sprawled on the floor of the costume warehouse where she has been shot to death by her husband, reminding us of Reeves, who may also have been shot to death by a jealous lover.

The costume warehouse additionally alludes to Reeves's repeated disparagement of his own Superman costume. Feeling trapped in a suit that brings him woe, Reeves worries about being typecast in his inky cloak. (As the film indicates,

Superman's costume was black and gray in the early years of the black and white series.) When Reeves gets a part in *From Here to Eternity* (1953), he must suffer the indignity of having his role drastically reduced when preview audiences snigger at the actor they identify as the hero of "ten-year-old boys and shut-ins." He ends up on the cutting room floor, like the murdered costume worker, whose final resting place is identified by a huge sign proclaiming "Cutting Room" immediately before we see her body prone on the wooden floor.

Rather than as a serious actor, Reeves is repeatedly identified with little boys. The wealthy Toni Mannix, who becomes his lover, several times calls him "my boy," giving him a gold watch inscribed with the words "Mad about the Boy." She is with George when a group of ten-year-olds excitedly point to him inside a restaurant. We recognize the boys as Cub Scouts due to their familiar uniforms—blue shirts and slacks with red neck kerchiefs—the exact same colors as Superman's costume. Significantly, immediately before we see the blue and red cub scouts, Reeves's agent tells him that he will soon be filmed in color, to which Reeves sarcastically responds, "Wow, I'll get to wear the blue and red."

We are not surprised, then, later to see Reeves having just heard that *Superman* has been cancelled, at his barbecue grill gleefully burning his blue and red costume. This reminds us of an incident earlier in the film, during one of Simo's sullen trips to visit his morose ten-year old son, Evan. Simo's estranged wife reports that Evan burned his Superman outfit when he heard that the action hero had shot himself. To make the connection between Superman and ten-year-old sensibilities even more explicit, the film next gives us a graphic match cut: the camera cuts from a shot of the distraught Evan leaning to his left with his left hand in a pocket to a shot of Reeves in the same place on the screen, standing in the exact same position, while he performs as Clark Kent.

The scene with his costume-burning son occurs not long after Simo hears that Reeves's mother wants to hire a private investigator. Believing her son incapable of suicide, she plans to challenge what seems to be a police cover-up. To get the case the broke Simo pretends to be what he is not: a well-respected investigator who agrees with

the mother's assessment that the suicide-ruling is merely the trappings and suits of woe. Simo's pretending is so good it even has those of us in the audience convinced. Repeatedly offering the press evidence that Reeves was murdered, Simo shocks us late in the film when he tells his secretary, "This murder bullshit I've been slinging; I think it might be true." He comes to this conclusion after he is beaten up in his apartment, and, true to the mystery of Reeves's death, it never becomes quite clear who pummels him. Obviously, someone hired thugs to prevent Simo from uncovering the truth. But who? Toni Mannix who killed George because he left her for a younger woman? Toni's husband who had George murdered when he broke Toni's heart? Police who worry that Simo will expose their cover-up? A fiancée who accidentally shot George in a drunken spat?

The film then switches back and forth between Simo investigating Reeves's death and flashbacks of Reeves's life—in order to reinforce parallels between their two kinds of acting: that engendered by lowlife investigation and that endangered by high-life celebrity. Both men are aided in their acting by women they bed: Simo sleeps with a wannabe actress who does secretarial and investigative work for him, while Reeves becomes the boy-toy of Toni, a former actress, who buys him a house and gets him auditions. The parallel becomes explicit when the film cuts from a kiss between Toni and George—who has just discovered that she is a married woman, cheating on a husband who heads MGM studios—to a kiss between Simo and his secretary, who indicates that the husband of a cheating wife is in their office. Significantly, along with the kiss, Simo exuberantly proclaims to his secretary, "I've got a fiancée; I've got a mistress." These words apply to his discovery that Reeves had both a mistress and a fiancée, but Simo's grammar also makes him sound like George, who could say the same thing.

Another parallel occurs when Simo displays a newspaper headline to Reeves's mother: "Mother Investigates 'Superman' Suicide." He comments to the older woman, "See how I got us in the paper?!... But it requires a financial commitment from you." Similarly, Reeves worked to get himself in the paper at the start of his career, a move that landed him the financial commitment of the "older

woman" Toni Mannix (who appears in the newspaper photo along with Rita Hayworth). Based on these financial commitments, both men rise in stature as they manipulate others to their advantage, and both men take a dramatic fall as they start to confuse reality with their well-acted fictions. This brings us back to Shakespeare, who has generated thousands of classroom discussions about whether Hamlet actually became mad or was merely pretending madness. As Kurt Vonnegut famously put it, "Be careful what you pretend to be, because you are what you pretend to be."

Vonnegut's words seem especially appropriate to Reeves, who subtly starts appropriating elements from the Superman persona he detests. This comes as a marked contrast to his initial work for the television show. Dressed as Clark Kent for an early taping, the rambunctious Reeves asks, "Lois, would you like to see the real man of steel?" and then drops his pants to moon the camera. At this early stage we see, quite literally, the real flesh under the costume. However, the first time we see him after the disappointment with *From Here to Eternity*, George is dressed in a bright red suit jacket: the exact same color as the Superman cape. Later, after he tells Toni he is going out on his own to write and direct, we note that, for the first time in the film, he has on black-framed glasses—exactly like those he wore as the fictional Clark Kent. It is as though he believes he can be a man of steel on his own, no longer in need of Toni's money or connections. His plans, however, have as little substance as the aspiring actress he meets while wearing the glasses. A sexy but smut-mouthed shrew named Leonore Lemon, the young actress contributes to George's fall as much as the much older Toni contributed to his rise. Significantly, Reeve's final fall—onto a bed from a bullet to the head—occurs while he is naked, both Superman and Clark Kent artifices stripped away.

George's rise and fall are symbolically anticipated during a filming of the Superman show. We see his arms rise—as though in victory—as he waits for sound-stage wires to lift him into the air. Just as he reaches the heights of artificial flying, something breaks, and he lands flat on his face. The film uses this image to make a connection with Louis Simo's rise and fall. Feeling on top of his form after manipulating the press at Reeves's funeral, Simo

raises his arms in victory upon successfully spitting into his apartment pool. A minute later in his apartment, he is punched in the gut by an intruder and falls flat on his face.

At this point our attention is drawn to an important motif. We hear the sound of Simo's keys tinkling immediately before he is assaulted. Then after his brutal beating, the camera focuses on the keys lying on the floor next to his bloody face. And just in case we didn't notice them, we are given another shot of his head and shoulders, at a different angle, the keys once again dominating the *mise-en-scene*. The attentive viewer will then remember that the last time the film drew attention to Simo's keys was immediately after the high-wired Superman fell flat on his face. The film had cut from a limping Reeves exiting the sound stage to Simo entering his girlfriend's apartment complex—while tossing his keys.

The keys next appear when Simo, reduced to drunkenness after learning about his client's murderous rampage in the costume warehouse, stumbles into his son's schoolyard. Barely able to stand, he tries to convince the frightened boy to come with him rather than wait for his mother, stating in slurred speech "Evan, Evan. Nobody has magic powers. You gotta be tough.... My father never taught me that." After mentioning his inadequate father, Simo drops his keys, which he clumsily retrieves. When Evan runs away, Simo drops the keys again, plopping down on the schoolyard merry-go-round. Finally, his estranged wife walks over to him, picks up the keys, and places them in his shirt pocket.

This obvious motif necessitates analysis. What does the film imply about the keys with which one might unlock "that within which passes show"? One thing it communicates has biblical resonance: money, which drives the shows of Hollywood, is not the key to happiness, as illustrated by the numerous sad players who put on acts both for the screen and behind it.

Throughout the film, people manipulate and deceive others for money. Leonore Lemon seduces George because "he's gotta be loaded." The director of public relations for Eddie Mannix pays off—if not "offs"—anyone who might adversely affect the studio's finances. As he explains to Simo, "When it comes to publicity, whether it's true or

false doesn't really matter. If it hurts the studio, stopping one person from buying a ticket, I have to stop it. That's my job." Others justify their deception with the same rationalization: it's their job. A former partner explains to Simo that he betrayed him because "it's how the mortgage gets paid." A cop who participated in the cover-up of Reeves's death excuses himself with, "I got a wife and kids, car payments."

Simo is just like them, telling the costume warehouse wife who catches him in the act of surveillance, "I do it for the money." But it's quite clear that neither he nor his paying customers are happy. The lowest point of Simo's fall, then, comes not when he gets beaten up but when he discovers that his desire for money resulted in a woman's murder. By putting on an act of investigative competence he was "stringing along" a suspicious husband "for \$50 a day" until the man, out of frustration, killed his own wife.

Simo can pull himself out of his key-dropping bender only when he decides to act with integrity rather than put on an act. After George's mother gets bought off by the studio and drops the case, Simo refuses her money and pursues the truth for the sake of truth itself. In the process of seeking the keys to Reeves's death—motivated by truth rather than money—he begins to retrieve the keys to his own life.

Simo considers several scenarios that might explain the death of Superman, all of which are acted out for us as projections of his imagination, but he never uncovers the truth. Instead what he uncovers is that which passes show: loving others more than oneself. Twice in the film he is challenged about his tendency to look only at surfaces, in words so similar that we are called to take note. His lover sadly tells him, "You don't know what I could do; you don't know a thing about me," while Eddie Mannix, who genuinely loves Toni, growls, "You don't know me; you don't know what I think, what I do."

Such words also apply to Simo's limited knowledge of George Reeves. Toward the end of the film, however, Simo is given a clue to Reeves's sad fate. An agent lends him a home movie of Reeves trying, and failing, to master moves as a wrestler for a possible audition. The silent black and white footage captures an aging has-been desperate for money,

a lost action hero with a “heart that’s breaking, breaking” (to use the words of Sandburg).

Simo then watches another home movie on the same projector. This one, however, is in color, capturing a joyful scene with his son Evan. In the flickering clip we see Simo raise his arms above his head—as he did right before he was knocked to his apartment floor, just as Superman did right before he fell to the stage floor. In the home movie, however, Evan raises his arms in imitation of his father, and Simo picks him up to help him fly through the air—like Superman. Rather than an artificial stage device, Evan is held up by authentic human connection.

Next, a low-angle shot in the home movie shows Evan’s head moving in front of the sun, reminding us of the framing film’s first image after the discovery of Reeve’s dead body: a low-angle

shot of a bow-tied man whose head moves in front of the sun. This is our first view of the murderous husband who hires Simo to spy on the costume warehouse. In Simo’s home movie, however, there are no costumes—not even for Evan as he pretends to fly. Instead what we see is that which passes show: the son as sun, lighting up a father’s life.

After watching this home movie, Simo journeys—in more ways than one—to reconnect with his son. As he closes his car door in front of Evan’s house, *Hollywoodland* closes with a tight shot through the framed car-window, focusing our attention not on a “heart that’s breaking, breaking,” but on keys being tossed in Simo’s expectant hand. †

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COMMITMENT

On the way to the wedding, we are shocked
by the fields of wild mustard climbing out
from curves in the highway in fiery flocks.

The golden puddles stun us, embarrass
the old rural roots in us, create doubt.
Just who are we, when lovely weeds dare us
to bury our grandfathers’ dreams for high
yields—for crops that can be eaten or sold—
deep beneath our love of color, brief delight?

Later, the bride will carry a bouquet
of roses, lavender, and baby’s breath
arranged by a cousin of ours (who grows
the fetching blooms herself) in such a way
that we can forget everything, but death.

Mary M. Brown

pulpit and pew

Bread for the Body

Joel Kurz

THE PHRASE “THE GREATEST THING SINCE SLICED bread” unsettles me and gives rise to a disdainful remark: “If that factory-produced and machine-cut airy substance is the standard of greatness, God help us!” I’m not alone in feeling this way. Richard Watson, recalling Henry Miller’s attack on such bread as the symbol of “a place so uncivilized that people would put something with the consistency of cotton and the taste of cardboard in their mouths, masticate it into a dough ball and swallow it,” concurs and asks, “How can civilized human beings eat Wonder Bread?” (1985, 33). The popularity of that “foodstuff” tells me, however, that not all share our convictions.

Bread takes on various substances, textures, and shapes around the world, and the recent reemergence of bakeries specializing in “old world” breads in this country reminds us of that. Bread can be made from grains other than wheat. It can have a crisp and crunchy crust; it can be a free-form round or even flat. It can be simple or complex; it can stand alone or serve as a wrapper (or container) for other foods. Regardless of its diversity, bread is still referred to as a unified and powerful force—“the staff of life.” Bread is a tangible, edible symbol of bodily life.

The mourning peasant family at the end of Ignazio Silone’s *Bread and Wine* observes that it takes nine months to make bread, for there are nine months from sowing to harvest—just as there are nine months for a child to be formed in the womb. Do we think of the whole maturation process that gives us grain for flour when eating a slice or hunk of bread, even when we have made it ourselves? Unless we’re growing and milling the grain, we usually don’t consider the soil, the sun, the rain, the time—at least I usually don’t, even though I try to be more mindful.

While serving a parish in Ohio a number of years ago, I made it a practice to have the cat-

echumens make the altar bread for their first Communion. Gathering in the parish kitchen on a Saturday, I explained to them the significance of the day—the seventh and last day of the week; the day of God’s Sabbath rest from the work of creation; the day of our Lord’s “rest” in the tomb between his crucifixion and resurrection—a day that looks toward Sunday as the first and eternal eighth day.

Although we had made pizza dough and raised bread before and talked about all the rich symbolism of each step, this was profoundly simple... water, oil, salt, and flour (and not just any flour but organic, unbleached white flour from the local co-op and whole-wheat grown at a nearby experimental farm and ground on stone wheels at a refurbished mid-nineteenth-century water-powered grist mill not more than five miles away!). Our dusting the large wooden cutting board with fine flour and kneading the brown lump seemed as momentous as the creator taking dust from the ground and molding Adam. How could I not tell them that as bread is formed of many grains crushed and bound by water, so the church is comprised of those who die with Christ, are joined by the water of Baptism, and emerge as one with the fire of the Spirit? How could I not pass on to them Geoffrey Preston’s magnificent words? “We, who are dust of the earth, have the breath of the risen Jesus breathed into us and thereby dust is refashioned into the image and likeness of the body of God” (1980, 114).

The next morning they followed the ushers’ offering plates, each carrying the small round of flat bread (marked with a cross, circle, and radiating division lines) that he or she had made.

“Offering” has been reduced to dropping an envelope in a basket (or making an electronic withdrawal), but we are to offer our “bodies [as] a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God” (Romans 12:1). What better a lesson in this than bending

over dough, working it with our fingers, shaping it and baking it, and then offering it to God as an emblem of ourselves and all of creation—only to receive it back with the wine as the body and blood of the sacrificed and risen Christ? Receiving this sacramental bread, our bodies are sanctified and strengthened anew so that we can stand against the lusts still raging in our flesh, so that we can be conformed in our bodily deeds to the ways of the Spirit and make Christ visible.

BREAD IS BORN OF FLOUR AND WATER—IT IS communal in origin and end. It is not to be hoarded but

broken with others. It is ordinary and hallowed, mundane and filled with mystery. The oriental culture of Christ's day (and still today) breaks bread rather than cutting it, for taking a knife to bread is as horrendous as taking a knife to a human body. But as people living in an industrialized and mechanized culture, we are accustomed to giving little thought to the ways of mass-production—whether applied to bread or body. We were created in God's image and likeness, but how often do we blaspheme that God (out of "fallenness") with bread and bodily life that reflect the paltry rather than the glory that is ours through the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus? We accept the inferior out of "convenience."

It is not coincidental that Jesus was born in *Bethlehem*—"house of bread"—or that he was laid in a feeding trough where animals were accustomed to finding their grain. He is the one who spoke of himself as *bread from heaven, bread of God, bread of life, and living bread* (John 6). He is the one who repeatedly took bread—blessed it, broke it, and gave it—as a central and defining act of his life (see Luke 24: 28–35). So it was that hours before his death, after eating of the Passover lamb, Jesus took bread and gave it as his body; took wine and gave it as his blood—he was offering his body as a

living sacrifice in a final, yet *new*, testament. Here we see the Word "through which the vine bears its fruit, the springs flow, and the earth has strength to produce the stalk, the ear of corn, and the grain of wheat for bread" (Wingren 1959, 13–14) giving himself for the restoration of humanity and all creation. No longer are we defined solely by Adam and Eve's eating of what God had not blessed but by what Christ blesses and gives for us to take and eat, take and drink.

A little more than a decade ago, an article appeared in a denominational journal defending the use of "tasteless" communion wafers on

the basis that those communion would then dwell upon the gospel's goodness and not be "distracted" by physical sense. But is not the thrust of the gospel that God incarnate comes in Christ through the still-existent good of creation to redeem what is flawed and corrupt? Can we not taste "that the Lord is gracious" (1 Peter 2:3), nor taste "the heavenly gift" and "good word of God" (Hebrews 5:4–5)? Why not use the best bread we can



make or buy for our Lord's Holy Eucharist instead of small, dry factory "hosts" that seldom register in our mouths and minds as bread (or even crackers)? Should we not see the eucharistic bread of Christ as the invitation to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8)?

Does Christ still come to his gathered assembly in a sacramental way through those "tasteless" wafers? Yes, but why not offer him bread that is a gift of our labor and being; that comes from the working worship of our bodies only to return blessed and made wondrously new by Christ? After all, bread signifies our bodies, the holy body of our Lord, and the new creation. Conrad Pepler wrote so insightfully and straightforwardly:

The whole meal loaf not only feeds a man, it prepares him for his Communion with God in the sacred bread. The white loaf

manufactured by the most up-to-date factory process does not satisfy; it does not even call forth the respect of the eater.... Where the loaf is the full bread we can more readily understand Christ's words, and more readily gather round the Lord's table. Bread from the full corn grown on the living earth can easily become sacred bread.... We must learn again how to sacrifice at every meal. Liturgical reformers should turn their attention first to the kitchen and the dinner table. (1957, 126-7)

I cannot read those words without thinking of the old tradition of Lammas Day (August 1)—Loaf Mass Day—when the first grain of the new harvest was baked into a loaf and brought by each family to the church for blessing; a feast of thanksgiving centered on bread. Nor can I help think of the loaves the Lord instructed to be made from the “first fruits” of the harvest and offered on the feast of Pentecost (Leviticus 23:15-17).

Should it surprise us then that we call Christ's supper of breaking bread “the Eucharist”—the *thanksgiving*? It is not wrong or unholy to actually “enjoy” the bread by which Christ gives us himself. If anything it calls forth gratitude from within us for so sacred a gift.

Jesus said, “The bread which I will give is my own flesh; I give it for the life of the world,” then went on to speak of those eating his flesh and drinking his blood as being raised up on the last day (John 6:51-54). Our bodies, which live on bread, will die and return to the earth, but Jesus tells us to look at his feast of bread as an assurance of the resurrection that is to come. Irenaeus, the second-century Bishop of Lyons, elaborated on this beautifully, writing in *Against Heresies*:

For as the bread, which is produced from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly; so also our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, having the hope of resurrection to eternity. (4.18.5)

Bread joins this world to the next; Christ blesses and gives it for our temporal and eternal good. Beyond this life and the pale of death there is resurrection and eternal feasting, and “holy bread” provides the bridge into that life that is yet to come. †

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being lutheran

Vocation versus the Postmodern “Oops”

Uwe Siemon-Netto

ARE CONFESSIONAL LUTHERANS PULLING their weight in this spiritually perplexed world? Do they actually have anything to contribute to a culture focused on the “Me?” Scholars from various Christian traditions believe they do. They are increasingly appealing to confessional Lutherans to start reintroducing their doctrinal treasures to the rest of society. Historian Mark A. Noll, an evangelical teaching at the University of Notre Dame, has been saying this for fifteen years already, and he said it again during a forum at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis last year. Luther’s voice, Noll keeps reminding us, is “a voice of unusual importance in Christian history, for in this voice we hear uncommon resonances of the voice of God” (Noll 1992, 36–37).

Peter L. Berger, Robert Benne, the late Harold O. J. Brown, and Gregory Lockwood, a Roman Catholic theologian, have preached similar messages recently at Concordia Seminary. Berger in particular mentioned the two kingdoms doctrine that draws clear distinctions between the secular and the spiritual realms, which according to Luther must never be “cooked and brewed together,” lest the Devil have his way.

Linked to this concept is Luther’s *Berufslehre*, or doctrine of vocation, which seems particularly relevant in an era where selfishness has been elevated almost to the level of a virtue. According to this doctrine, God calls all Christians to their secular activities, ranging from family obligations to professional, academic, cultural, economic, and political chores. Christians acquitting themselves of these responsibilities to the best of their ability and out of love for their neighbors render the highest possible service to God, says Luther. And this makes them members of the universal priesthood of all believers. They are, as St. Peter wrote, “a kingdom of priests... God’s chosen nation, His very own possession” (1 Peter 29).

They perform their priestly functions not in church, Christ’s realm, which Lutherans call the right-hand kingdom, and where the gospel, grace, faith, and love are the governing principle. Instead they exercise this particular priesthood in the “left-hand kingdom,” the “world,” which is run by the law and natural reason. Still, it is very much a priestly role because by serving the neighbor it ultimately serves God, who rules this temporal realm in a hidden way (*Deus absconditus*).

Theologians from other churches may be forgiven for their perplexity when confronted with the Lutheran dialectic between law and gospel inherent in the doctrines of the kingdoms and of vocation. Let them take comfort from the fact that there is no dearth of equally bewildered Lutheran pastors. Still, never before has there been a more urgent need to apply this body of teachings to everyday life. Perhaps the most compelling reason for its appeal today is this: We are living in a “Me” culture whose destructive features are hard to overlook—the abortion epidemic and soaring divorce rates, including among evangelicals; corporate greed; the selfishness of all kinds of interest groups expressed in endless nauseating “isms”; the neglect of infrastructures; manifest environmental irresponsibility; the exaltation of almost any libidinous anomaly; and the growing inability to think and reason logically.

In light of the forthcoming US elections, the flagrant abuse of religious chatter in political life also deserves a prominent place on this list of woes because it too is ultimately a symptom of “Me” thinking. When Democratic and Republican candidates noisily protest their Christian faith, Lutherans should remind both sides of what Luther himself said about this topic: “The emperor does not have to be a Christian as long as he possesses reason.” This concerns liberal and conservative rhetoric alike. If liberal candidates claim that

support for abortion rights or same-sex unions is virtuous in the Christian sense because it conforms to the Christian virtue of “tolerance,” they are mistaken. They ignore for selfish reasons the teachings of natural law, which applies to Christians and non-Christians alike. Natural law does not countenance the killing of innocent children, or euthanasia, or homosexual marriages.

At the same time, though, some members of the Christian Right are misguided when they confuse national history with salvation history by declaring contemporary America to be the “city on the hill,” and therefore the anteroom of God’s kingdom. This too is ultimately an expression of “Me” thinking. It is a selfish undertaking in that it places, in the final analysis, one’s own salvation before the love of others. This notion is diametrically opposed to the Lutheran view that the believer, knowing that he is already redeemed by Christ’s vicarious sacrifice, must now roll up his sleeves for the benefit of others, be they clients, relatives, superiors, subordinates, the electorate, patients, or just the “man on the street.”

Seen from a sober Lutheran perspective, all of the Me culture’s phenomena are manifestations of *Schwärmerei*, a heresy most often imprecisely translated into English as enthusiasm. *Schwärmer* are what Matthias Pankau, a sharp young German theologian from Leipzig, Bach’s city, termed mockingly “co-initiators of the *eschaton*” (Pankau 2003, 2), meaning people who believe they are called to immanentize the end of time thus drawing paradise into the here and now. Back in the sixteenth century, *Schwärmer* such as Thomas Müntzer, Luther’s nemesis, thought they had the mission to give God a hand by engaging in a bloody insurrection against real or imagined injustices. Three and four hundred years later, first Friedrich Engels and then Nazi chief ideologue Alfred Rosenberg referred to Müntzer in their quest for the godless heaven on earth they envisioned (Engels 1963, 46; Fest 1991, 72).

Today, wrote Pankau, new and seemingly benign variants of *Schwärmerei* abound. They strive to create “feel-good paradises for certain groups,” heavens therefore of “limited duration.” Contemporary *Schwärmerei* cloaked as pacifism and tolerance, “furthers in reality self-righteousness.” In a stinging critique, Pankau accused con-

temporary church bodies of succumbing to current fads, which also reflect the mindset of *Schwärmer*:

Excesses of feminism, a secular ideology, and the increasing acceptance of same-sex unions as allegedly ‘willed by God’ are symptoms of a *Schwärmer*-like aberration. Here the *Zeitgeist* has replaced the Bible as the measure of all things for church people. But where the church welcomes in the *Zeitgeist*, it bows to secular ideas, which are, like everything worldly, under sin. They do this in order to create mini paradises in which everybody can feel good. But this is none other than a variant of *Schwärmerei*. (Pankau 49)

By definition the “Me first” *Schwärmerei* that pollutes all aspects of postmodern life—political, religious, economical, educational, and interpersonal—is downright un-Lutheran. It follows that Lutheran theology ought to be able to provide an alternative. And it does. Where postmodern *Schwärmerei* is primarily concerned with the self, Lutheran theology points Christians in the opposite direction, to the other. It is the fellow man that matters. Serving their neighbors as spouses, parents, craftsmen, scientists, artists, voters, politicians, soldiers, and policemen makes Christians not just priests in the secular realm, as we have seen, but also partners in the *creatio continua*, the ongoing process of creation. This is what man was created for.

Earlier this year a sad instance of indifference to the doctrine of vocation on the part of a church leader caused a considerable stir in Germany, an uproar worth discussing here because its significance knows no national boundaries. The Rev. Margot Käsmann, Lutheran bishop of Hannover and one of her country’s most impassioned preachers, announced that she was divorcing her husband Ekkehard, also a pastor. This case illustrates most vividly the need for Lutherans to remain faithful to their doctrinal treasures and share them with other Christians. Lutherans teach that marriage is not a sacrament but nonetheless an order of creation. According to Luther, marriage is “an external, worldly thing,” but at the same time a vocation above all others, “be they emperors, princes, bish-

ops, or whatever. It is the noblest of all estates in the whole world" (Luther, WA30I.162.6-11; Bonhoeffer 1972, 11). Like the United States, Germany suffers from a divorce epidemic, with approximately 40% of all marriages breaking up.

It must be pointed out here that this article addresses the Christian's divine vocations to activities in the "world" and not the question of whether a woman is called to serve as a pastor or bishop, a right-hand kingdom issue that is still unresolved between various denominations, including Lutheran church bodies. But in Germany, a *Landesbischof* (bishop of a regional church) stands in the lime-light as head of a powerful state-related institution; hardly a day goes by without Bishop Kässmann appearing on television. As bishop of the largest Lutheran see in the world, with three million members, she is one of the two most visible Protestant church leaders and one of the most influential personalities in her country. Thus Dr. Kässmann stands in the lime-light in the secular realm just as much as in the spiritual. Given her high profile she is expected to set an example. The most important example a renowned Lutheran can give is to live up to his or her callings in the left-hand kingdom, and of those the calling as a spouse is the most significant by Luther's standards.

In a public statement Bishop Kässmann agreed that marriage is "a good gift from God," and that spouses ought to remain together until death; then she said, "Yes, this is what we wanted to do. Yet we failed."

Oops.

It is not the intention of this article to pillory Bishop Kässmann for being human like the rest of us. Nor was it because of her and her husband's

manifest fallibility that this event triggered a huge debate in Germany, which like all other western nations is groaning under the impact of postmodernity's destructive force. The point here is that according to Lutheran doctrine, God does ultimately correct errors humans commit in their various endeavors in the left-hand kingdom. In other words, He "brings good out of evil. For this purpose He needs men who make the best use out of everything," as Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his prison cell. This implies that even when Christians fail in one vocation, they might be given another calling where they can convert their initial fiasco into something that suits God's purposes.

In Dr. Kässmann's case this could have meant turning her personal calamity into a blessing for many by resigning from her post, thus teaching fellow Christians once again the art of drawing the proper consequence from failure. Had she done so she would have acted out of love for her fellow man and in so doing transformed human failure into a priestly act at the altar of the secular left-hand kingdom.

Traditionally, Lutheran pastors whose marriages break up have been reassigned as a matter of course. But Dr. Kässmann chose to remain in office and might even be elected as presid-

ing bishop of the twenty-three-million member "Evangelical Church in Germany" (EKD), the umbrella organization of all state-related regional Protestant churches in that country.

And this is the real tragedy of this case and the reason why it is discussed here in some detail. It displays with terrible clarity the Me culture's Oops mentality in all areas of life: Neglected the nation's infrastructure to the point that one eight-lane bridge across the Mississippi collapsed, with 160,000 more around the country to go? Oops! Misjudged a military strategy? Oops! Drove a

"Oops" is the exclamation signaling the decline of civilization, whose growth over millennia was also divinely willed. The Oops mentality shows that our civilization has lost all sense of personal responsibility for failure. In the most ridiculous manner, Oops is an idiom signaling self-justification, which makes "Oops" a profoundly un-Christian noise.

corporation to the brink? Oops! Failed to manage a natural disaster properly? Oops! Surprised by an unwanted pregnancy? Oops! Stole \$60 million from your shareholders? Oops! Executed the wrong person for a murder he did not commit? Oops! Indulging in trivia at primetime television programs while ignoring acts of genocide in Africa? Oops! Destroyed the nation's once sophisticated passenger railroad system? Oops! Failed to teach children to appreciate the beauty of classical music? Oops! Produced college graduates incapable of writing a proper sentence or finding China on a globe? Oops!

"Oops" is the exclamation signaling the decline of civilization, whose growth over millennia was also divinely willed. The Oops mentality shows that our civilization has lost all sense of personal responsibility for failure. In the most ridiculous manner, Oops is an idiom signaling self-justification, which makes "Oops" a profoundly un-Christian noise. With their theology of calling, Lutherans possess a remedy against this degeneration, a remedy they should make available to all. But Lutherans, whom Billy Graham once called the sleeping giant among the Christians in the United States, seem to be engaged in permanent slumber. They snooze on, hunkering over their doctrinal treasure chest, which contains, to paraphrase Mark A. Noll, uncommon resonances of the voice of God. †

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WHAT THE FALL REQUIRES

Black, brittle, like charred ribs
of burnt parasols, the dead
heads of summer perennials
stick above sturdy foliage
that lately supported their unfurled
charm. Desiccated belladonnas
of the air, I break you off
to favor now the unremarkable
stalk and rootstock under-
ground, substance
of blooms unseen.

Gayle Boss

life together

How to Refute a Sneer

J. Bradley Creed

WHAT ARE YOU READING CURRENTLY? WHAT is America reading? The best index for this, the Dow-Jones of the publishing world, is the *New York Times* Bestseller list, updated and compiled weekly. Publishers and avid readers have noticed an unusual trend over the last year or so. Books on religion are enjoying success in mainstream publishing. An editor for Publishers Weekly traced it back several years to the popularity of three books by Christian publishers that made it to the *New York Times* list: *The Prayer of Jabez*, the *Left Behind* series, and Rick Warren's *Purpose-Driven Life*. Since then books on religion have experienced a surge in popularity along with, ironically, books on anti-religion, books that are hostile to the idea of faith and religious belief. I don't know how much people are actually reading these books, but they are selling like hotcakes, and people certainly are talking about them.

I will mention three in this category. Daniel Dennet's *Breaking the Spell* takes the position that religion is nothing more than a natural phenomenon. There is nothing supernatural or ultimately sublime about it, because there is no God. Another bestselling author is Sam Harris, who wrote first *The End of Faith* and most recently *Letter to a Christian Nation*. Harris is atheism's angry young man. He tries to make the case that the world would be a better place if faith would just disappear and if we outgrew the antiquated notion of religion that he blames for most of the evil, ignorance, and suffering in the world today.

The best-selling atheist and the one who is raising the most ire is the fire-breathing Richard Dawkins, author of *The Blind Watchmaker*, *The Devil's Chaplain*, and most recently, *The God Delusion*. In these books he compares religious belief to a virus and dismisses faith in God as a neurotic delusion. The God portrayed in the Bible is a "sado-masochistic, capriciously malevolent

bully." Try putting that in a praise song. Dawkins's great intellectual project is an effort to root the explanation for almost everything in biology. He is unabashedly confident that science will be able to accomplish what philosophy has been unable to do for the last two thousand years, make belief in God intellectually and morally indefensible.

In case you do not recognize his name, Dawkins now has achieved pop culture icon status, along with Tom Cruise and Osama Bin Laden, by being featured and lampooned in an episode of *South Park*. In this episode the *South Park* kids' teacher Mr. Garrison has an operation to become Ms. Garrison and marries Richard Dawkins. Five hundred years later, thanks to the work of odd couple Garrison and Dawkins, everybody is an atheist. This brave new world, however, did not bring peace or end the sectarian strife of true believers, because the atheists had broken up into conflicting, ideological groups and were at war with each other.

What do you do with a Richard Dawkins? My own opinion is that while he may be a brilliant scientist, he comes off as an irresponsible philosopher and an undisciplined thinker. He reduces complex issues into one simple answer—religion is the villain. He engages in parody and caricature to make his case. He is as much a showman as he is a scholar. Reviewers more eloquent and capable than I have pointed out the weaknesses of his book, such as Terry Eagleton in the *London Review of Books* who describes Dawkins's approach to his subject as "lunging, flailing, and mispunching." In *Harper's Monthly*, Marilynne Robinson offers that Dawkin's approach to religion cannot properly be called scientific since he treats the grandest questions about life and learning without consistency, without an acknowledgment of countervailing information, and without doubt. The only thing he seems to doubt is whether he should use a

crowbar or a baseball bat in bludgeoning religion and people who believe.

I don't want to be guilty of dissing and dismissing Dawkins, just as he does religion, because in spite of his shrill rhetoric and shameless grandstanding, he is a force to be reckoned with. He raises serious issues worth discussing, issues about knowledge, society, science and religion, human consciousness, and even ethics and morality. But what do you do when someone launches a frontal assault on the things that you believe and throws his arguments in your face?

Martin Marty, writing about Dawkins in *The Christian Century*, quoted William Paley, the eighteenth-century British philosopher. When faced with a great attack on his faith, Paley responded: "Who can refute a sneer?" That is a poignant question. How do you refute a sneer or even a snarl? Why not just turn your cheek, ignore it, and go on your way?

I believe that there is great value in engaging the arguments proposed by people like Dawkins, and we should not shy away from doing so. Their approach toward religion is nothing new. You can see the pattern in Bertrand Russell's classic 1927 essay, "Why I Am Not a Christian." This is the strategy: First, discredit the traditional arguments for supporting the existence of God and reduce religion to nothing more than a natural phenomenon. Then, show how religion is the culprit in many of the crimes perpetrated against humanity. Finally, make a case for how brave and splendid it is to be a non-believer, how a person can have a happy, meaningful, and even moral life without worshipping a deity.

ONE WAY TO REFUTE A SNEER IS TO PRESENT intellectually rigorous arguments for the belief in God and to expose the presuppositional arguments that are made by all people, regardless of their alleged belief or unbelief. In making rational arguments and contentions, everyone starts from somewhere, not nowhere. There is a rich and honored tradition of apologetics by very intelligent people who were believers, such as Thomas Aquinas, who incorporated Aristotelian philosophy into his arguments for the existence of God. Dawkins dismisses these as ridiculous. Aquinas's arguments are medieval

in origin, but there are sophisticated modern versions of this approach that are a challenge to refute. You might read the works of C. S. Lewis from a generation or two ago, particularly his classic *Mere Christianity*. For contemporary authors, I recommend N. T. Wright's new book, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* and *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* by Francis Collins. Collins is one of the country's leading geneticists and longtime head of the human genome project. There are limitations to apologetics, but the discipline of apologetics provides a way to engage serious arguments about crucial issues and to hone your skills as a critical thinker.

Merold Westphal, Professor of Philosophy at Fordham University and author of *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism*, suggests another and more imaginative response to the sneer. When someone sneers at your belief or faith, accept the judgment that is presented but engage the despiser from the standpoint of prophetic biblical faith. Karl Marx, for example, deemed religious faith as a construct that people in power use to support the social structures of the status quo. This is why he used the term "opiate of the people." People in power use religion to lull the masses into accepting unjust and oppressive structures that keep the powerful in power. When this kind of argument is tossed your way with a sneer, just admit that it is the truth. This is what the prophets of the Old Testament—Isaiah, Amos, Jeremiah—thundered against: a religion that uses, manipulates, and oppresses people. Sigmund Freud held that religion was wish fulfillment. In other words we have a psychological need for a godlike father who will take care of us. The fact that there are elements of wish fulfillment in some people's beliefs does not negate those beliefs or tell the whole story. This approach to refuting religion is called reductionism.

Those who sneer like to point out how much pain, suffering, and difficulty religion has brought into the world. Let's be honest. They're right. But if you are going to throw the Crusades in my face, I have to point out that without the religions that perpetrated the Crusades, you can't have hospitals, universities, or even the scientific method. Good Baptist people, like those who founded my

university and were stewards of its growth and development, justified slavery and Jim Crow laws by using the Bible, but there also were good Baptist people who, because of their gospel convictions, fought for abolition and marched for civil rights and used their faith as a force for good. Science has been a force for great good. It has given us the electricity that heats and illuminates the building where we live and work, the polio vaccine, and the iPod that brings a new dimension to listening to music, but science also has given us mustard gas and the despoliation of creation and Hitler's final solution.

Another argument used by the cultured despisers of religion is not a new one: Life can be happy, moral, and meaningful without God. One doesn't need religion to live the good life. This last argument gets at pragmatic value. I must admit that when I was a teenager this argument was compelling. People who weren't hung up on religion seemed to me to have more fun. Preachers tried to convince me about how miserable the sinners were who didn't go to church, but I saw those sinners every Sunday pulling the boat behind the truck on the way to the lake when my family was driving the car to church. They looked pretty happy to me, especially when my sister and I were fighting in the back seat. Is the purpose of the Christian faith to make you necessarily happier or more fulfilled or successful? Struggle, especially intellectual struggle, is at the heart of the Christian experience, because it is the way of the cross. Jesus would have had a hard time convincing his followers that the purpose of faith was to make them healthy, wealthy, and wise or to awaken the giant within as he dragged the cross up to the hill of crucifixion. Countless people of faith have born this witness throughout history from Teresa of Avila to the Puritans. There were seasons of doubt, darkness, and difficulty in their experience of faith.

There will not be an end to religious faith no matter how earnestly Sam Harris pleads for

it or how vigorously Richard Dawkins attacks it. All the evidence points in another direction. For good and sometimes for bad, religious movements worldwide, especially in the southern hemispheres and in non-western cultures, are thriving. Alistair McGrath, an Oxford scholar who has debated Dawkins, says that we are living in the twilight of atheism—it is fading away. Others, especially scientists who are exploring the boundaries between science and religion, contend that the books written by people like Dawkins are the last gasp of an Enlightenment secularism that has run its course. When people speak rather smugly about the end of religious faith, I am reminded of a quip attributed to Mark Twain: "Of all the predictions ever made about the end of the world, less than half have been correct." I would hope for an end of faith that breeds violence, intolerance, and ignorance, and we don't have to point to Islamic terrorists to find this. Tragically, it is found in our ranks and voiced by some of our Christian leaders and in our own hearts and minds.

So here is my advice: Read some of these books. They will stretch you and probably make you angry, but they will serve a purpose in making you a more complete and educated person. Use your faith and your mind to build bridges to those whose ideas, beliefs, or non-beliefs are different than yours. Don't build walls or throw bombs. Use your influence and abilities to promote dialogue and clarity in the search for truth. Speak with balance and care. When others sneer practice the Christian virtue of hospitality, even to those who are hostile, and in so doing, be faithful. ✠

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The Hazards of the Liberated Self

Robert Benne

I RECENTLY HAD THE OCCASION TO EXPERIENCE A family court in a large city. The court building was huge and grim. Security was tight. Long lines of people wended their way through security to get into the fortress-like building. A special line was made up of caseworkers and lawyers, who were arriving in droves. All these people were monitored—sometimes harshly—by hundreds of police. The operation was massive. It inevitably made one think about the enormous daily expense of running such an enterprise. This mass of humanity was a small portion of those who would be in court in the future and of those who were in court sometime in the past. And of course this was one city among many, many American cities, some larger and some smaller than this one. Moreover, this was family court, not criminal court.

What was truly overwhelming was the crowd of young people who were “clients” of the system. Young mothers, some dysfunctional teenagers trying to raise dysfunctional children, some with multiple children. Young men awaiting court dates and others awaiting various sorts of arbitration. One part of the family in one room waiting trial or waiting to negotiate agreements; the other part in another room, but hardly any intact young families visible. The only intact ones were worried fathers and mothers and some grandmothers and grandfathers. Lawyers scurrying to court rooms and back and forth to negotiating parties. Social workers helping people through the maze of rooms. Child-care centers throughout the building to take care of the many children whose parents went to court.

Have we experienced some sort of social earthquake in this country? What could account for all this chaos and misery?

We have been experiencing since the 1960s—with increasing momentum—the *de-formation* of American society. The cultural forms that once guided young people into orderly and wholesome

behavior have been gradually eroded: the orderly practices of dating, engagement, and marriage that governed appropriate levels of commitment and intimacy; the rules that once restrained young people from sexual intercourse before they were married; the social expectation that marriage preceded the bearing of children; and the cultural insistence that marriage itself was an honored, expected, permanent, faithful, and mutual enterprise of a man and woman that transcended the desires and wishes of the individuals committed to it. Along with this erosion has come the inevitable destabilization of the family, the crucial building block of any healthy society. I don't have to list the grim statistics and the even grimmer social implications of that destabilization. The family court was a graphic illustration of what happens when we release individuals from wholesome forms of guidance.

Our society has made the dubious wager that persons “liberated” from these guiding forms will do the right thing. This optimistic assessment of unformed individuals assumes that there is something within them that can be trusted as a moral gyroscope, as it were. In the coarsely entitled movie, “Knocked Up,” a couple does the wrong thing by having a one-night stand that results in pregnancy. Both then do the right thing in having the baby, marrying, and making a genuine effort at sustaining the marriage. While I applaud the director's depiction of the couple doing the right thing, I am doubtful that in real life such positive results would come out of the situation in which such a couple found themselves. More likely each would have followed their own self-interest by aborting the baby and going their own ways. Why would a socially mobile young woman take such a risk on a slacker? Or if they had stuck together, they would have wound up in a family court like the one I observed.

Both classical and Judeo-Christian moral traditions of Western civilization have held that young people must be well-formed by others in order for them to experience authentic freedom and for society to enjoy well-being. Aristotle thought that young people must be habituated by a good community in the virtues that would enable them and the ongoing community to flourish. The Jewish wisdom tradition strongly affirmed that the young must be brought up in the ways of the Lord. "Train up a child in the way he should go..." (Proverbs 22:6). Christians, with their doctrine of original sin, expect that unconstrained humans almost always will do the wrong thing. Thus, they have viewed the moral and spiritual formation of the young as a Christian priority.

It is true that these dominant traditions have been challenged by rebellions that have exalted the self unfettered by social and cultural forms. Indeed, the 1960s began a revolt against the more ordered societies that preceded that decade. "Throw off the shackles and let us become the innocent and expressive beings we really are!" The 1960s inaugurated our own Romantic movement, one that echoed earlier Romantic movements in Western history. Only this time the movement involved not only the decadent children of the aristocracy but swept through a whole society with, I believe, the disastrous results I witnessed at family court.

There are some hopeful signs that we are rethinking our romantic experiment. But the

momentum of this "liberating" experiment is enormous and the concomitant damage will continue to be massive. Though many voluntary agencies "pitch in" to help ameliorate the damage, and the state grows ever larger to handle the problem, it is difficult for me to imagine a solid rebuilding of workable forms without a genuine renewal of religious traditions that ultimately give rise to cultural guidance systems. Christian, Jewish, and now Muslim traditions all strive to provide communities in which families bring up the young with humanizing and civilizing patterns of behavior. Even those unconnected with religious traditions are to a considerable extent dependent upon the values generated by those religious traditions. And no other organizations reach so many individuals and families. Public schools reach millions but are increasingly unable to engage in clear moral education on these matters.

We are fortunate in this country and community in having many vibrant religious communities—churches and synagogues and their attendant Sunday and day schools. What else can prevent the social earthquakes that cause so much human pain and destruction? †

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law

The Kennedy Court and the Politics of Legitimacy

Larry Baas

THE MOST RECENT TERM OF THE UNITED STATES Supreme Court has raised a host of questions about where the Court is headed on issues like abortion and affirmative action, but also about more fundamental questions concerning the Court itself. For example, if substantial change on the Court can occur as the result of the appointment of only one new justice, then what is the law really all about? And if what the law means depends on what one middle-of-the-road justice says it means, how is the Court different from other political institutions? More importantly, if the Court is no different from other political institutions, how will it maintain its aura of legitimacy and its ability to have its decisions enforced?

Questions like this always have been important, but they seem particularly critical now. In addition to the controversial cases of this past term, there are over thirty recent decisions on issues ranging from religion to sovereign immunity in which Justice O'Connor's vote was pivotal and are threatened with the ascension of Justice Alito to the bench and/or dependent on the viewpoint of Justice Kennedy.

To a political scientist who studies the law and courts, the answers to all but the last of the above questions seem straightforward. Two generations of research have found that the Supreme Court is a political institution that consists of justices who are motivated by ideology and policy objectives (Segal and Spaeth, 2002) and who attempt to maximize, within specific limits, their policy objectives by applying various tactics and strategies (Hammond, Bonneau, and Sheenan, 2005). While "the law" is an important factor in the process, it is only one of a series of constraints and not the decisive factor. Thus the current term of the Court was quite predictable and understandable. Since the Supreme Court is a political institution with policy-motivated participants, its decisions are influ-

enced by personnel changes and by strategically located centrists. The legal process at this level is quite indistinguishable—except for the robes and rituals—from the political game that takes place down the street. The more difficult question is what will happen to the Supreme Court's legitimacy if the mass public begins to view the Court in these terms?

While political scientists have long recognized the political nature of the courts, this view has generally not filtered down to the mass public. Conventional wisdom (Corwin 1936, Dahl 1957) has long held, and a limited amount of empirical research confirms, that the mass public still tends to see the courts—particularly the Supreme Court—and legal institutions like the Constitution in somewhat mythical terms (Casey 1974, Baas 1980). Justices are viewed as somehow above the political fray, and legal institutions like the Constitution are believed to possess religious-like and even magical powers. The existence and perpetuation of these myths is critical for the Supreme Court. Because it possesses neither the purse nor the sword, its legitimacy, and hence its ability to make authoritative decisions, is tied to the public's acceptance of these mythical qualities.

Barring a Democratic victory in the Presidential election of 2008 followed by the retirement of at least one of the conservative justices, it is likely that the Supreme Court will hand down a series of major decisions in the next few years overturning some of its own precedents. It is much more difficult to predict how the public would evaluate such a shift by the Court. Seventy years ago, after observing the dramatic changes made by the Supreme Court as a result of Franklin Roosevelt's appointments, Max Lerner (1937) predicted that the potency of the myth surrounding the Court would notably decline as a result of the undeniable political and partisan nature of the changes

the Court made. As Lerner put it the public had looked “upon the judicial-Medusa head, and lo! they were not turned to stone” (1315). Research since that time, however, indicates that the myths surrounding the Court and the Constitution have been somewhat less malleable than Lerner thought.

The Court was able to weather the New Deal storm and many more recent controversies surrounding cases like *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), *Roe v. Wade* (1973), and *Bush v. Gore* (2000) because, as a low-visibility institution, it is insulated from public opinion. Research also has shown that mythical views of the Supreme Court and other legal institutions like the Constitution are so much a part of our traditions that acceptance of these beliefs actually increases as people become more educated and knowledgeable. An apparent by-product of education is the transmission of society’s major myths, including those about the Supreme Court (Baas, 1987). Additionally, the Court has benefited from what James Gibson, Greg Caldeira, and Lester Spence (2003) refer to as the positivity bias. As people are drawn into controversies about the Court—even negative ones—they are exposed to judicial symbols and the ritualistic nature of the courts that all point to the conclusion that courts are different. As a result the message received is that courts deserve greater deference and support and, in turn, legitimacy.

There is some evidence, however, that we may be entering a new era in which the Supreme Court is more likely to be evaluated as a political institution. A recent study by Gibson and Caldeira (2007) demonstrates not only that people view the nomination of Samuel Alito to the Supreme Court in political and partisan terms, but also that those who viewed it that way also viewed the Supreme Court as less legitimate. In the Alito case the highly visible media advertising campaigns waged by those for and against his nomination framed the struggle as an ideological-partisan battle with significant policy impact. In this era when even judicial nominations have become political spectacles, it is possible that the Court may find it more difficult to hide the realities of its process from the public. Recent polls suggest this may be the case. A Washington Post-ABC poll indicates that 39% of Americans currently say the Court is

too far to the right, up from 19% two years ago. The percentage who thought the decisions were “generally balanced” declined from 55% to 47% in the same time period (Barnes and Cohen, 7 July 2007). In this context the overturning of a series of major decisions over the next few years may be all that is necessary to turn the tide against the Court.

MORE THAN JUST THE SUPREME COURT’S OWN actions is contributing to the public’s reassessment of the Court’s legitimacy. For example, the recent controversy over the firing of the federal prosecutors has shown the public the extent to which this office had been politicized. More damaging, perhaps, is the dreadful inability of the Attorney General, the nation’s chief legal officer, to get his story straight and properly defend his activities. The entire spectacle has painted a picture of a legal process that is tainted by politics and incompetence.

Other problems and abuses in the legal process were exposed during the Duke Lacrosse team case, in which innocent persons were accused and almost convicted by a self-serving and incompetent prosecutor. The real tragedy of the Duke spectacle, however, is how often this sort of thing occurs in cases where the socio-economic status of the participants, as well as the outcomes, are reversed. The proliferation of “Innocence Projects” across the country and the number of economically disadvantaged persons who have served lengthy sentences because of inadequate legal assistance and/or politically motivated, over-zealous prosecution clearly indicates serious problems with our legal system, and the public is becoming increasingly aware of these problems (Frisbie and Garret 2005). Despite the fantasies created on television programs like CSI, these numerous reversals of erroneous convictions have exposed significant problems with standard criminal investigative techniques such as lineups, forensic profiling, and even fingerprinting.

And if the courts didn’t have enough trouble, we discover that judges in many places may be even less sensitive to appearances of impropriety than ordinary politicians. One study of Ohio Supreme Court Justices (Liptak and Roberts, 2006) discovered that the justices rarely (only 9 out of

215 times) recused themselves from cases in which one of the litigants had contributed to their campaigns, and that the justices voted in favor of their contributors in 70% of the cases. Similar patterns have been found in other states and jurisdictions indicating that courts may be even more political than real politicians.

The Supreme Court also may be hurt by those who will most likely benefit from the potential proliferation of conservative decisions. While courts have been attacked by groups from all sides of the political spectrum, the Right has been the most relentless in its attacks on the Court and in exposing its partisan, ideological, political nature. Similarly, conservatives in the current administration who hold to the Unitary Executive theory, particularly its more radical versions, have attacked a central component of the mythology of the Supreme Court, the belief that it and it alone is the final arbiter of the Constitution. According to the Unitary Executive theory, the president is the final arbiter in his own sphere, and in other areas his interpretative authority is at least equal to the Court's. While this is not a novel argument, its assertion by the President in numerous signing statements has alerted the public to its consequences.

There is a long list of other examples, ranging from the nightly rantings by television personalities like Lou Dobbs and others about the improper convictions of border guards to the anti-judicial referenda recently on the ballots in South Dakota and Colorado. All these examples share a common theme: there is something drastically wrong with our current legal system.

Members of the general public do not always quickly tie together disparate pieces of information into well formed opinions, but they do keep a "running tally" of positive and negative information and they use these tallies in constructing narratives about things like the law and the Supreme Court. If Gibson and Caldeira have correctly identified a trend and the public is primed to evaluate the Court in political and partisan terms, and if this information is tied into an emerging narrative about the political nature and incompetence of other legal institutions, the Court may be confronting a new environment unlike anything it has dealt with in the past. If in this context the United

States Supreme Court dramatically overturns numerous constitutional precedents, Lerner's predictions may finally be realized. ♣

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A LITTLE LOWER

Responsible farmers haven't reformed
This indolent beanfield yet.
Old, naked and scruffy,
Its silvery stubble
And wrinkles of ochre rows
Stretch out serenely,
Absorbing the ribaldry
Of raucous crows.

Disreputable old beloved sod.
From your warm dust my Maker imaged me -
A chip off the old clod -
To be a sort of mouth for clay.
Such marvels,
That in us the chemicals
Have grown to understand themselves;
In us the flames gain tongues
That also sing.

Charles Strietelmeier

books

Meilaender, Gilbert. *The Way That Leads There: Augustinian Reflections on the Christian Life*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2006.

“THE DIVINE NATURE WOUNDS and perhaps destroys us merely by being what it is.” So declares Orual, Queen of Glome, in C. S. Lewis’s magisterial retelling of the myth of Cupid and Psyche. Cutting sharply against the grain not only of the declamations of modern skeptics such as Freud and Feuerbach, but of the ever-alluring fashions of our consumer society as well, Orual’s dark wisdom confronts us with a disturbing insight into mortal life: sharing the universe with the divine is in fact no pleasure cruise.

Of course, long before Freud and Feuerbach modern religious skeptics adopted the practice of caricaturing traditional religious faith as merely a pill, an irrational palliative that protects the weak against the harsh realities of honest, authentic living. It has indeed become unquestioned wisdom among many modern and postmodern secular intellectuals that, in our enlightened age of science, faith in God is attractive only because it offers an “easy way out.” With an ironic twist of logic, C. S. Lewis’s *Till We Have Faces* turns

this modern secular agenda on its head. Through the drama of Orual’s dawning recognition of the grasping and rapacious nature of her own heart, we confront the ironic truth that it is in fact our inveterate human demand for autonomy, not the tyrannical love of the divine, that most deeply alienates us from ourselves and those we love. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that of the many fine Christian thinkers writing in the last fifty years, few have been more courageous and outspoken in advocating the wisdom of Orual and debunking the myth of Christian faith as “easy comfort” than Gilbert Meilaender, Duesenberg Professor of Christian Ethics at Valparaiso University and one of the finest C. S. Lewis scholars writing in the past fifty years. Indeed, since the publication of his *Taste for the Other: The Social and Ethical Thought of C. S. Lewis* (Eerdmans, 1978), Meilaender has been defending an intellectually unpopular conviction shared by such Christian writers as C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Flannery O’Connor, and Saint Augustine: living a truthful human life means relinquishing the comforting dogma of autonomous existence and following the far more difficult way of the cross. Such a life of utter dependence on the true “other” (God)

may well promise ultimate and final bliss, but in the here and now it calls us to the life of renunciation and thereby inevitably wounds us deeply.

Certainly from the vantage point of sincere Christian conviction, the wisdom of Orual offers a much-needed antidote to contemporary consumer culture’s aggressively marketed ethos of self-absorption, personal autonomy, and cheap, therapeutic grace. Saint Paul sought to deliver Corinthian Christians from the swirling vortex of enticing but inordinate Corinthian pleasures. Similarly, Christians living today desperately need to hear wise voices within the church reminding us of the hard truth that being a follower of Jesus in our culture of consumption still means renouncing not only our cravings but our inveterate and insistent desire to dictate, orchestrate, and control our own destinies. As Orual declares, “That there should be gods at all, there’s our misery and bitter wrong.... We want to be on our own.”

The list of Gilbert Meilaender’s earlier contributions to the world of Christian thought is substantial. Of his most instructive works in ethics and theology, two in particular ought to be acknowledged as classics in their field: *The Taste*

for the Other, an authoritative study of the social and political thought of C. S. Lewis, and *Bioethics* (Eerdmans, 2005), arguably the most subtle, principled, and erudite work in twentieth-century bioethics written from a Christian vantage point. Building on this strong foundation, *The Way That Leads There* provides an original and invaluable addition to Meilaender's already impressive array of writings on the Christian life. In this recent work, Meilaender provides us with a unique work of Christian scholarship relying on the thought of Saint Augustine to delve deeply into the life of faith while at the same time keeping clearly before our minds the restlessness, discontent, and pain that are essential to an authentic life of faith. Meilaender chooses Augustine as his primary guide for the task of reflecting on some of the greatest ethical challenges of the Christian life; he does so not because Augustine always gets things right but because Augustine possesses the unique ability to "worry about things" (ix). In other words Augustine has the rare capacity to examine, ponder, and argue profoundly, all the while recognizing that we are mere mortal human beings who even at our very best "see through a glass darkly." *The Way That Leads There* is thus a book written not so much to tell us about Augustine as to help us think and struggle with Augustine; most impressively, this is a book that returns to Saint Augustine in order to "free us from the limits that confine us" (x)—in order to reflect, that is, on the meaning of faith with

renewed vigor and truthfulness. In so doing, *The Way That Leads There* is a work of uncommon wisdom, providing Christians in our hyper-materialistic world addicted to comfort with the very tonic we so desperately need.

The Way That Leads There sets out by exploring the problematic nature of Augustine's eudaimonism and the recurring tension between our human desire for happiness and the demands that moral duty place upon us. Exposing the teleological gap between the ideal unity and happiness we yearn for, on the one hand, and the demands of moral duty and the limits of our human capacities, on the other, Meilaender engages the reader in a series of subtle and balanced conversations on the nature and limits of politics, the meaning of human sexuality in God's creation, and the significance of grief for human beings who ultimately must learn to love God as their only final and highest good. As Meilaender relies on Augustine to guide us through these complex issues, we are led to appreciate the paradox inherent in Augustine's profound insight that "our hearts are restless till they rest in thee." From Augustine's perspective, to be human is to yearn for what we can never, in our earthly lives, fully possess. Those ultimate blessings we long for—the exhilarating experience of the unity of duty and happiness, the secure enjoyment of rest and communion in the presence of divine beauty, and the transformation of the self into a renewed self capable of rejoicing in and ador-

ing God—lie painfully outside our mortal grasp. So, echoing Augustine, Meilaender sums up the human condition in terms of an arresting and daunting existential choice: "[w]e can have a sham happiness that will not really satisfy—or we can relinquish the desire to grasp the happy life here and now, leaving open in our being a gaping wound that God must fill in His own good time" (19).

A brief review can in no way do justice to the richness and ingenuity of Meilaender's arguments. In what follows I will try merely to highlight some of the particularly fine reasoning Meilaender exhibits throughout his reflections. In the first two chapters, Meilaender primarily aspires to clarify and defend Augustine's vision of the human heart. In chapter one he defends Augustine's Christian eudaimonism against three important objections: (1) that Augustine's basic thesis that all human beings ultimately need God in order to find lasting and true happiness degrades God into a mere instrument or object of human desire; (2) that Augustine's doctrine of the restless human heart essentially downplays fundamental disagreements among world religions and promotes a bland, anthropocentric religiosity; (3) that Augustine's vision of final rest in God presents us with tyrannical God whose demand for total devotion precludes all loves for the merely finite. In other words, love of God, who is our all-sufficient, sovereign good, suffocates love of neighbor, friend, parent, or child. In defending Augustine,

Meilaender provides an impressively balanced and subtle analysis of Augustine's complex understanding of *cupiditas* and *caritas*.

So, for example, Meilaender offers a sympathetic and compelling refutation of Anders Nygren's contention that Augustine's eudaimonism "degrades" God by reducing God to nothing more than an object or instrument for satisfying human longing. Nygren's fundamental error, as Meilaender deftly shows, is to fail to distinguish healthy from unhealthy forms of need-love. Contrary to Nygren, need-love need not be selfish love. Indeed, as C. S. Lewis explains so elegantly in the *Four Loves*, while human need-love may certainly become corrupted and devolve into a grasping selfishness, to be needy per se cannot be a moral defect for it is fundamental and appropriate to our creaturely nature. Indeed, we are by nature erotic beings who can fully become ourselves most fully only by acknowledging our neediness and transcending our isolated, private selves. So *healthy* need-love is essential to our creaturely nature, reminding us that we are not self-creators. Need-love of God in particular is certainly not reducible to a proud, self-centered, and self-absorbed preference for self. On the contrary, as Meilaender shows in his analysis of Augustine's writings, only by transforming human need-love can the Holy Spirit deliver us from our excessive preoccupation with our own private, ego-centric desires. Like Orual, we must learn how to need God. We

must be led outside of ourselves and toward God Who alone is truly good in and of Himself. Thus, paradoxically, as human beings who are meant to flourish only in and through God's perfect gift-love, we find our way home and satisfy our deepest desires only by losing ourselves in the presence of a God whose worth is not of our own making, relinquishing our egoistic tendency to possess and control our highest good as if it were our own. In uniting our entire selves to the God of perfect love, Meilaender observes, "anthropocentrism will have been overthrown as, simultaneously, the *anthropos* is fulfilled" (21).

Meilaender is similarly subtle and lucid in defending Augustine against the charge that love of God obliterates love of neighbor. Here Meilaender wisely diagnoses and remedies Martha Nussbaum's aversion to transcendence ("Augustine and Dante on the Ascent of Love" in Gareth B. Matthews, ed. *The Augustinian Tradition*, Berkeley, 1999), clarifying how Augustine's vision of the ascent to divine love transforms rather than nullifies love of neighbor. Yet while he argues in favor of Augustine's fundamental philosophy of *caritas*, Meilaender acknowledges the serious spiritual difficulty all human beings encounter in learning how to love God and neighbor in a healthy and uncorrupted fashion. As Meilaender himself confesses,

It is not easy to find language in which to express clearly the proper way to love something that is

good, but good only relatively—something that has real but not ultimate value because it has no existence apart from its participation in the life that comes from God. Rather than saying it is not right to love earthly things, we should say we do not know the right way to love them. (155)

As Augustine so profoundly understood, philosophizing about the spiritual transformation of our imperfect and corrupted human loves is not the same as daily struggling to hold on to "the Way That Leads there." Learning how to love requires more than thinking—perhaps an obvious truth, but one that professional theologians and philosophers need to be reminded of, at least once in a while.

The Way That Leads There is certainly not a one-sided work defending Augustine at all costs and against any and all contenders. While Meilaender endorses Augustine's basic Christian teleology and chastened conception of the nature of politics, he also finds that Augustine at times overlooks the complexities inherent in some important human capacities and practices. Augustine's account of the proper ends or goods of such human activities as eating and sexual union suffers, according to Meilaender from an unfortunate narrowness. Meilaender argues that Augustine fails to see the plurality of proper ends internal to the activities of both sexual union

and the eating of food. Indeed, Augustine's regards the good of sex in a way similar to that of food: both serve the human being as a kind of medicine. For Augustine the sole purpose of sex is procreation, that of food, mere nourishment of the body. Though Meilaender criticizes Augustine for characterizing these human activities in too restricted a fashion, he nevertheless gives Augustine his proper due. Despite the shortcomings of his understanding, Augustine reminds us that properly enacted eating and sexual activity must lead us to affirm goods outside of ourselves and should not serve merely for our autonomous, private self-gratification.

Meilaender's chapter on Augustine's chastened conception of politics should be required reading in all courses in political philosophy. Quoting Jean Bethke Elshtain, Meilaender notes "If Augustine is a thorn in the side of those who would cure the universe once and for all, he similarly torments cynics who disdain any project of human community, or justice, or possibility" (79). According to Meilaender, Augustine embraces a subtle historical agnosticism: avoiding the errors of Christian triumphalism and millenarianism, as well as the vice of despair and cynicism toward the political realm, Augustine urges us to seek the well-being of the *civitas terrena* without overlooking the fact that no human institution caught in the struggle between earthly and heavenly loves ever will be free of discord, dissension, and division. On Meilaender's reading, Augustine thus pro-

vides us with a "chastened but not denuded politics." Turning then to an illuminating critique of Rawls, Meilaender proceeds to expose the incoherence of the secular liberal's insistence on a rigid and simplistic separation of the religious and the political. To be sure Christian citizens of the *civitas terrena* must not confuse political power with that of the Holy Spirit: "[C]hristians in public service should decline to use political power to (attempt to) create faith precisely because they take seriously their Christian commitments—among them the belief that God wills to work faith not through the sword but through the work of the gospel and the testimony of the Holy Spirit" (102). Yet as Meilaender is careful to remind us, Augustine was not himself always consistent in his own thinking on the proper relationship of the two cities. By working through Augustine's complex thoughts, however, Meilaender contends we can nevertheless find in them a coherent and compelling vision of church and state. At his best, Augustine reminds us that, at bottom, liberalism and conservatism are not only compatible but inseparable. Being free, both for individuals and for communities, requires conserving what is just and true in our historical traditions without falling prey to the idolatry that confuses the ideal with the actual. As Augustine argues, we must resist confusing patriotism with righteousness, and we must never forget the immense distance separating the deficient and often disappointing church from the

perfect and unblemished Lamb who is her true life, true authority, and true integrity.

To be sure some readers will bristle at the Augustinian humility and "ethics of heteronomy" that pervade Meilaender's text. *The Way That Leads There* prevents a powerfully counter-cultural vision of human life as wholly and utterly dependent upon God's grace. In an age clamoring for the separation of *amor sui* and *amor Dei*, this is not a work one expects to see lauded in the party periodicals of the cultural elites. Yet for those sympathetic to the life of faith, a close reading of *The Way That Leads There* is anything but a journey into despair. It is a most informative and hopeful work embodying the kind of truthful and robust Christian vision of life that Flannery O'Connor terms "Christian realism." Ultimately, Meilaender's reflections on "the Way That Leads there" call to mind Saint Paul's Christian realism regarding the place of struggle and suffering in the journey of faith. As Paul confesses to his Corinthian brothers and sisters, "[w]e were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life. But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead. Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us" (2 Cor. 1.8–10).

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Peacocke, Arthur. *All That Is: A Naturalistic Faith for the Twenty-First Century*. Philip Clayton, ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.

JUST BEFORE HIS RECENT DEATH, the noted biologist-theologian Arthur Peacocke composed a final essay that in brief chapters summarizes his position in the religion and science conversation on which he has been a major influence. The essay itself is just more than fifty pages, but Philip Clayton, also an important thinker in this dialogue, has brought together additional essays from some of Peacocke's friends and admirers in the dialogue to respond to the short essay. All of the contributors are scholars known already for their own work in religion and science, so Clayton has served us well in giving us a collection of essays from leading scholars commenting on the work of Arthur Peacocke. That in itself recommends this volume for those interested in the field or for students who want to be introduced to the most important work being done.

My comments will be a review of the entire book since to comment on Peacocke in particular would only serve to add one more voice to an already crowded field. My interest is to assess the project as a whole from my perspective built on twenty years also teaching and writing in this field and having been engaged as a colleague and in conversation with many of the authors in this volume. I bring concerns that are especially my own, although I believe this

may help to put the volume into some perspective. My interests have focused on whether the dialogue is presented as a fair representation of all who should be involved. Does this picture of the dialogue invite a multi-religious conversation? Does the book give us a real interaction between scientists and religious thinkers? Finally, does the volume suggest practical applications for the conversation? I feel a bit encouraged to approach this text through the lens of my interests because Peacocke seems genuinely also to desire to address precisely these elements as key to a successful dialogue between science and religion.

The first matter is compelling in that Peacocke is so keen on showing how different religious traditions can and should be involved in the conversation. His effort to forge a Christian point of view that can allow for other religious perspectives is a notable feature of his essay. We see quickly, however, that the essay is clearly an effort to work out a specifically Christian theological view that focuses attention on specifically Christian faith tenets. Peacocke's efforts are understandable as he is clear about his project from the outset and, at least, he tries to show how such a particular perspective can open up to conversation with those who are differently religious and even those who declare themselves not to be religious at all. In addition, Peacocke does not aim at a defense of Christian views. Consistent with his work throughout, Peacocke asks whether a specifi-

cally Christian view make sense to anyone who also takes science seriously. This means that Peacocke opens the Christian claims to honest critique based on what we think we know about reality according to the sciences. This approach is fully amenable to any other religious thinker and for those who also are religious skeptics. All are welcome to the conversation.

The issue for me can be found in the essays that come from his commentators. All are, with the possible exception of one, confessing Christians. There are no other voices represented by this collection. That is not so problematic as the actual direction of the essays. Clearly there are those who are ready to take issue with Peacocke in different ways (Drees and Ward are two who are likely at different ends of the spectrum), but they do so entirely within the framework of a Christian debate. Others may find this entertaining and instructive in a limited sense, but the contributing authors so eager to take on Peacocke's project with academic rigor but also with more than a high degree of respect end up making the conversation pretty much an intra-Christian debate. Perhaps Karl Peters and Don Braxton can be seen as exceptions but neither of them actually pushes for a broader discussion of the religions.

My second interest is also perplexing to me. Peacocke surely represents a thinker who participates as both a scientist and a theologian. Others like Drees and Russell have done work as scientists. However,

the approach taken by both Peacocke and his commentators is fundamentally theological/philosophical. Even when science is brought to the discussion, the material is present as a component of a theological problem. Again, one cannot blame Peacocke for this, since he says from the outset that this is a theological treatise. Following on that lead the others focus essentially on that task. There is much to be done in that effort, but I am amazed that there are no scientists, not to mention the possible real scientific skeptic, who were invited to comment as scientists. We have theologians essentially describing science, some who are obviously very knowledgeable. Still, we lose some of the perspective that this is after all a science and religion dialogue. Perhaps even more perplexing is that the agenda is clearly set as a theological agenda so that, even if scientists were to be involved, it is not fully clear in what way they would contribute to this discussion. Even Peacocke's notion of a hierarchy of complexity that leads to his emergentist perspective can open the door to the appearance that science does not participate in the discussion past a certain point. Is this a dialogue then? This is not Peacocke's intent, I believe. He would leave open the possibility that science can bring critical questions at every level and thus challenge theological claims about reality, that very reality that the sciences also attempt to describe.

Perhaps it is clear that my turning this review toward the particular interests I have named

is a way for me to voice my disappointments with the volume. These are the very areas that I find to be weakest in this text. Even as I turn to my last point, I must again wonder why there is so little direction given in shaping a practical application of all of this conversation. To be sure, Peacocke assures us that there is a practical aim for his theology, but this has to do with the practice of religion as such. He develops a thoroughly sacramental view rooted in both his creation theology and in his Christology. And there are those who take him up on these themes, notably Karl Peters, Don Braxton, and Ann Pederson. Pederson's essay does indeed hint at an issue, and Peacocke is appropriately chastised for not taking account of feminist contributions. But even this push does not actually eventuate in raising the very specific practical, dare we say ethical/political goals of much of feminist thought.

More concerning is that the contributors, Peacocke and Heftier to be sure, have often urged that this dialogue must have the aim of contributing to a better, more wholesome human situation, on a global scale one would hope. I believe that most if not all of those who have written for this volume share this aim. But we hear little about ecology or the environment generally, about disease and medical research, about the dire consequences of global warming and what this means for the poor, the starving, the desperate of the planet. The sacramental view proposed by Peacocke could be and is for

these thinkers in their own right a stepping stone for looking closely at these issues, but not in this volume. It is striking that a final word is added by Peacocke as he narrates his experience of facing death because of the ever prominent effects of cancer. Surely, this is a place for real conversation between science and religion. Still, this final "Nunc Dimittis" as Peacocke calls it remains a personal narrative. That is perhaps appropriate in this case, but the volume falls short of pushing the conversation past the internal theological quandaries toward the global issues that I think all of these scholars would agree are even more pressing concerns for the great majority of people as well as for the religions as such.

But my comments follow after I have already given my recommendation for what is in the book. There is in Peacocke's essay a beautiful and elegant summary of his theology as it has developed over the years, and the conversation that ensues surely brings together a very high class of thinkers who have engaged in both honoring Peacocke's contribution as well as showing how it does become the basis for a lively discussion. That is the marvel of Arthur Peacocke as a major player and shaper of an honest dialogue between the sciences and the religions.

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the attic

History As Law and Gospel—I

(first published February 1949)

WHERE IS HUMAN HISTORY headed and what does it mean? This question is forcing itself upon sensitive minds everywhere as a result of the course that history has been following in the past fifty years.

It is symptomatic of this situation that two of the most popular books on the non-fiction list in recent years should have been entitled *Human Destiny* and *A Study of History*. Nor is it accidental that Marxian Communism, which has laid increasing claim upon the hearts and minds of men in the past three decades, should concern itself with the problem of the meaning of history. Man's attempt to solve the riddle of his own existence is intimately bound up with his desire to understand the two factors that have made him what he is, namely, nature and history. Having discovered that an understanding of the world of nature is insufficient for an explication of the contradiction in which he finds himself, that, if anything, such an understanding merely deepens the contradiction, he turns to history in the hope of finding there the answers with which science refuses to provide him.

But philosophies of history vary as widely as do philosophies of science. The erudition of a historian is no guarantee of

the validity of his understanding of historical process, nor does the study of historical data as such supply the explanation of those data. Unlike the firefly, history is not self-illuminating. The problem of the meaning of history is, therefore, not primarily a historical problem. Because the question is part of the problem of the meaning of human existence as such, and therefore of my existence, an inquiry into the nature and destiny of history is necessarily an existential and intensely personal investigation, far removed from the vaunted objectives with which the historian claims to be able to view the course of human events. Precisely because a consideration of the meaning of history is so closely linked to my understanding of my own life, I cannot attempt to carry on such a consideration apart from the convictions and commitments by which my life is directed. For the Christian, the meaning of life, hence of history, is "hid with Christ in God."

According to the declaration of the Christian faith, God's disclosure of His will for human life is twofold: it comes as law and as gospel, as judgment and as redemption. Similarly, the meaning of historical process, when viewed with Christian eyes, appears as law and as gos-

Jaroslav Pelikan

pel. Without a clear delineation of this twofold character of history, an attempt to articulate the Christian philosophy of history will lose itself in the same errors which have attended every theology in which the law and the gospel were confused and mingled.

History as Law

In the framework of Christian thought, the law is that revelation of the purpose and will of God by which He sets down what He expects and demands of men. Since man is what he is and lives as he does, however, that revelation is simultaneously an announcement of divine wrath and judgment. In opposition to the Kantian formula, "You should, therefore you can," Christianity asserts that man is inevitably involved in intentions and decisions that run contrary to God's law. And thus the law becomes a voice of threatening and destruction.

History is conceived of as Law whenever its development demonstrates the inability of men and civilizations to redeem themselves or to live up to the ideals and goals that they set for themselves. This is something quite different from the "laws of history" that men profess to find within the stream of historical events. The elaborate

schematizations of a Toynbee, for example, are neither convincing as history nor incisive as philosophy. Though none can deny Toynbee's scholarship or his acquaintance with many forgotten crannies of history, his entire scheme bears the marks of a preconceived notion that must now be superimposed upon history without regard for those parts that may not fit the mold. And while his theory of "time of troubles" bears some affinity to our understanding of history as law, he seems to us to short-circuit the dynamics implicit in that theory by the calm assurances with which he foresees and foretells history's ultimate redemption.

Nowhere in the course of his ponderous book does Toynbee come seriously to terms with the judgment that historical study pronounces upon all pat theories, such as his own, that claim to rise above history in order to understand history. So painfully aware was the late Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) of that judgment that he made of it an entire philosophy of history. The historicism or historical relativism of Troeltsch and his followers on both sides of the Atlantic is rooted in the realization of the conditionedness of every historical utterance and event. This does not mean only that every man must be understood in the light of his times, and that every great movement or idea is a product of the historical environment in which it arose and grew. It means rather that even when I am sure of the fact that what I think and say is conditioned by the historical situation

in which I stand, I cannot escape that historical situation. Like the Nemesis of the ancients, it avenges itself upon me whether I like it or not.

But not even the splendid synthetic gift of Ernst Troeltsch was able to draw the consequences of this view. In his posthumously published work on historicism, Troeltsch expressed the conviction that "we must overcome history with history." On the basis of this work, no less a figure than Adolf von Harnack called Troeltsch the greatest philosopher of history Germany had produced since Hegel. Neither Troeltsch nor Harnack, however, realized the implications of the judgment that each in his own way pronounced upon historical dogmatism and absolutism.

The Preacher First

For historicism, like every other preaching of the law, must first be addressed to the preacher himself. Otherwise, it can itself become—as indeed it did become in both Troeltsch and Harnack—a vehicle for dogmatic pride. Troeltsch and Harnack both failed to discover that their own realization of historical conditionedness was itself conditioned by the temper of their times. With an unseemly ease that appears to be an occupational disease of historians, these scholars pointed out how ancient Christian thought came under the influence of Hellenism, how medieval social ideals were drawn from feudalism, how early Protestant theology and ethics were shaped by the "spirit of capitalism."

They were able to do all this without penitently acknowledging that their own method and approach were inspired by the historical consciousness of the late nineteenth century and were informed by the relativism and skepticism that pervaded not only the social sciences and history but ethics, theology, and philosophy as well.

Thus historicism ends in its own dissolution; or, in Marx's terms, it contains the seeds of its own destruction. It fails to explain history satisfactorily, not because, as might seem at first glance, it is too radical but because it is not radical enough. It is not nearly as radical as is a Christian view of history as law, which acknowledges humbly and penitently that its own judgment upon history is subject to the judgment of God; "He that judgeth me," said St. Paul, "is the Lord." Historicism does not even approach the penetration of the Old Testament prophets into the infinite possibilities for self-deception that the preaching of the Law offers to the preacher.

Another reason for historicism's failure to do justice to history is the fact that it does not take the paradox of historical development seriously enough. As we shall see in our discussion of history as gospel, the phenomenon of development within history has been the means by which more than one philosopher of history was led astray. The paradox involved in the concept of development is that while there is development and movement within the historical process, every step

forward involves a new set of opportunities for the corruption of the very impetus that first propelled that step.

That paradox cannot be resolved by a theory that sometimes passes for the Christian understanding of history. Usually beginning with the cliché "Human nature does not change," this naive view denies all meaning to historical development. It conceives of history as something static and of historical events and ages as insignificant. Far from being the Christian philosophy of history, such a conception sells the Christian worldview short by refusing to deal seriously with time. It owes much more to the Greek than to the Christian idea of history; for one of the distinguishing marks of the latter in contrast to the former is the earnestness with which it considers the *kairos*, the age. Greek thought, on the other hand, thought of both nature and history in static terms. And yet there are many circles in which the theory of the changelessness of history, almost blasphemy in view of the Christian picture of God, parades under the Christian name.

Modern secular thought has sought to do away with the paradox of historical development by resorting to another device. It has deliberately blinded itself to the possibilities for corruption that are present on each level of historical development and has naïvely equated development and progress. We shall have more to say about the Marxist and the bourgeois theories of progress in the second part of

this essay. But in this context, this device is important as an illustration of man's attempt to rationalize the condemnation that the law, whether in the Bible or in history, calls down upon him. By affirming the infinite perfectibility of man, the theory of progress has managed to overlook the fact that every development within history presents man with the chance to destroy the very genius that has made that development possible.

This is just another way of saying that man's capacity for rising beyond himself and beyond history can become the means by which he defies the divine purpose in history. In Reinhold Niebuhr's words, "The fact that man can transcend himself in infinite regression and cannot find the end of life except in God is the mark of his creativity and uniqueness; closely related to this capacity is his inclination to transmute his partial and finite self and his partial and finite values into the infinite good. Therein lies his sin."

Myth and Atom

A realization of this inclination on man's part to suppose himself to be more than he actually is can come through empirical observation. Thus the Greeks were wont to speak of *hybris*, man's refusal to content himself with his place in nature—the Christian would add, in history—and his attempt to scale the heights of divinity. The myth of Prometheus, when profoundly understood, signified for the Greeks the fact that an improvement in man's creative capac-

ity and his control over nature does not necessarily bring with it a proportionate increase in man's wisdom in the use of his newly found powers. Much the same realization has come upon modern men as a result of scientific development. The fact that man can harness the power of the atom does not yet mean that he can harness himself and his demonic inclination to use the power of the atom for evil rather than for good.

Heartening as it may be that this realization is beginning to dawn on modern man, this does not mean that he has discovered the Christian understanding of history as law. Søren Kierkegaard's distinction between a sense of guilt and a sense of sin is applicable in this situation. The awareness of the possibility for evil on every level of historical development must be rooted in the Christian doctrine of God as creator and Lord before the meaning of history as law becomes apparent. It is only when I know that history, like nature, is ultimately subject to the lordship of God that I can measure the magnitude and depth of the guilt that I have empirically discovered. Then I realize that history, which was intended as the arena for service to God, has become instead the battleground between God and the devil, and that I am involved in that conflict. The Christian view of history as law is, then, dualistic in that it sees the historical process as the stage for the drama of God's battle with the devil.

That conflict-theme underlies the best that Christian thought

has had to say about the meaning of history. As we shall see, it is the basis of the Christian idea of history as gospel; but it is that because it is first the framework of the Christian view of history as law. Whenever man tries to act like God, he acts like the devil. The very creative acts by which man seeks to assert his lordship over the forces of nature and history are the instruments by which he sells himself into the service of the demonic. His dec-

laration of independence from God is his oath of fealty to the devil. This is the Christian dialectic of history, that God and the devil are at war in history; and history is understood as law whenever it becomes apparent that the devil has won a victory in that war, and that a particular historical phenomenon is therefore under the judgment and wrath of God.

The radical claim of the Christian view of history is that

the conflict between God and the devil is settled in Christ, and that history's inability to redeem itself is itself redeemed in the entrance of God into history in the person and work of Christ. That is the Christian idea of history as gospel, which will concern us in the second part of this essay. †

(To be continued)

PLENITUDE

Late fall, but the sun's still warm, streams
in from the west like tupelo honey, thick and sweet.
My hands curl around a mug of hot tea, and it feels
like a benediction, a reprieve from my crazy life,
bringing my mother from one doctor to the other,
as systems shut down, doors start to close;
going to interviews with my disabled son to find
out, in the end, that promised programs do not exist,
or are not being funded, and when school ends in June,
that's it, ta-ta, so long, farewell. But today, there's this—
the wash of happiness that comes from working again,
even though rejections fill my mailbox, thicker than snowflakes.
I know that winter is waiting; I've felt its cold breath
on the back of the wind. This is just a bit of respite,
before the storms roll in. Still, I can lean against this willow,
let the sun soak into my skin all the way to the bones.
These blue mountains hold me lightly, cupped in their hands.
There is just this lucent afternoon, and a spigot of birdsong;
it fills my bowl to the brim.

Barbara Crooker

on the cover—

Emil Armin was an influential Chicago modernist who frequently came to the Indiana Dunes to create art and visit the cabins of fellow Chicago artists who established residences there. In addition to his time in Indiana, his travels to New Mexico in the 1930s led to his creating fine works depicting the landscape and people of the Southwest. The Brauer Museum of Art has in its permanent collection twenty pictures by this always innovative and interesting artist. Donors Herman F. and Helen P. Johnson have enhanced the Brauer's collection immeasurably by their gift of seven superb Armin pieces.

on reviewers—

James R. Peters

is Professor of Philosophy at the University of the South.

James F. Moore

is Professor of Theology at Valparaiso University.

on poets—

Edward Byrne

is Professor of English at Valparaiso University and editor of *Valparaiso Poetry Review*. He is the author of five published books of poetry, most recently *Tidal Air* (Pecan Grove Press). A sixth book of poetry, *Seeded Light*, is forthcoming from Turning Point Books.

Christopher Anderson

is Professor of English at Oregon State University and the author of a number of books, including a recent book of poetry, *My Problem with the Truth* (Cloudbank, 2005). He is also a Catholic deacon.

Mary M. Brown

teaches Literature and Creative Writing at Indiana Wesleyan University. Her poetry has appeared in *Tar River Poetry*, *Mankato Review*, *New Zoo Poetry Review*, and *Christian Century*.

Gayle Boss

writes poems and essays from Grand Rapids, Michigan, and, with her husband, raises two sons.

Charles Strietelmeier

is an ELCA pastor in Hobart, Indiana, and a regular contributor to *The Cresset*.

Barbara Crooker

has published poetry in numerous publications, including *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Christian Century*, and *Sojourners*. Her recent book *Radiance* (Word Press, 2005) was a finalist for the 2006 Paterson Poetry Prize. Garrison Keillor recently read nine of her poems on National Public Radio's "The Writer's Almanac."

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Gary Fincke

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