Dramas of Love and Dirt
Norman Wirzba

A Conversation With Peter L. Berger Gregor Thuswaldner

A Short History of Infertility and Ducks Kirsten Eve Beachy

Practicing Restraint as Lenten Discipline David Lott

Remembering John Tavener Katherine Kennedy Steiner

The Political Writings of Martin Luther Geoffrey C. Bowden
Betty LaDuke's artistic journey started when she was nine years old at the Worker's Children's Camp, where she was introduced to African American art and Mexican mural painting. After attending Denver University and the Cleveland Institute of Art, LaDuke traveled to Mexico in 1953 to study at the Instituto Allende. There, she explored expressionism, cubism, and pre-Columbian Aztec and Mayan art and met Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, David Alfredo Siquieros, and Rufino Tamayo. After a year at Instituto Allende, LaDuke spent two more years in Mexico painting murals in Otomi Indian villages for an organization sponsored by the United Nations and the Mexican government.

LaDuke returned to New York in 1956, but soon felt out of place because of the focus on abstract expressionism in the art scene. She traveled with Vincent LaDuke to his family home on the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota before settling in Los Angeles. In 1964 the LaDukes separated, and Betty LaDuke moved to Ashland, Oregon to accept a position at the Southern Oregon State College. LaDuke soon established roots in Ashland, marrying Peter Westigard in 1965. A sabbatical to India in the early 1970s began LaDuke's yearly explorations around the world. Her paintings have followed her journeys first through Asia, then Latin America and Africa, and most recently Vietnam and Cambodia. In vivid colors and patterns, her artworks celebrate the identities, beliefs, and ways of life of people around the world. Although rooted in scenes that LaDuke has witnessed in her travels, her paintings and prints often have a mythological or dreamlike quality and are filled with both universal and specific cultural symbols.
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if anything is excellent or praiseworthy
—think about such things.

Philippians 4:8

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EVERY YEAR WHEN LENT BEGINS, I FEEL unprepared. After all the feasts and parties of the recent holidays, I usually find myself around New Year’s needing to improve my diet and lose a few pounds, so I resolve to eat better and less and to get more exercise. Sometimes I even stick with this resolution for a respectable amount of time, but more often than not, within a month I have slipped back into my old bad habits and out of any new good ones. Before long, I realize that it is time to choose something to give up for Lent. The easy route, of course, would be to start over and re­solve whatever resolution it was that didn’t take the first time, but my typical New Year’s pledges often seem inappropriate as Lenten disciplines.

It’s not that I couldn’t use some reform in my dietary habits. Most of us in the US and the rest of the developed world have strange relationships with food, drink, and our other indulgences. We live in a culture not only of abundance but of excess. We fill our refrigerators and pantries with more food than we can possibly eat before it spoils. And after we eat too much of that food, we diet and exercise to lose the extra weight we have put on. Sadly, these efforts to “live better” are usually just another form of self-indulgence, one that reinforces an obsession with our own physical and personal well-being. When I exercise more often, my health improves and I feel better, which are good things. But are we ever more isolated and focused on our own needs and wants than when we are pounding away on a treadmill, ear buds blocking out the rest of the world?

This is why simply continuing our New Year’s resolutions and re-branding them as Lenten disciplines is a bad idea. We shouldn’t fast during Lent because we want to flatten our bellies and feel good about ourselves. The point is to give something up, not to work harder toward getting something we want. And even just giving up something is not the real point. In Lent, we set things aside because by doing so we open up space and possibility. During Lent, we create room for the presence of God in our lives. Instead of continuing to be led by our selfish desires and obsessions, we allow ourselves to be guided by the Spirit to become part of God’s work in the world.

Some of the authors in this issue ask us to use this Lent as an opportunity to focus on ends beyond ourselves. Norman Wirzba’s beautiful essay “Dramas of Love and Dirt” reminds us that as creatures of God we are dependent not only on other human beings but on the whole of creation, and that this means we must live in the world with a sense of humility and gratitude, even toward the soil under our feet. He calls for a Lenten discipline, inspired by the tradition of monastic contemplation, that will quiet selfish passions which contribute to fragmentation and distortion in the world. In “Practicing Restraint as Lenten Discipline,” David Lott also asks us to rethink our Lenten fasts. Drawing on the writings of theologian Sallie McFague, Lott suggests that during Lent we should experiment with new ways of living that embrace practices of both self-restraint and self-giving.

Beyond the topic of Lenten discipline, there is much of interest in this issue. In “A Conversation with Peter L. Berger,” an eminent sociologist discusses how his thinking about religion has changed over the course of his distinguished career. And in “Eggs: A Short History of Infertility and Ducks,” Kirsten Eve Beachy tells the story of how a typical “granola Mennonite” confronted the challenges of trying to bring new life—both avian and human—into the world.

Whether or not you practice a formal Lenten discipline, let this be a season of reflection and renewal. Let this be a time to recognize the noisy demands of the world and the impatient selfishness of our own passions as the distractions they are, and let us set them aside. In Lent, let us quiet the restlessness of our hearts, so that they might come to rest where true joy is found, in the love of God and all God’s creation.

—JPO
Dramas of Love and Dirt

Soil and the Salvation of the World

Norman Wirzba

"The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrection, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life. Without proper care for it, we can have no community, because without proper care for it we can have no life."

Wendell Berry
The Unsettling of America (86)

“We spend our lives hurrying away from the real, as though it were deadly to us. ‘It must be somewhere up there on the horizon,’ we think. And all the time it is in the soil, right beneath our feet.”

William Bryant Logan
Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth (97)

Try to imagine what it would be like to hear your name every time someone uttered the words “soil” or “dirt.” This is what life would have been like for Adam, because his name makes no sense apart from the soil from which he lives. The Hebrew word for soil is adamah. That the first human being was called adam meant that the biblical writer wanted us to understand that human life derives from soil, needs soil, and is utterly dependent upon it for food, energy, building materials, comfort, and for inspiration. Similarly, the fact that soil is called adamah would have had the effect of reminding human beings that soil also depends on us in certain respects, and that we have responsibilities to it. Adam and adamah are inseparable.

To read Genesis 2 is to discover that humanity’s fundamental identity and vocation are determined by life in a garden. Human life is created out of the ground as a particular extension of it and is what we might call a “variation on soil” in one of its many forms: “the Lord God formed adam from the adamah, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and adam became a living being” (2:7). Adam is not left alone to wander about aimlessly. Instead he is immediately put to work taking care of the soil. “The Lord God took adam and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (2:15). Two essential formulas emerge: a human being’s identity = soil + divine breath; and humanity’s vocation = soil + gardening work. This biblical story is telling us that the fate of soil and humanity are inextricably intertwined. When soil suffers, so do we. When soil is healthy, creatures have the best chance to flourish. Genesis 2 is not a fanciful story. The witness of history and the findings of ecologists and agronomists confirm it as an indispensable truth.

The etymological connection between adam and adamah has some resonance in English when we note that “humanity” relates to “humus,” the rich organic layer of decomposing matter that is the top layer of soil. We likely don’t care to be reminded of this reference. Who wants to think of themselves in terms of decomposing plants, leaves, animal bodies, and excrement? But without humus there is no viable terrestrial life. With humus, however, the ground takes in death and, with the aid of billions of microorganisms, transforms it into fertility. In it a vast assortment of processes are occurring that we have barely
began to understand or appreciate. William Bryant Logan says, "Radical disorder is the key to the function of humus. At the molecular level, it may indeed be the most disordered material on Earth. No two molecules of humus may be alike" (16). And yet, out of this disorder comes life, all the beautiful and terrifying shapes and colors and sizes that make up our world—and us.

Is it any wonder then that God loves soil? It is certainly true that God loves you and me, but when we first meet God in the garden, God is focused on and busy with dirt. God is on God's knees, hands in the dirt, holding soil so close as to breathe into it the warm, loving, divine breath of life. And not just human life. Plants (2:9) and animals and birds (2:19) come out of the same ground. Soil is the earthly center and connector through which God gardens life into vibrant, beautiful, and delectable reality. God is the first, best, and essential Gardener of the world. The astounding thing is that by staying close to soil, attending to its needs and potential, we have the opportunity to share in God's gardening ways with the world. To "till and keep" soil is not a burden or a curse. It is the most basic and the most God-honoring work, because when we do it well we participate in and extend God's life-giving provision in the world. We are each members with adam, called to keep our attention and affection on adamah. It is what God does daily. To believe the Psalmist—"When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit/breath, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground" (104:29–30)—the day God ceases to hold soil close is also the day all creation dies. When we cease to care for the soil we not only speed up its ruin, we also bear witness to a basic confusion about who we think God is. We communicate that we disdain God's gardening presence in our midst.

For much of human history the life-giving bond between people and soil was commonly understood, even if it was not always properly respected. Living in an agricultural world, especially when practicing subsistence agriculture on what can be considered marginal land, meant that a soil base and soil fertility were never to be taken for granted. Soil erosion (whether by wind or water) and soil salination (whether through over-irrigation or improper drainage) were visible, practical reminders of human obligations to take care of the soil. Failure to do so meant personal ruin and communal starvation because healthy soil is the foundation for healthy plant and animal and human life. Life and land were understood to go together because livelihood—the economic patterns and processes that put a roof on one's head, food on the table, clothes on one's back, and an offering at the altar—called minds, hearts, hands, and feet always back to the soil. Human desire, what people wanted and expected from life, was daily calibrated according to the needs of land, plants, and animals. For many of us today, living in urban or suburban worlds, it is almost impossible to imagine this land-shaped desire. Put starkly (and too simply), the contrast is between desire shaped by personal ambition and want and desire shaped by plant and animal need and potential.

Soil calls us to a radical life, especially if we remember that the word "radical" refers to what is central and essential, that which takes us to the roots and origins of life. It also calls us to a humble life, a life in which we come to honest terms with our need and dependence upon others. To be humble is to know that we do not and cannot live as individual egos, through our own resources, and on our own terms. "Humanity," "humus," and "humility" are etymologically related because together they show us that we

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live at our best when we remember and respect where we come from, what we depend on, and what we must do so that our life and the lives of others can thrive.

Understanding any of this has never been easy. Each year, however, we take a step in this direction when, on Ash Wednesday, we receive ashes and the words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

These words take our minds back to the story of the "Fall" in Genesis 3, the moment when human beings refused their creaturely life and sought to be like gods. God curses human beings, telling Eve that her pain at childbirth will increase and Adam that his work will now be characterized by toil and sweat. Then God reminds them that they will "return to the adamah, for out of it you were taken; you are dust [apar], and to dust you shall return" (3:19). There is much to say about what happened at this moment and why it matters. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his valuable commentary on this passage, says, “The word disobedience fails to describe the situation adequately. It is rebellion, the creature's stepping outside of the creature's only possible attitude, the creature's becoming creator, the destruction of creatureliness, a defection, a falling away from being safely held as a creature" (Bonhoeffer 1997, 120).

The destruction of creatureliness is a catastrophe because it marks the refusal of our fundamental identity and vocation. Adam and Eve's rebellious decision, according to Bonhoeffer, amounted to a rejection of who they in truth are and what they are to do. Human beings are creatures, "earthlings" as Genesis 2 describes it, called to take care of each other and the land. When we presume to rise above the earth, as if soil did not matter, or as if the care of soil was somehow beneath us, we forget who we are and where we come from, and in this forgetting bring pain and suffering to each other and to the world.

What should Adam and Eve have done? According to Bonhoeffer, the essential thing was for them to recognize and affirm that they are creatures who need others—most basically for food, friendship, and inspiration—and depend on God for it all. Life is a gift rather than a possession, a gift that we did not make and that exceeds our attempts at comprehension. The humble reception of gifts is no small thing, because if this biblical story teaches us anything it is that we rather seek to secure life on our own terms. We don't like to admit that our life is impossible without the nurture and support of others. We prefer to think that we can live on our own and out of our own ingenuity and resources. Put another way, we prefer to live in ways that bring glory to ourselves rather than gratitude to others and glory to God. Genesis 3 wants to teach us, however, that all life and we ourselves are gifts from God. We need to learn how to receive such gifts, how to cherish them and take care of them. When we fail to do this—as when we brutalize soil by killing it with ever-more-toxic herbicides and then putting it on life-support with synthetic, fossil-fuel dependent fertilizers—we contribute to the ruin of creation. The Fall is not simply a mistake by our ancestors. It is the disruption of the orders of being because in it we find the transformation of a world of grace into an arena of competitive grasping and arrogant, self-glorifying manipulation.

Not insignificantly, the Bible says that when Adam and Eve sinned, the ground itself was cursed on their account and soil would henceforth produce thistles and thorns along with whatever else was planted (Genesis 3:17–18). It is important to see that the soil has not itself become evil in some sense: soil continues to be the site and the medium through which God's creative, nurturing breathing moves. What changes is our relation to the soil. Human work, rather than aligning itself with soil processes in ways that support fertility and diverse life, becomes disruptive and destructive through numerous forms of mismanagement. "Weeds" and pests thrive because we create the conditions for their success. In ways that will likely surprise us, scripture presents degraded soil and languishing fields as active witnesses to the disordered and destructive living that we do, whereas thriving soil bears testimony to rightly ordered human living. As the prophets put it, a just culture, one in which shalom reigns, is reflected in lands that are beautiful and fruitful. An unjust culture is one in which land and people suffer together.
In the biblical story we see an inability within Adam and Eve to be honest with themselves and their situation. In trying to rise to the level of an autonomous, unencumbered god, they deny the truth—a truth confirmed every time they eat, drink, or breathe—that they are creatures defined by need. Had they been honest with themselves, had they been humble, they would have acknowledged their dependence on humus and their vocation as humans to cultivate and nurture it. They would have embraced life as God's precious gift and as God's intimate, animating breath.

To be told, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return," is not something that should depress us. It should, instead, elevate us into a more profound sense of our participation in God's own life. God is constantly attentive to and at work in the soil, animating creatures into the fullness of life. Though we may often be told to "look up" to find God, perhaps believing that God resides far, far away, the truth of creation is that God is never far away. God is near, always lovingly active—like a gardener—in the soil beneath our feet. If we are to believe any of this we are going to have to rethink soil and our relationships to it.

Hans Jenny, one of the greatest soil scientists of the twentieth century, professed at the end of a long and distinguished career that it is almost impossible to give a precise definition of soil. Depending on where you are, the place's geological history and climate, and the variety of plant and animal life that have lived there, soil will exhibit many diverse qualities. He preferred to describe soil not as a thing but as a web of relationships that goes through varying states of fertility and infertility. It is, finally and irreducibly, a mystery because so many processes and elements and creatures come together to create the diverse conditions in which life can flourish. And the life that arises within and because of it is unfathomable. Where should we begin?

We can start with a remarkable, though hardly appreciated, observation. Soil absorbs death. Everything that lives dies. Why, then, are we not overwhelmed with the stench of all these corpses? It is because the ground receives death and transforms it—through the miracles of decomposition and re-composition—into the conditions for new life. Logan writes, "The grave seems to interrupt the human story. But the fact is that graves are motherly for the Earth. They wrap up the things of time and deliver them back to the cradle. So that the show goes on. So that nothing will stop the stories from being told" (54). This may be small comfort to us, given that we have such trouble facing death. As yet another sign of the forgetting of our creatureliness, we embalm our dead bodies with formaldehyde, thus making our entry into the ground a poisonous presence. Would we and the earth not be better off if we embraced our creatureliness by welcoming the gift of decomposition? This matters because decomposition is the gift of nurture. It is the hospitable gesture that welcomes others into the banquet and dance whereby death becomes the basis and the nurture for new life.

One way to describe soil is to say that it is not stingy. While it holds a bewildering variety of nutrients closely together, it also lets go lightly. If it did not, life could not develop freely out of it. Think, for instance, of what must happen for a seed to sprout and grow. It must, as John put it in his gospel, enter into the soil and die if it is to bear much fruit (12:24). But upon entering the soil it does not enter into a passive medium. The soil is itself active, embroiled in digestive and transformative processes that receive the seed's dissolution and then nurtures it into plant life. Seeds germinate because the soil is that welcoming place in which minerals, water, clay, microorganisms, worms, and heat already have been long at work. What healthy soil does
is release and bring to light all the possibilities that are latent within any particular seed, even those possibilities (like weeds) that are not to our particular liking or benefit. It takes the seed’s potential and works with it. This is why Logan, quite rightly, asserts: “Hospitality is the fundamental virtue of the soil. It makes room. It shares. It neutralizes poisons. And so it heals. This is what the soil teaches: If you want to be remembered, give yourself away” (19).

This is an arresting way of speaking. But we should not be surprised if we believe that it is God’s life-giving breath that constantly circulates through soil. Here it is worth recalling that as theologians have tried to understand why God creates at all, the best answer they have come to is that God creates because God loves. God does not create out of some lack or deficiency or out of necessity. God creates freely because God loves for something other than God to be, which is to say that God makes room within God’s own life for a reality that is not itself God to flourish and thrive. God’s love in creating the world is the most basic act of hospitality because God welcomes life to be itself and be nurtured by all that God provides. The hospitality of soil, we can say, is but one of the material manifestations of God’s primordial hospitality in creating the world. To be nestled within fertile soil is to be in a nurturing place that provides the conditions necessary for life to realize its unique potential.

But there is more. Though soil receives death, along with all the so-called “waste” of the world, it also constantly gives what it takes. In healthy soil there is an abundance of air, water, and mineral and organic nutrients. These elements by themselves, however, are not enough. There must also be the geo-bio-chemical processes and the energy—what William Blake called God’s “Eternal Delight” (Blake, 34)—that transform tissues into tendrils and trees. This transformative process is well-described as a scene of perpetual offering or as a place in which the giving of elements to each other is the means of life. Insofar as anything remains in isolation or is rendered incapable of being given to another, it remains dead. Life happens only as a transitive movement because whatever lives does so only as it participates in a process of endless giving. This is why John continues his reflection on a seed’s death and life’s fruitfulness by observing, “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25). To love one’s own life is to try to claim and secure it as one’s own private possession. It is to think, like Adam did, that one’s own is the only life that matters and that all other creatures must be manipulated to serve it. This is no life at all. It is, instead, hubris and alienation and needless death. Eternal life, on the other hand, is the knowledge of God (John 17:3) and the intimate sharing in God’s hospitable, self-giving life that produces good and beautiful fruit. Eternal life is not an escape from the world of soil because such escape would also signify a departure from the love of God there at work. It is rather the intimate tasting and experience of the fullness and abundance of life that God is (see John 11:25, 14:6).

Soil is the most mundane yet forever mysterious place where we regularly meet God’s hospitable love for life. Among contemporary writers, few have seen this as clearly as the Kentucky farmer and writer Wendell Berry, who says:

The most exemplary nature is that of the topsoil. It is very Christ-like in its passivity and beneficence, and in the penetrating energy that issues out of its peaceableness. It increases by experience, by the passage of seasons over it, growth rising out of it and returning to it, not by ambition or aggressiveness. It is enriched by all things that die and enter

How can we embrace our creatureliness and so learn to live more appropriately and with greater humility and gratitude in God’s world?
into it. It keeps the past, not as history or as memory, but as richness, new possibility. Its fertility is always building up out of death into promise. Death is the bridge or the tunnel by which its past enters its future. (Berry 1969, 204)

What transformations in us need to occur if we are to learn to perceive and receive the soil in this hospitable manner? Put more broadly, and in the terms suggested by the earlier part of this essay, how can we embrace our creatureliness and so learn to live more appropriately and with greater humility and gratitude in God’s world?

We must start by acknowledging and attending to the many ways in which the patterns of human life reflect an imposition, even assault, on the land. Michel Serres has given us a powerful image to consider as we reflect on the nature of this assault. He asks us to look carefully at Francisco de Goya’s painting “The Cudgel Fight Duelo.” In it two men are at arms with each other, swinging sticks frantically so as to overcome the other. The duelists are knee deep in mud, or what looks to be like quicksand. “With every move they make, a slimy hole swallows them up, so that they are gradually burying themselves together. How quickly depends on how aggressive they are: the more heated the struggle, the more violent their movements become and the faster they sink in. The belligerents don’t notice the abyss they are rushing into; from outside, however, we see it clearly” (Serres, 1).

As we look at the painting our temptation is to focus on the men, wondering who will win. As history teaches, it is the man who can exert the greatest force. This is why cultures devoted to “winning” develop vast machineries of economic, political, technological, and military force. Our attention fails, however, because it does not acknowledge the soil and the water, the plants and the animals, that inevitably have to absorb all the violence we exercise against each other. And so we continue in our violent ways, failing to see how this violence is slowly going to destroy us all by burying our hubris and neglect in a vast, desolate ocean of mud. Serres calls this a loathsome culture because it is a culture that abhors the world by working toward global, mutual assured destruction.

The forms of loathing we need to face are multiple. Reflecting on the patterns of settlement that characterized his home state, Berry observes how much utter violence has been the American habit. Forests have been felled, wetlands drained, whole species killed to near extinction, and hills and mountains bulldozed or exploded into oblivion. In the space of one to two centuries, we have managed to degrade by erosion and poisoning vast stretches of some of the world’s most fertile soil. The main source of our difficulty is that we have not entered our places with humility or with
the desire and patience to learn in detailed ways what our places need or recommend. Not being devoted to any place, we have not developed the understanding and the habits that would equip us to live there without destroying it.

Berry argues that for too long we have lived by the assumption that what is good for us is also good for the world, and that personal pride and greed are the primary measures of what is good. We are now seeing that this assumption is a disaster. The world is dying because of our efforts to achieve what we think to be good. The path of correction must, therefore, begin with a recognition of how wrong we have been in our assumptions.

We must change our lives, so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption that what is good for the world will be good for us. And that requires that we make the effort to know the world and to learn what is good for it. We must learn to co-operate in its processes, and to yield to its limits. But even more important, we must learn to acknowledge that the creation is full of mystery; we will never understand it. We must abandon arrogance and stand in awe. We must recover the sense of the majesty of creation, and the ability to be worshipful in its presence. For I do not doubt that it is only on the condition of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain in it. (Berry 1969, 196)

If we are to learn to live well on the land we must take up our divinely appointed vocation to take care of God’s garden, letting our lives be inspired by God’s gardening and hospitable ways with the world, and turning our work into forms of love that extend God’s gifts of nurture wherever we are.

None of this will be easy. Is one season of Lent each year enough? The movement of repentance must then be followed up with the disciplined self-examination that exposes the many strategies we have for keeping ourselves—our security, comfort, convenience, and ambition—at the center of the universe. It will also require that we resist the many marketing strategies of business, politics, education, and religion that further the sense that the satisfaction of personal desires should be our primary, individual and collective goal. What forms should such resistance and discipline take?

I don’t believe there is one answer to this question. Each person and community, defined as they are by particular kinds of temptation and potential, will need to move forward in ways that are appropriate to their lived contexts. I want to close, however, by offering some suggestions from what might appear to be an unlikely source: the tradition of monastic contemplation. I think we have much to learn from monks who fled to the desert or wilderness. Their flight was not simply to escape the social and cultural centers that flourished by encouraging pride, greed, and violence. It was so that they could commence on the difficult and concentrated work of self-purification, work that enabled them to subdue the many passions within themselves that prevented them from embracing the world and each other in gestures of genuine love. Without withdrawal and solitude, it was simply too difficult to commence the difficult work of reconstituting one’s fragmented life.

In an elegant and far-ranging study of contemplative traditions as they relate to the healing of the world, Douglas Christie writes:

...for the early Christian monks, the language of contemplation provided a way of perceiving existence that encompassed all of reality, that enabled one to attend to the most simple and mundane elements of existence and to see them as filled with significance, as sacred. It enabled one to notice and cherish the koinonia or community into which one had been invited to dwell, and to commit oneself to the life and health of the community... The contemplative was invited to notice everything and to experience all things as part of a sacred whole. The monks believed that this encompassing, penetrating way
of seeing, while possible for everyone, must be cultivated, brought into the center of consciousness through disciplined practice... One could learn to live in the world as a healing presence, attentive, and responsive to the lives of other beings and capable of helping to reknit the torn fabric of existence.” (Christie, 6-7)

According to these monks it was possible to be looking and not see because one's looking is so dominated by the "passions," the various fears, anxieties, hubris, boredom, and ambition that so dominate and shape our ways of relating to others. Rather than seeing another creature or a place for what it is—as the material manifestation of God's love—all one can see is one’s passions being projected upon them. This is why the real work of contemplation is about truthful awareness and honest perception of self, world, and God.

Maximus the Confessor says, “A pure soul is one freed from passions and constantly delighted by divine love” (56). What he means is that a pure soul no longer sees the world in instrumental terms, but is able to see each place and creature as the expression of God's love. It is to appreciate that God's love is not coercive or controlling. In making any particular thing, God simply delights in the unique thing that it is and finds joy in seeing that creature realize its divinely given potential. So much of our engagement with others is not for the sake of helping them realize their potential. It is, instead, a dominating of others so that they can help us realize the ambitions we have chosen for ourselves. Our perception and engagement, in other words, by being an imposition of oneself on another, have the effect of frustrating the ability of others to be the creatures they can be.

This is why the monks said over and over again that truthful awareness begins by seeing how the passions contribute to the fragmentation and distortion of the world. This is a painful realization because we must come to terms with our hubris and insecurity, perhaps the deep-seated fear that we are not valued or loved, and so must aggrandize ourselves to even feel we exist. Tears are appropriate in this stage because they are the embodied sign that we are feeling our complicity in the destruction of the world. They are also a hopeful sign, however, because tears further communicate that we are learning to feel empathy and compassion for the many wounds that have been inflicted on others and the world.

As we learn to identify the passions, along with what Evagrius of Pontus called the eight categories of thoughts—gluttony, fornication, avarice, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory, and pride—we can then begin the movement toward an appreciation for how one's life fits within a larger whole, and that without the depth of relationships that nurture us we could not possibly thrive. To speak of one's "fit" is to realize that we are not autonomous or self-standing beings but are constantly in relationships, receiving nurture, inspiration, and traction from others. It is also to see that as one member within a larger web, we are responsible for being ourselves sites of nurture and inspiration, all so that the webs of life can be strengthened. This amounts to turning oneself into a conduit rather than a siphon of the divine love that is constantly animating our life together. Evagrius said our goal is to move into an awareness of oneself as alive in God. When this happens, one can be said to have entered "the place of God" (Christie, 45).

To perceive a thing is "to allow it to enter into one's imaginative life so that it becomes part of the fabric of one's being” (Christie, 146). I can think of no better place for this kind of perception to develop than in a garden. Here, in the patient work of attending to soil and plants, the detailed and sympathetic imagination can develop in which the needs and the potential of creatures can eclipse the self-serving desires that otherwise rule our days. If we want to enjoy fresh raspberries we are best served by caring for the vine. To taste the fruit can then also become an occasion to marvel at the gift of such a delectable experience, an experience that takes place from beyond personal comprehension and control. Having received such a luscious gift, one can then take the next step of sharing the gift with another so that the joy of life together can increase.
There is much more that can be said about and learned from Christian contemplative practices. But we have seen enough to know that if we are going to attend to the soil and meet there the hospitable love of God at work, we are going to have to develop the disciplines and skills that make love incarnate in the world. We are going to have to learn what these monks called the art of detachment, which is the ability to quiet and subdue the ego that so desperately wants to make of another a possession or item of control or convenience. Love is the freedom that allows us to respond wholeheartedly to another without the many agendas that serve to inflate our egos. And faith is the disposition and confidence that gives love a home from which to work.

As Berry suggests in the following, the scope of the love we need to share in God's ways of being in the world may be more expansive than we first thought:

Until we understand what the land is, we are at odds with everything we touch. And to come to that understanding it is necessary, even now, to leave the regions of our conquest—the cleared fields, the towns and cities, the highways—and re-enter the woods. For only there can man encounter the silence and darkness of his own absence. Only in this silence and darkness can he recover the sense of the world's longevity, of its ability to thrive without him, of his inferiority to it and his dependence on it. Perhaps then, having heard that silence and seen that darkness, he will grow humble before the place and begin to take it in—to learn from it what it is. As its sounds come into his hearing, and its lights and colors come into his vision, and its odors come into his nostrils, then he may come into its presence as he never has before, and he will arrive in his place and will want to remain. His life will grow out of the ground like the other lives of the place, and take its place among them. He will be with them—neither ignorant of them, nor indifferent to them, nor against them—and so at last he will grow to be native-born. That is, he must re-enter the silence and darkness, and be born again (Berry, 207).

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Works Cited


**Endnotes**

1. David R. Montgomery's *Soil: The Erosion of Civilizations* is an excellent treatment of how abuse of soil leads to the destruction of civilizations past and present.

2. Sir Albert Howard's *The Soil and Health: A Study of Organic Agriculture* is the classic statement of the connection between soil and plant and animal life.

3. The contrast becomes destructive when the two forms of desire become exclusive. It is possible, and clearly desirable, for them to come together in a well-integrated life. This happens when affection for the land becomes the driving force within us. With the discipline of affection in place, the good of self and other together becomes possible because one understands that success at another's expense is mutually destructive, while care of others creates the conditions for mutual flourishing.

4. Bonhoeffer describes the attempt by humanity to live like a god in the following way: "It now lives out of its own resources, creates its own life, is its own creator; it no longer needs the Creator... Adam is no longer a creature. Adam has torn himself away from his creatureliness" (115).

5. For an accessible and entertaining examination of human attempts to master land, see Michael Pollan's *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*. Pollan observes that domestication is fraught with complication because it is a disturbance of natural ways and processes. Many of our efforts at farming and gardening create "vacuums" in which pests are uniquely suited to thrive. Or we grow fruits and vegetables that are especially delectable to all kinds of species of insect and animal. The question becomes: is there a way for people to grow food that works with ecosystem processes, learns from them, and so is not a violation of them? The answer is yes, and can be found in various forms of "natural systems" gardening and agriculture.

6. Wendell Berry observes: "If a healthy soil is full of death it is also full of life: worms, fungi, microorganisms of all kinds, for which, as for us human beings, the dead bodies of the once living are a feast. Eventually this dead matter becomes soluble, available as food for plants, and the life begins to rise up again, out of the soil into the light. Given only the health of soil, nothing that dies is dead for very long. Within this powerful economy, it seems that death occurs only for the good of life. And having followed the cycle around, we see that we have not only a description of the fundamental biological process, but also a metaphor of great beauty and power. It is impossible to contemplate the life of the soil for very long without seeing it as analogous to the life of the spirit. No less than the faithful of religion is the good farmer mindful of the persistence of life through death, the passage of energy through changing forms" (*The Unsettling of America*, 86).

7. Thomas De Zengotita describes in *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live In It* that today's marketing and technological media have the effect of replacing God with Self. In our mediated world we are made to believe that the satisfaction of our every want is the overriding good. We now live with the flattery of being constantly addressed by marketers, politicians, teachers, and preachers: "everybody who addresses you wants to please you. They want you reclining there, on the anonymous side of the screen, while they parade before you, purveyors of every conceivable blandishment, every form of pleasure, every kind of comfort and consolation, every kind of thrill, every kind of provocation—anything you want. You're the customer, after all, you're the voter, you're the reader, you're the viewer—you're the boss" (268).
A Conversation with Peter L. Berger

"How My Views Have Changed"

Gregor Thuswaldner

ON SEPTEMBER 12, 2013, THE EMINENT Austrian-American sociologist Peter Berger visited The Center for Faith and Inquiry at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts. The following is a partial transcript of an interview conducted by Gordon College's Gregor Thuswaldner.

Gregor Thuswaldner: When you started out as a sociologist of religion, you had a very different view of secularization than you do today. Can you tell us about the concept, the so-called secularization thesis, and what it's about, and why you now think it's wrong?

Peter Berger: Very good question. The best question you could ask, and we could now start a ten-hour lecture on this by me. Instead, I'll give you a four-minute summary. Secularization theory is a term that was used in the fifties and sixties by a number of social scientists and historians. Basically, it had a very simple proposition. It could be stated in one sentence. Modernity inevitably produces a decline of religion. When I started out doing sociology of religion—like two hundred years ago—everyone else had the same idea. And I more or less assumed that it was correct. It wasn’t a completely crazy assumption; there were many reasons why people said that. But it took me about twenty years to come to the conclusion that the data doesn’t support this, and other people came to the same conclusion. I would say there are now some holdouts who I respect. I like people who say something else from what the majority has to say in the field. It shows character, but most people came to the same conclusion as I did. The world today is not heavily secularized, with two interesting exceptions that have to be explained. One is geographical, it’s Western and Central Europe, and the other is an international intellectual class that is heavily secularized. Why? This is something that can be studied. It has been studied, but I won’t go into this. The rest of the world is massively religious. In some areas of the world, more religious than ever. The theory is wrong. Now, to conclude that the theory is wrong is the beginning of a new process of thinking. I came to the conclusion some years ago that to replace secularization theory—to explain religion in the modern world—we need the theory of pluralism. Modernity does not necessarily produce secularity. It necessarily produces pluralism, by which I mean the coexistence in the same society of different worldviews and value systems.

That changes the status of religion. It’s a challenge for every religious tradition. But it’s not the challenge of secularity; it’s a different challenge. The problem with modernity is not that God is dead, as some people hoped and other people feared. There are too many gods, which is a challenge, but a different one. So this, in terms of my career as a sociologist of religion, has been my major change of mind. I think it’s very useful, and in intellectual history we’ve learned something from Thomas Kuhn, from his The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, that when one theoretical paradigm collapses under the weight of evidence, it opens up the possibility of new paradigms. And it’s very exciting. That’s what I and some other
people have been much involved in in the last few years.

GT: What makes Europe different? Why is Europe not as religious as other places in the world?

PB: Well look, it's something that one should never do, and that is quote one's own works. But I have to. I did a book on this [Religious America, Secular Europe? London: Ashgate 2008] with Grace Davie, a British sociologist, who I think is one of the best sociologists of religion in the world. She is a professor at the University of Exeter, and incidentally, among other things, a lay cannon in the Church of England. (A cannon in the Anglican Church is an advisor to a bishop, and most of them are clergy, but she's a lay cannon.) After much discussion, we came to the conclusion that there were eight reasons why Europe is different from the United States. I can't go through that whole list. I would assume generally that any important social historical event doesn't have a single cause. But among the reasons why Europe is different, I would say the most important reason has to do with relations of church and state. Every major tradition in Europe—Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox—comes out of a history of being a state church. There are some exceptions—nonconformists in England—but most of them—Reformed, Lutheran, Catholic, Orthodox—were state churches. The United States started out with pluralism. Some of them didn't like this at all. The Puritans in New England hanged Quakers on Boston Common. They weren't tolerant of other religions. They had to become tolerant, because there were too many of these other people. You couldn't hang them all. You couldn't convert them all. It was, I think, a very good development. But what does a state church do in terms of people's attitudes to religion? If a church is too closely linked to the state, every time people get annoyed at the state, they get annoyed with the church that is established by the state. It's very simple. And that's not good for religion, and it's not good for the state, for different but similar reasons. That's the most important reason, I think.

GT: And when it comes to the intellectual elites?

PB: That's more complicated. It's a particular kind of elite. The top of that elite are people mostly in the social sciences and humanities. Natural scientists are not so much in that groove. The problem, I think, has to do with—again—pluralism. It has to do with the relativization of worldviews and values, which is most conscious to intellectuals who are in literature, or sociology, or anthropology, or history, rather than chemists, let's say, or physicists who are not as much affected by this relativization. I think an explanation can be made along those lines.

GT: Do you think this is going to change? Or do you anticipate that the intellectual elite will remain mainly secular? Do you see any changes going on right now?

PB: The most massive change is in the Muslim world. Turkey is a wonderful example. Turkey had a very secularist regime for many decades. When it became more democratic, all the so-called unenlightened masses started to vote, and they voted their values. But you still have the Kemalist elite, which is very secularist and very disturbed by what is going on. You get increasingly young people—college graduates, university graduates, young intellectuals—who, if they are women, appear at home with the kerchiefs, and if they are men, with the beards, to the utter consternation of their parents. So that's a significant change. So
you get now an intelligentsia in Muslim majority countries, which is heavily Islamic or even Islamist in the radical sense.

In the United States, I don't see any remarkable change. The so-called atheist thing is a thing of public relations, a creation of certain publishing houses. We can talk about the people who say they have no religious affiliation. Most of those report that they pray irregularly, that they believe in God and life after death. Basically, these are mostly people who haven't found a church they like. It is a different issue from secularization. I don't anticipate any great changes in the United States.

In Europe, it's a difficult question, and there are some hints here and there of a change toward, at least, even among intellectuals, a more tolerant attitude toward religion. And then you have a very important factor, which is immigration. Take Sweden, which is a kind of paradise for secularism. These secular Swedes who felt that their worldview was absolutely obvious suddenly are confronted with African Pentecostals, with Muslims, and this is having some effect on the indigenous white population of the country. This may change in Europe. There are no dramatic changes happening.

GT: Around twenty years ago, the historian Mark Noll, wrote a book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* [1994]. Back then, in the mid-nineties, he complained that there was not much of an Evangelical mind, but I think you could make the argument that especially in the last twenty years, things have changed quite a bit, especially among Evangelicals... I wouldn't call it necessarily a revival, even though that would be a typical evangelical word to use, but I think there has been an intellectual renewal. Do you think that will be visible on a much larger scale at some point?

PB: Yes, probably not dramatically, but significantly. This is not my community. I'm evangelisch but not evangelical. I usually describe myself as incurably Lutheran, but I'm very comfortable with Evangelicals. And between Evangelicals and Mainline Protestants, I prefer Evangelicals for reasons theologically. But speaking as a sociologist, you point at something which is very interesting, which is a development in recent decades of a self-conscious Evangelical intelligentsia. Not only in institutions like this, and there's a network of these institutions across the country with some very significant people. You mentioned Mark Noll. He is respected not just by Evangelicals, but as a historian. But [people like this are] also dispersed in other situations, not just Christian colleges. That's a significant change. By the way, an interesting parallel is what happened to Jews in the 1930s, when places like Harvard and Princeton that were closed to Jews suddenly had an influx of very bright, ambitious, young Jewish professors and students, graduate students. Something similar is happening here, I think. These young, bright Evangelicals are invading old fortresses like Harvard or Princeton. The interesting question is how will this affect the Evangelical community, as it becomes more, well, educated, more respected, less marginal. It must have been about twenty years ago when James Hunter wrote this book [James Davison Hunter. *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987] in which he predicted that Evangelicals in another generation or so would become like other Protestants, as boring as Congregationalists let's say. That has not happened, at least not yet. So prediction is very dangerous. What I would predict is there will be some effect of this, and there are some examples where Evangelicalism collided with general views of what the world is like. Evolution is an obvious example. But that so far as yet has not influenced the core of the Evangelical faith, and I don't see this happening, yet. The future, one never knows.

GT: Let's talk about Mainline Protestantism. In *The Sacred Canopy* [1967], you say that Protestantism has significantly contributed to the secularization of the West. There's a quote actually in the book that says, "At the risk of some simplification, it can be said that Protestantism divested itself as much as possible from the three most ancient and most powerful concomitants of the sacred—mystery, miracle, and magic. This process has been aptly caught in the phrase, 'disenchantment of the world...' The Protestant believer no longer lives in the world ongoingly penetrated by sacred beings and forces." Can you elaborate on that, how
Protestantism might have contributed to secularization?

PB: An unoriginal idea. This was Max Weber. You quoted the "disenchantment of the world." Yes, there's something to that, and if you're particular, Protestantism cannot be understood except against the Catholic background from which it came. And Catholicism, certainly even today, has more mystery, magic, and miracle than most Protestant denominations. That's true. It's not true, for example, when you talk about Pentecostals, which is a most rapidly exploding form of Protestantism. And to some extent, it isn't even true of most Evangelicals. So I would be more careful now in formulating this.

GT: Would you say this would be true for Mainline Protestantism?

PB: No. And that is, I would say, a significant difference, and incidentally, since this is a Christian college, I don't mind making theological statements. (At my age, I can say anything, what do I care?) I think that Evangelicals so far have resisted what has been I think the main sin—I wouldn't call it a sin—the main mistake of Mainline Protestantism, which is to replace the core of the Gospel, which has to do with the cosmic redefinition of reality, with either politics or psychology or a kind of vague morality, which is usually something that most people would certainly approve of: don't be nasty to little old ladies if they slip in the gutter. Okay, fine. But again, that's not what the Gospel is about. And that is something that Evangelicals have retained, and I think, and I hope, will continue to retain.

GT: What have been some of the biggest surprises for you when it comes to the intersection of religion and society when you look back on the last five decades or so? Have there been developments that you didn't anticipate?

PB: Well, I would say if you go back a few decades, my main surprise is that I discovered Pentecostalism as a significant sociological problem. It's not a religious format that particularly appeals to me, but as a sociologist I find it enormously significant. And our research center has called it "inner secularization." Either it becomes politicized: What is Christianity all about? It's some political program, which tends to be left of center, now it could just as well be right of center. That's distortion. Or it becomes psychologized: it has to do with well-being and self-realization, Norman Vincent Peale type stuff. Or a kind of vague morality, which is usually something that most people would certainly approve of: don't be
done a number of studies. In fact, we pioneered in the study of Pentecostalism. We first supported the work of David Martin, another British sociologist, sort of the Dean of Sociology of Pentecostalism now. He’s my generation. He still has interesting things to say. That’s been a big surprise.

GT: Can you elaborate on the surprise a little bit? What was so surprising about that particular religious group?

PB: Its size and the rate of growth. I would say Pentecostalism is the fastest growing religious movement in history. I mean, the Pentecostal core phenomenon—speaking in tongues, spiritual healing, miracles, exorcism—have been around for many years. Modern Pentecostalism, as most historians would agree, dates from the beginning of the twentieth century. The crucial event was the so-called Azusa Street Revival in 1906, when a one-eyed, black Baptist preacher came from Kansas to Los Angeles and started preaching in an abandoned stable on Azusa Street in a slum. He must have been quite a character, and within a few months, he... managed by his preaching to bring together a congregation that was interracial, which was very unusual for California. And it spread from there, first to other places in the United States and then abroad. The Pew Research Center a few years ago did a study on world Pentecostalism. These figures are very iffy, but it’s a very solidly based study. They estimated about 600 million Pentecostals in the world today. That is amazing. And this I didn’t know when I started out. I knew what Pentecostalism was. I’d come across it here and there, but the size of the phenomenon, I didn’t know. And also, its enormous influence, economically and politically, especially of course in the Global South. In the United States, it’s a little different. It’s been around a long time. It’s not as important, but in Black Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia, it’s terribly important. I didn’t know this until later.

GT: You’ve written so many books; it’s really hard to keep track. There’s one book that fascinated me that came out just a couple of years ago on fundamentalism and relativism [Peter Berger and Anton Zijderveld. In Praise of Doubt. New York: Harper One, 2009] and finding a different position, a middle position between the two extremes. How do you explain that both fundamentalism and relativism are so popular in the twenty-first century?

PB: I would say they are two sides of the same coin. What pluralism brings about in the area of religion is that in fewer and fewer places in the world there is one religious tradition which is taken for granted as a sort of hegemonic or monopoly status in society. So let’s just say if you lived in a Tyrolean village two hundred years ago, to be a Catholic was as natural as if you had blond hair or red hair. That is very difficult now to find in the world. You have to go into the center of Amazonia or Central Africa to find such tribes. And even in very remote areas, you find all kinds of pluralism. I could give you many colorful examples.

What does this mean for the individual? It means that instead of the religion into which he or she was born being self-evidently true, now you have to make choices. You can be this or you can be that, and even if you choose a very conservative version of your own tradition, say a very conservative kind of Catholicism, you’ve made that choice and that by implication means that you could make a different choice tomorrow. It becomes more precarious. Now, many people can live with this. I have no particular problem with this frankly, but some people find this very unsettling, and one can understand this. Human beings want some certainty in life. Both relativism and fundamentalism have ways of reducing that anxiety. The message of any fundamentalist movement—and the secular fundamentalisms too, not just religious fundamentalisms—to its potential recruits is, “Come and join us. We’ll give you what you always wanted: certainty. You’ll know what the world is like. You’ll know who you are. You’ll learn how to live. We’ll teach you.” Relativism embraces the uncertainty, and says, “Don’t worry that you don’t know what is true and what is right and what is wrong. There are no objective standards. Everything is relative. And basically, you decide your own worldview.” That is, in a way, the opposite of fundamentalism, but it
has the same psychological function. The middle ground is that you don’t give way to the fundamentalist promise, whatever it may be—political, religious, whatever. You accept the fact that there are many uncertainties in the world. And on the other hand, you don’t accept the proposition that we don’t know at all what is true or what is right or wrong. That is a middle position, which I would say is not that unusual—and there are millions of people in the world, and I’m being optimistic again, but I think it’s correct—who manage this in their own lives....

GT: What I like about that particular book is that you invited colleagues from different traditions to talk about how they would formulate their own middle ground. I recently had a conversation with a German Catholic theologian, who was shaking his head when I mentioned to him that the denominational boundaries are breaking down in the United States, that one could grow up Baptist, attend a Mennonite college, become a member of a Nazarene church, marry a Reformed person, and send their kids to an Episcopalian school. This may be a little bit of an exaggeration, but maybe it is not too far from reality. How is it possible that denominational boundaries and the different theological frameworks they’re supposed to provide seem to have lost their relevance? Was that foreseeable fifty years ago?

PB: It was beginning then, and I think one reason is that the dogmatic formulations of different religious traditions are still meaningful in describing in broad outlines what the tradition is still about, but professional theologians take it much more seriously than most people in the pews. Take a very concrete example. A friend of mine who is a Lutheran theologian was very involved in this. It took several years. They had a committee of theologians that tried to reconcile Lutheran and Roman Catholic views of justification. And after years of negotiation—I’m sure in comfortable hotels in Germany or Switzerland or wherever—they arrived at a formula both sides could accept. Most people, lay people couldn’t care less. They didn’t know what the original dogmatic formulations were, and they were not concerned about finding compromises. In a nasty moment, I called many such negotiations “border negotiations between nonexistent countries.” Let me give another example, not to talk all the time about Lutherans. There’s an interesting Catholic/Orthodox dialogue going on, again between theologians. And some of them have agreed that basically they agree on so many things. They’re really the same. Leave out the political aspect of this, but even from the point of view of the average believer, if you spend ten minutes at the Divine Liturgy in an Orthodox church and ten minutes in a Roman Catholic mass, you understand these are totally different pieties. And whatever the theologians have decided is the same, the little old babushka who kisses the icon knows that what she does is different from the Catholics down the road. So I think in answer to your question, the denominational divisions basically define theology, and for most lay people, the theological distinctions are not terribly real.


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Eggs
A Short History of Infertility and Ducks
Kirsten Eve Beachy

When you are a granola Mennonite couple just getting started on a little homestead, free stuff is gold. So when my father-in-law called us a few days before the 2008 Virginia Mennonite Relief sale and asked, “You want some ducks?” we said, “Of course,” arranged to pick them up at the sale, then hurried to research Muscovy ducks.

A few words first for the uninitiated about our relief sale: thousands of Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley—from bonnet-wearing to Bible-thumping to Global Village to granola to college students—gather for a weekend of eating homemade donuts, potato chips, and Brunswick stew, watching church people grind cornmeal and churn ice cream, purchasing apples and grapes, and participating in conspicuous generosity at an enormous quilt auction, all to raise money for Mennonite Central Committee, a global relief organization.

After stuffing ourselves with pancakes for the good of the world, we went out to my father-in-law’s truck to see the birds, who sat placidly in a wire cage, dipping their beaks into a coffee can of water. Stella was a blue-eyed white duck with a demure gray cape and a bandit mask of red skin. Black-and-white Stanley was larger and had a fright mask that covered his entire head in red knobs and warts. These caruncles are supposed to be very handsome—to ducks. A child visiting us sometime later had another opinion: “It looks like his brain is on his head.”

Muscovy ducks are perching birds with talons at the ends of their webbed feet. They fly, but won’t fly away. They enjoy water, but just need a pan, not a pond. They don’t quack—they just whisper and huff, and they are close enough to their wild roots to brood and hatch their own ducklings. Muscovies seemed right for us—low-maintenance, no-nonsense, quiet-in-the-land birds. A good match for a down-to-earth woman like me.

I never worried about my weight or my looks, beyond learning that long and straight was the easiest style for my hair. I liked natural fibers, knew how to wear makeup but rarely did, didn’t have cramps, hardly ever had headaches, slept through the night, would eat anything (but didn’t keep that processed crap around the house), and often found myself to be the more rational, less emotional half in my marriage with Jason. I balanced the checkbook and paid the bills, and my favorite color was brown.

I wore my good health like a virtue, without any conscious sense of entitlement. When we decided, in early 2009—the same time the ducks began nesting—that it was time to grace the world with our offspring, I was comfortably certain that the first would arrive soon, though I had no illusions about instant pregnancy. I stumbled into—and then quickly out of—the obsessive mommy-wannabe Internet forums:

OMG! DH and I just started TTC, did the BD as soon as I had an OPK+, now I’m in the 2WW and I’m soooo nervous!! My sister had to have IVF with ICSI, and it was sooo expensive, but she has three beautiful babies so it was sooo worth it!! Do you think I should go on Clomid? This is probably TMI, but for the past couple days I’ve had this
discharge that's kind of like rubber cement, but not really, plus a bad headache right now. Do you think I could be PG?? Plz answer ASAP!!

It was the era of the Octomom. I rolled my eyes and powered down the computer. Some of the advice out there conflicted anyway: Don't consult a doctor unless you've tried for six months without success. Some perfectly normal couples take two years to get pregnant. Consult a fertility specialist before you ever try. I decided to do what I do best in regards to the medical establishment: nothing. I wasn't even thirty yet. I'd find my health in our weedy garden—with a few B vitamins and folic acid thrown in for good measure.

We got down to the fun part.

Stanley and Stella started going at it as soon as the days began to lengthen. Chicken mating, a modest coital kiss, left me wholly unprepared for what I saw when Stanley and Stella did the deed.

Drakes are among the few birds endowed with a real penis. In a Muscovy, the organ is cork-screw shaped and can be as long as sixteen inches when unfurled from its counterclockwise spiral. They have been in an evolutionary arms race with the female ducks, who have developed clockwise reproductive tracts to stymie unwelcome suitors. As Stanley and Stella demonstrated, a drake is large enough to flatten a duck to the grass. From the amount of necking my ducks engaged in before mating, Stella seemed pleased to be made into a rug. Afterward, as she went off to bathe and Stanley splashed water on his back in post-coital celebration, his dangling phallus still retracting slowly, the proof of their fertility remained hidden in her unhatched eggs.

After she began to brood on the eggs, I spent too much time online trying to determine whether they would hatch and finally, following the guidelines of a development paper from Papua New Guinea, measured the eggs during one of Stella's bathing breaks, wrapping them in a bit of white eyelet ribbon suitable for baby showers. They were large enough to be viable, a relief, but then Stella sometimes had trouble keeping the eggs warm. I'd come home from work to find she'd left the pen but couldn't figure out how to fly back in. As she marched around the enclosure whistling her concern, the eggs cooled.

After a few months of hoping for our own babies, I did take a peek at the classic Taking Charge of Your Fertility. A granola Mennonite like me can get on board with do-it-yourself fertility tracking with a combination of charts, thermometers, and divination over secretions and anatomical details. She invests in only enough ovulation prediction kits to confirm her theories. For me, everything was working well, like clockwork.

A granola Mennonite would consider a grandmother's prayers to be a welcome ingredient for conception, but would never tell her grandmothers, mother, or mother-in-law that she was hoping to conceive. (That wouldn't matter; they would have been praying for grandbabies since the wedding.) And she might, in a fit of mysticism, go out back to the creek, Briery Branch, to invite the spirit of her child to come from the land and the flowing water of the place, and when she found herself further downstream—say the Dry River in Bridgewater—she might fancy that her child's spirit had drifted past last month, but she would catch it here. If not here, today, then next month as the Shenandoah ran through Harpers Ferry, or later in the summer at the Chesapeake Bay, or perhaps in the fall at the Atlantic Ocean.

I eventually gave up on the spirit baby—until much later when I learned to repeat the mantra Spirit baby in the back of the car... spirit baby in the back of the car while I drove, in order to combat one of the side effects of the fertility drugs, aggressive driving. But that would be much later. A granola Mennonite isn't a fan of drugs of any sort, and fertility drugs sound like something for high maintenance people. A granola Mennonite takes...
what comes. A granola Mennonite finds satisfaction in her childfree life.

After all, there were ducklings in the world. After two slow days of hatching, six ducklings emerged, and Stella abandoned the nest. It was far from a perfect hatch, with quite a few unbroken eggs left. Stanley, banished from the pen, waited outside the chicken wire while Stella showed him the new brood. The scene looked like a prison visit. The babies were wobbly on their little webbed feet and collapsed quickly, taking naps under her wings.

One egg didn’t have time to hatch. A little bill jabbed frantically at the shell, peeping, still trying to enlarge its window. I tucked the egg in my jacket pocket to take inside to an old incubator. The helpless egg went quiet. Ducklings help each other hatch, peeping encouragement and sometimes pecking at the shell. I thought this one might be lonely, so I queued up the Dresden Philharmonic and duckling number seven began to sing along.

After a whole day of music, she managed to hatch: Chopin piano études, Eine kleine Nachtmusik, a Baroque mixed disc, twice. When the music stopped, the chick grew quiet—when I put on a new disc, she cheeped and struggled against the shell. Late in the day, she pushed off the top of the egg and flailed free. But she died by morning, a trifling thing, no more than a scrap of dandelion fluff.

It was nothing to hollow a hole in the turf at the outside corner of the poultry yard, to tuck her in and fold the grass back over. Perhaps I should have followed Stella’s lead. Perhaps I should have left the duckling in its shell, in the down-lined nest and the quiet darkness.

I told the story of the duckling who lived a short life of determination and music a few months later at a bonfire where friends remembered a daughter who died in her first year. Any baby takes care and love, but the ones who have the fiercest struggles—who need all we can give, who leave us in the end—change our hearts in violent ways. I was not ready for this, I thought. No one could be ready for this.

Within a couple summers, Stella had hatched dozens of ducklings, and her children and grandchildren were brooding new generations of ducks. Up to our ears in Muscovies, we butchered some, and sold others each fall. True to form, I was the one who wrote the names of the ducks on the freezer bags, Jason the one who said, “no... please, no.” With no sign of human offspring, we submitted to simple tests. It was still just a matter of weeks or months, I believed—and if there actually was any problem, it wouldn’t be mine.

We both looked good. Some of our numbers weren’t quite in the normal range, but no one, not even studies I found through the infallible Google Scholar, could tell us whether that mattered. We added on more vitamins, decongestants, and some dubious folk wisdom from the Internet.

Eventually, I followed up on my midwife’s referral for an HSG to confirm that my fallopian tubes were open. “Oh,” said the technician. “You’re here for the infertility work-up.”

I wasn’t ready to use that term. Some wicks are just slower to catch fire, I told myself while he pumped dye through my cervix. Normal fertility is sometimes defined as the ability to conceive within two years, and by that definition I still had a few months left.

“Perfectly normal,” said the radiologist, showing me the dye flowing through my open tubes on the monitor.

“Where’s your husband?” asked the nurse.

I stayed away from physicians for six more months, then took Jason with me to appointments. I didn’t mind the duck-billed speculum, but it was nice to have a hand to hold when that long metal tenaculum clamped down inside my privates.
Meanwhile, this granola Mennonite learned and grew. She taught writing. She edited an anthology about Mennonite martyrs. She planned a writing conference. She also nurtured. I taught people to walk. My grandfather, in assisted living, stumbled on his feet and wasn’t allowed to leave his chair by himself, but together we could roam the halls, he with his walker, I with my wheelchair, offering encouragement. One duckling hatched with a curled foot. I worked to straighten it out. This delicate work, taping the foot of a struggling duckling to a little plastic shoe each morning, felt like grace—a new chance to save a duckling—or perhaps make a bargain with the God who watches over sparrows.

My mother says I was born with my legs crossed and curled, and I remember walking across an examining room while a pediatrician watched my toed-in walk. “She’ll probably grow out of it,” he said. “A brace is psychologically difficult.” I like this philosophy of medicine, that time is a healer, that given enough space the organism will grow beyond its disorder.

Most first-line treatments for unexplained infertility include ovarian stimulation, which carries with it a high risk of twins or multiples—ten to thirty percent, depending on the drugs used. To me, it was a terrifying possibility. I was no duck; one baby at a time was more than enough. When we found ourselves at last in a specialist’s office, he didn’t pressure me to try these procedures, but neither did he emphasize the very real risk of multiples when he laid out possible treatments.

We decided to stick with “expectant waiting”—an accepted form of treatment for unexplained infertility, but one that was waning in effectiveness as we approached the three-year mark and our monthly odds of conception kept dropping, based on population studies. We considered further diagnostic steps. The specialist suggested that I might have endometriosis. The only way to know for sure was via a laparoscopy, minor abdominal surgery, but I couldn’t pick up the phone to schedule one.

The last time I tried to assist with a hatch, Stella hurled herself at me, scattering ducklings, her bill lashing, and I drew back a moment too late. Her perspective on intervention was as clear as the bruise darkening on my forearm. The duckling had caught its wing in the process of hatching, and I chipped away enough of the egg that the little creature could work itself free. Stella stood protectively over him while he pushed his way out. But he remained weak and didn’t survive the next day’s heat wave. I resolved that forevermore, I would let hatches happen naturally for the ducks.

When they could hatch eggs, that is. One duck, Delores, kept building her nests in a rocky spot under the yucca plant. One after another, the eggs would crack, and in late summer her nest would be a stinking mess. Things didn’t go perfectly for the drakes, either. Stanley’s impressive phallic prolapsed and we had to separate him from the other birds for months while the long swollen end of it dried up and fell off.

All this time, many of my friends were having babies, and I attended blessingways, circles of women who offer support to the expectant mother. At each of them we introduced ourselves, naming our mothers and their mothers. It was a reminder that we were part of an unbroken line of women who gave birth. With my gathered friends I felt in touch with generations of women who were mothers and then, to my surprise, with all of the rest, the women who waited and the women...
who stopped waiting, or chose not to wait. There's a long tradition of them, starting with the Biblical stories of Hannah and Sarah straight on down to maiden aunts of family legends, friends who carry on after a miscarriage, acquaintances without Fallopian tubes, one who tried in vitro fertilization unsuccessfully for years, one whose partner refuses to have children, some who prefer other ways to be generative.

In the bathroom at work, I chatted with a mother who dealt with infertility for years. She told me about her own surgeries and wished me well. Her embrace gave me the courage I needed to go home, pick up the phone, and finally schedule that laparoscopy.

I came home from the pre-operative appointment to find five ducklings missing from the black duck's nest. We searched the weeds all through the nursery enclosure, but feared the worst. Gray Julia sat calmly on her nest of waiting eggs. The cat yawned when I asked whether he ate the ducklings, showing off his fangs. I moved the mother and her remaining brood to a cat-proof pen. Only a few days later did I discover Julia, who should have been on her own eggs for another two weeks, wandering through the potato patch making mother-duck whistles, a handful of stolen ducklings behind her.

I apologized to the cat for doubting him and then, for simplicity's sake, returned the ducklings to their original flock. It was too late for Julia to return to her own nest. The mothering hormones were pumping and she wanted babies. She staked out a pen full of brood, thinking she might pick a few ducklings out of this larger flock, pacing the fence and whistling to them. OMG! I found some ducklings and think they like me, do you think it would be okay to take them? Plz answer ASAP!!

I was spared that precise sort of desperation. I never understood the attraction to babies. It was easy to be around my friends who are mothers of infants; I only grew wistful when watching older children. Actually, I Facebook- and blog-stalked a few families, really fine granola Mennonite types with good-sized broods of kids, building tree-houses and gingerbread lighthouses; I clicked through every single picture in the album of that family trip to Europe. One girl in particular stood out. With her long brown hair and coltish confidence, she might have been mine. Simply put, I fell in love. If I hadn't, I could have stopped right there, taken what came—or didn't—like a good granola Mennonite, waiting for the universe to call me some day and say, “Hey, you want some kids?”

Our children would not come to us freely, but I needed to meet them. I already loved them. I wasn't quite putty in the hands of the doctors, but in time I became ready to submit to needles and invest in long woolly socks to cut the chill of the stirrups. I would decide a baby was worth more than a Prius, even if they would cost the same. I would decide, eventually, that twins were a risk worth taking. I would take it slowly, since my endometriosis turned out to be mild—a non-issue—and my eggs were in good condition. I would advocate for better insurance coverage. I would end up posting regularly on an infertility forum online. I would learn to view treatment as a right and a privilege, a justice issue, and would eventually share our story in my community, but I would still ascend the ladder of interventions one reluctant rung at a time. It would take a long while, these first awkward steps in the work of mothering, the long process of letting go.

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MEDITATION ON MATTER

Doesn't it matter that you have existed all of your life?

All my life I've been matter. Big news, right? This coffee, still too hot to drink. The music—tuneful disruption

of the ether, lyric, maybe apocryphal, not at all apocalyptic.
Sticky pine cone, snake-tangle of cords, paperbacks titled

American Earth, Derrida and Negative Theology, and My Brother Is Getting Arrested Again: matter, matter, matter. It all

matters, or so I must believe. But how to reckon, sort, articulate? When I say None of this is true, mark A or B.

When I say Ready, steady, get in your stance, but don't jump the gun. Who can say this matters, this does not,

yellow buses wait for their children and the sun has broken loose again and liquid guitar runs shiver and vanish

like wind in poplars, sun on the skitter pond, swifts banking and swooping through their high neighborhoods, all this

matter and all so luscious, heaped and sorted and tinkered into shape and form and sound, boys and girls on the sidewalk

with bookbags and trumpets, school over and the cookie jar full.

Jeff Gundy
Practicing Restraint as Lenten Discipline

David Lott

Practicing Lenten disciplines has always been one of those spiritual activities from which I've shied away. Too often, when hearing friends tell me what they're "giving up for Lent," their intended sacrifices sound to me more like religiously shaded New Year's resolutions than genuine vehicles for self-reflection, much less avenues for building intimacy with the divine through prayer and meditation. Certainly, stubborn bad habits can block one's spiritual development, so there is merit in any concentrated effort to free oneself of such debilitating patterns, whether it ensues on January 1, Ash Wednesday, or any other day. It is just that our "fasts," whether we give up chocolate or take a break from Facebook for the forty days of Lent, don't always obviously connect with following Christ on his journey to the cross. Indeed, one might even say that many of our Lenten disciplines trivialize that larger practice and the theology that stands behind it.

The problem, perhaps, is that sacrifice does not necessarily signal actual practice. We place too much emphasis on what we are sacrificing, and direct too little attention to that which we may take up instead. After all, through our Lenten fasts, we are not simply creating a void that God then enters and magically fills. Rather, Lent calls us to take up something new into the space we have created through our letting go, most often through prayer and acts of charity. It beckons us to a certain self-forgetfulness, to seek something—someone—outside ourselves. Otherwise, these Lenten disciplines may simply become another form of self-indulgence: a demonstration of the strength of one's own willpower rather than a true spiritual fast. Self-examination need not demand self-centeredness; instead, it can be an opportunity to expand our vision, to become more aware of our context and environment.

Skeptic though I am, during this past Lent I did participate in a spiritual discipline of sorts. I was immersed at the time in a large editorial project, reading through all of the books written by the theologian Sallie McFague for the purpose of selecting excerpts that I would then organize into a volume of collected readings. As a way of more deeply engaging with and understanding her theological project, I decided that during Lent I would make a concentrated effort to read the weekly lectionary texts through the lens of her thought. Such a project meant that I both let go of my usual (and often undisciplined) ways of reading and thinking about biblical texts—my Lenten sacrifice—and attempted to read those texts in this new way, shaped by the thought and approach of a specific theologian—my Lenten practice.

At first glance, McFague is not the likeliest of candidates to guide such Lenten reading. While she identifies as a Christian theologian as well as an Episcopalian, her work does not especially engage the work of churches and traditional practice. Indeed, she has said that she is more spiritually engaged and nurtured by hiking in nature than by participating in worship. But my research into her collected works revealed much that encouraged me to follow her in my Lenten practice. I found that in her earliest books, McFague examines the metaphorical aspects of theological language and offers a provocative biblical hermeneutic that is especially helpful in reading Jesus' parables as extended metaphors. We were then in lectionary Year C, when the parables in Luke's Gospel dominate the Lenten Sunday texts, and reading them through McFague's lens proved to be an excellent spiritual practice. Indeed, her first major book, Speaking in Parables (1975), analyzes several of those very parables that appear during Lent. And so, Sallie McFague became my spiritual guide during Lent 2013.
Reading more deeply in McFague's work I came to realize that her biblical hermeneutic is not the only way in which her theological thought might help Christians who are seeking new or different ways to engage in Lenten practices. Indeed, with each new book she has become increasingly interested in practice, and not simply theory. Coming to the forefront in her later books, as a logical extension of her metaphorical theology, are not only deepening ecological concerns but also a pointed critique of economic growth models that exacerbate environmental degradation and the suffering of all creation. These issues prompt her to ask how we might live “in God,” faced with the twin crises of ecological disaster and economic injustice.

McFague’s most recent book, Blessed Are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint (2013), presents us with perhaps her most provocative ideas for rethinking how we might engage in Lenten fasts through ways that benefit not just our relationships with the divine but all of creation. McFague elaborates here on what she refers to as “kenotic theology,” a term she introduced in her previous book, A New Climate for Theology (2008). Speaking of kenosis—self-emptying—she draws from Philippians 2:5–8: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” For McFague, this idea of self-emptying, exemplified not only in Jesus but in numerous saints and disciples over the centuries (she explores especially the lives of John Woolman, Simone Weil, and Dorothy Day), “suggests an ethic for our time, a time that is characterized by climate change and financial chaos” (Blessed, 6).

Of course, to assume an entire ethic based on the concept of kenosis as a Lenten practice would be an unreasonable expectation; doing so would require of most people a wholesale overhaul of their ways of looking at the world, which can hardly be accomplished over the course of forty days! But that should not prevent us from using the Lenten season as a time to explore what it might mean to begin to adopt a kenotic theology. As McFague says of this theological approach,

Since its primary source is personal stories that read the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, its central content is self-emptying for others, ranging from sharing food and healing bodies to the sacrifice of one’s own body on a cross, the ultimate gift of the self so that others might have new, abundant life.... It is a countercultural story, calling on our “wild space” to imagine a different way to live in the world, one at odds with our economic, governmental, and often religious interpretations of the good life.... What we see in the stories of Woolman, Weil, and Day—not to mention Jesus—is paradigmatic but not programmatic. (Blessed, 173–74)

By resisting a programmatic understanding, McFague opens the door to our imagining this different way of living in the world, which is an ideal practice during the “wild space” of Lent. And her vision of what kenotic living might look like is indeed different from the stereotypes of asceticism that mark most discussion of Christian practices of self-denial:

Kenosis manifests itself in attitudes of curiosity, delight, interest, and openness about the world in which we have been mysteriously “set down” and left to figure what to do.... Kenosis is not sackcloth and ashes, depriving the self of all worldly goods and pleasures for personal purification or salvation; rather, it is a hardheaded, sober analysis of the way things are; that is, the recognition that “something other than oneself is real” and not only deserves space but requires and demands it as well. (Blessed, 144–45)

Curiosity, delight, interest, and openness—these are hardly words that we associate with Lenten practices of discipline and sacrifice. But they do characterize the ways that McFague has
long asserted we should relate to the rest of creation. Nor are they inconsistent with her call to a “hardheaded, sober analysis of the way things are”; indeed, for McFague, proper appreciation and respect for the other proceeds from this very sort of regard. In Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature (1997), she asserts that “Christian practice, loving God and neighbor as subjects, as worthy of our love in and of themselves, should be extended to nature” (1). She expands on this thesis by contrasting the “arrogant eye,” which looks upon others and nature as objects to be dominated and controlled, with the “loving eye,” which understands our relationship with nature in terms of a “subject-subjects” model. This can be done by regarding nature with a spirit of appreciation, seeing it “as it is.”

Interestingly, in her next book, Life Abundant (2001), McFague declares her previous understanding inadequate: she concludes that loving nature is not enough when we continue to live consumerist lifestyles that express “greed, indifference, and denial.” She continues, “We North American middle-class Christians need to live differently in order to love nature, and to live differently we need to think differently—especially about ourselves and who we are in the scheme of things... [meaning] the largely unconscious picture of who we are that is the silent partner in all our behavior and decisions” (xi). This is surely the sort of self-reflection to which Lent calls us. Yet, what saves McFague’s call to think differently from generating the usual sort of blasé Lenten disciplinary practices is her passionate appeal to the planet’s well-being and a rigorous critique of prevailing models of economic growth and wealth maximization that reduce humans to consumers and make the rest of creation objects for our consumption.

Her title Blessed Are the Consumers, then, is tinged with no small amount of irony, in that it doesn’t endorse unfettered consumerism, but points instead to the opportunities that we consumers have to live kenotically—which is also what characterizes God’s relationship with the world. As she writes, “The issue of how to live well has become one of how to change from how we are living now to a different way” (Blessed, xi). We need to practice restraint so that others might have more—particularly those who already are wanting for the basics of life or whose lives or well-being are threatened by our lack of restraint. This means embracing a radical theology of incarnation:

A deeply incarnational understanding of Christianity claims that at every stage—who God is, what creation is, who we are, and how we should live—the focus is on embodiment. Jesus gives himself in his life and message of empathetic love to others, gives his body on the cross in solidarity with all who suffer, and thus points to God as the divine giver par excellence, whose being is composed of persons, as movements of interweaving love. Likewise, creation is the pulling in of the divine self to allow space for others to live fully embodied, physical lives, and Christian discipleship is following the pattern we find in Jesus’ life and in the Trinity of limitation, restraint, self-sacrifice of one’s own body that other bodies might flourish. (Blessed, 201–202)

So, what does this mean for contemporary Lenten practice? Again, McFague does not offer programmatic or prescriptive solutions, always wary that we may become overwhelmed by the myriad needs; never being able to do enough, we are apt to do nothing. And indeed, her theological vision is so large—this article only begins to touch on the range of her provocative ideas—it is hard to know how to begin to embrace and enact it, no matter how compellingly she urges us toward it. But again, Lent does give us the opportunity to try on some different ways of thinking that can translate to new forms of practice. So, for starters, we might adopt her so-called house rules for living on planet Earth as a general guide for Lenten practice: “Take only your share; clean up after yourself; and leave the house in good condition for others” (Blessed, 209). This might mean that, rather than thinking of restraint in terms of our own fasting from certain foods or habits, we can extend the idea of restraint to resisting consumer urges that contribute to the denigration of the earth and oppression of others.
She suggests that rather than just share food with others, we can be food for others by engaging in acts of voluntary poverty: “We are called to lives of simplicity, restraint, moving way down on the index of material comfort so that others may have their fair share” (Blessed, 209).

Finally, our loving attention to the Earth and its inhabitants, expressed in acts of kenotic self-giving, can be a way of attending to the divine or demonstrating our devotion to God insofar as we embrace McFague’s understanding of the Earth as God’s body. As she writes, “in this theological paradigm, God is always incarnate, always bound to the world as its lover, as close to it as we are to our own bodies, and concerned before all else to see that the body, God’s world, flourishes” (Blessed, 172). Lent, then, can be a time to re-engage the world in a new way, and to rethink how we live in God’s image, an image of restraint and self-giving. In Blessed Are the Consumers, as in all her published work, McFague issues a bracing clarion call to Christians for a new kind of Lenten fast, one in which we take the world into ourselves:

We must love nature as it is: physical, needy, interdependent, vulnerable. If we find God in the world, then we have set the context, the place, where we meet God. This perspective militates against an individualistic, spiritual relationship between God and the soul. It unites mystical spirituality—our personal relationship to God with the world—with the needy body, which must have the basics for flourishing. Finding God in the world means as well that our use of energy becomes important, for nature and its many creatures can only live by energy. Hence, mundane things like transportation, heating and cooling systems, concrete for buildings and roads, food production (whether local or brought from afar) become the way we love God. Loving God and sharing energy are one and the same thing. This kind of spirituality leads not only to delight and joy in the beauty of the world but also to kenosis, limitation, self-restraint, ecological economics, a sense of finitude, the need to share space, as we come to realize who we are in the scheme of things. (Blessed, 19–20)

Writing this as we approach Lent 2014, I must be honest and say that I am still unsure of what, if any, Lenten discipline I might take on this year, much less whether it might be informed by the work of Sallie McFague. Certainly, I could do more to cultivate the “loving eye” and tame my “arrogant eye,” as I look upon others and all of creation. I could take my practices of restraint beyond the New Year’s resolution level (portion control!) to helping ensure that others around me have enough. Or I could find yet another writer whose works might help me to read the Lenten texts anew. But having immersed myself in McFague’s writings, I know there is a wealth of unexpected wisdom there on which we all can draw so as to live into McFague’s aforementioned house rules, not only in Lent, but throughout every season of life. ♦

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Works Cited


When in Rome (or Slugged by Nuns)

Thomas C. Willadsen

Every year, one of the local Roman Catholic parishes in our town invites other Christians to their Tenebrae service, on Palm Sunday in the evening. They really do a good job with this service. It is powerful and emotionally rich. The parish administrator sends a form letter to Protestant clergy asking us to promote the service and inviting us either to do a reading or share a reflection.

This year the invitation arrived on a bad day. I did not take the letter as it was intended, as an open, sincere invitation to worship together on an occasion when it is allowed by their tradition. I took it as a half-hearted attempt to convince themselves that they are open, broad-minded, and inclusive. My efforts along the same line have been uniformly ignored by my Roman Catholic colleagues, and I didn't feel inclined to slip through the door they left cracked open for Protestants. My meds kicked in a few hours later, and I realized that no one would notice if I refused to participate as a protest [hmm “protest”... “Protestant,” coincidence?] and I would cede the moral high ground to them if I refused the invitation. I signed up to give a reflection.

A few weeks later, an email informed me that I would be reflecting on readings seven and eight. The former was Jesus crying out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This reading was followed by “stripitus.” I went to my dictionary; the term did not appear there. I went to the Internet and found all kinds of suggestions for making this dramatic, crashing noise. Some of which, the posters admitted, worked better in empty sanctuaries than those filled with worshippers. This is the kind of thing that Protestants aren't good at. I admit it and confess it myself. I write good sermons and conduct faithful liturgy, but rarely give attention to any other feature of the worship experience. Once someone asked me if I noticed the morning’s flowers, and I replied, “I don’t see them unless I knock them over.”

The stripitus following the seventh reading was just one of the features that makes this service so effective. Candles are extinguished at regular intervals. And the electric lights are also turned off throughout the course of the service. As it gets darker it gets harder to read the bulletin.

The eighth reading describes how the curtain in the temple is torn from top to bottom at the moment of Jesus’ death. My Greek returns to me. Weeks before the service I think, “I can work with this.”

When I arrive at the church I learn that I am the only non-Roman Catholic who has a speaking part this year. The psalmist shows me where to sit and where to speak from. He's really on top of the details. I tell him services like this are like All-Star games. We're all great at what we do, but we're not used to being on the same team.

I introduce myself to the nun, Sister Mary Ann. I know it’s Sister Mary Ann. She’s in a habit, and she’s the only sister mentioned in the bulletin. I had been at an installation with another member of her community the day before. At that event, Sister Pam preached a really fine sermon.

As we gather for a brief prayer before processing in, I realize that I am the only one wearing a black robe and a purple stole. The priest and deacons are wearing white albs and red stoles. I joke that I did not get the memo. The priest assures me that purple is a correct choice because we’re in the season of Lent. He considered wearing purple, but was pretty sure he had last year. This kind of thing does not make me self-conscious anymore. I realize that part of what makes these services interesting is that people come from different
traditions and represent different things. Then I snicker to myself because here are five grown men playing dress up. I turn to Sister Mary Ann and say, “You’re not wearing that, are you?” Of course she is. She’s a nun. She probably wears the same thing to the gym. Luckily, she knows I’m kidding. Not all nuns appreciate my humor. Sometimes they slug me. I like Sister Mary Ann.

As the procession begins, I’m third behind the priest and a deacon; I remark, *sotto voce*, “There’s no business like show business.” We walk single file. They bow to something. I don’t know what. I pause, to keep from running into them, then go to my seat.

Father Jim sets a nice pace, dignified and measured but not plodding. The worshippers feel the full effect of silence and darkness.

I begin my reflection paraphrasing Psalm 133, “How good and pleasant it is when sister and brothers dwell together in harmony.” I thank Father Jim and Joe, the psalmist, for inviting me and planning the service so skillfully. I talk about the sudden, startling stripitus and how it makes me jump even when I’m expecting it. Then I point out that the description of the curtain in the temple being torn from top to bottom is not really adequate. The Greek verb *σχίζω*, is much more violent. The curtain was not separated along a nice perforation, like a coupon in the Sunday paper, it was “rent asunder” as the older translations have it. The curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the people was completely destroyed. It’s as though there was no longer any separation between what is holy and what is human. The same word appears when Jesus is rising from the waters of baptism in Mark’s gospel. The sky was torn in two and the Holy Spirit descended into Jesus like a dove. Again, God has acted dramatically and violently to break the separation between God above and humanity below.

At the start of Christ’s ministry, and at the end of his life, the barriers that keep God and humanity apart are completely, utterly, violently destroyed. God’s strong, resolute, relentless desire is that we recognize God’s profound, fierce love for each of us.

Toward the end of the service the worshippers are instructed to kneel. I had not read ahead in the service and had a moment’s hesitation. As a Presbyterian, I only kneel in worship to retrieve a penny that has fallen out of the offering plates. This evening I shrug and think to myself, “When in Rome,” then nearly laugh out loud at my silent, internal quip.

After the service, I realize that this verb *σχίζω* is also the root word of schism, which seems eerily appropriate to me.

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FOUND

if only I'd had ears
to see the underwhispers

river echo voice amen
instead of eating the scroll of

ashes to ashes, dust to dust —scripture
or rupture— the pages brittle

bones that'll never walk again
ossified night after night insomniac I didn't know

in the halfway house on the way to heaven
I didn't have to be homeless

somewhere between heart & head
I didn't have to be furious done god-

forsaken no longer
no longer shiftless

or shorn (my God!)
my God, even if cast out—still

held, by love
for love, born aloft

as are the smallest birds
by a wind bigger than any

breath shining in
these lungs, tiny kites

—for if, having fallen, the fallen are
given wings, even once

upon an ache, a sparrow of
a boy can learn to fly

John Fry
"I have met certain Orthodox monks—in their presence you feel that the saints of old continue to live amongst us, because, like them, they are 'dead to the world.' 'Dead to the world' translates for me in auditory terms as 'silent music.'"

Sir John Tavener
*The Music of Silence*, 159

**THROUGHOUT HIS CAREER,** SIR JOHN Tavener sought to create what he called “silent music,” and he found an audience for this music in both sacred and secular musical spheres. On Christmas Eve, 2013 the King’s College Choir of Cambridge University remembered Tavener in their Lessons and Carols service through their performance of his beloved choral work *The Lamb*, a setting of the poem by William Blake. *The Lamb* gained Tavener great respect when he sent the manuscript to the premiere British college choir in November of 1982, and they scheduled it into their Lessons and Carols service for that year, allowing his music to reach millions of listeners. Ever since, Tavener’s music has had a broad audience outside of the typical classical music scene. Viewers around the world heard one of his many funeral pieces, *Song for Athene*, when Princess Diana’s body was carried out of Westminster Abbey in 1997. Though the music of John Rutter, his classmate from prep school, may have had more popular appeal in performances of sacred music, Tavener’s sound communicated the sacred in a way that spoke to those outside of his own British Orthodox community and even to those outside the broader Christian church, to all listeners in search of transcendent music.

Tavener followed on the heels of minimalist composers such as Steve Reich and Terry Riley. The minimalists’ project sought to reduce music to its most fundamental elements and examine them through repetition and permeation. Unlike their predecessors, however, the “Holy Minimalists,” including Tavener as well as Arvo Pärt and Henryk Górecki, composed in service of the Divine, rather than as an artistic project alone. Tavener’s unique form of minimalism was a rejection of the directional harmonic language of Western art music, which he often referred to as music from the “scholastic” tradition, in favor of harmonies and forms that reflect sacred chant traditions.

Tavener’s quest for a theological and musical home took him from the Presbyterian Church where he was an organist, to the Roman Catholic, and finally the Eastern Orthodox Church in 1977. In Byzantine and Russian Znamenny chant, he found a musical and theological (or metaphysical, as he preferred to call it) tradition to guide him. For Tavener, tradition was the answer to the modern aesthetic dilemma, that is, the obsession with innovation, to which minimalism was a response. Tradition does not demand innovation; it requires submission. “When you write something, if you believe you are created in the image of God, then music in a sense comes from God... tradition is God, at its highest point. Therefore, in practice, it should be no longer 'I' who 'composes' but tradition that composes in me” (Tavener, 36). In his autobiography, Tavener spoke of his development as a composer as his continual striving to divest his music of the self in order to let tradition, or God, speak in his music. His theory of the artistic act as a sacrifice of the self to tradition echoes the poet T. S. Eliot, whose poetry Tavener admired. In *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, Eliot wrote, “What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (Eliot, *Tradition*
According to Tavener in the late 1990s, this self-sacrifice is what distinguishes sacred music from Western art music. When the artist's personality is extinguished, what is left is God. In musical terms, Tavener expressed the sound of the eternal God through the presence of the ison, the traditional drone note from Byzantine chant, found in all of Tavener's music from this period.

In the last decade of his life, Tavener revised some of his claims about sacred music and incorporated the via negativa theology from other non-Western religious traditions into his "metaphysical" music. Tavener once responded to a question about his earlier statements regarding sacred music, "I just think that my way towards God has been to write music. I don't think it's the sound of God, I think that's romantic clap-trap" (Battle 2011). His compositions took his journey toward God into the realms of Sufi and Hindu writings as well. "'I reached a point where everything I wrote was terribly austere and hidebound by the tonal system of the Orthodox Church,' he said, 'and I felt the need, in my music at least, to become more universalist: to take in other colors, other languages'" (White 2007). His Lament for Jerusalem from 2002 combines texts from the Gospels, Psalms, and Rumi's Masnavi to lament the (temporary) loss of the Beatific Vision through these three traditions. In 2004, one of his great supporters, Prince Charles, commissioned a work setting the ninety-nine names of Allah from the Koran. It was daringly performed in Westminster Abbey, though Tavener admitted he never consulted a Muslim about writing such a composition.

Many music critics consider these last few works to be expressions of Tavener's real compositional voice. But works from his earlier, strictly Orthodox period have recently been used in critically acclaimed films to mark pivotal theological insights, providing a holy aura distant from the visual action. In the film adaptation of P. D. James's Children of Men, Tavener's Eternity's Sunrise, a setting of another of Blake's poems, carries the last baby on earth, the hope of the world, through apocalyptic scenes. Terrence Malick uses Tavener's "Funeral Canticle" extensively in his breathtaking film Tree of Life to introduce both the subject of the film, the Problem of Evil, and the Divine answer to it: that death is not an end but a beginning. "But in the light of Thy countenance, O Christ, and in the sweetness of Thy beauty, give rest to him whom thou hast chosen, because Thou lovest mankind."

Death and the life after is the subject of many of Tavener's works. Tavener considered his last significant work to be Towards Silence, a meditation on the four stages of death according to the Vedanta, written for four string quartets spatially separated. The piece draws together his typical tonal, wandering harmonies with his more recent forays into Hindu and Sufi mysticism. Just after finishing the work he had his own near-death experience in 2007, when he suffered two heart attacks that kept him in the hospital for nearly a year, and he lost his brother to the same disease that weakened his heart and made him a recluse for the rest of his life.

Even in this last significant work, he maintained that his music is ultimately an expression of silence, the ecstatic experience of the Divine received fully in death. From his Orthodox perspective, he found a visual explanation of silence in Byzantine ikons:

If you look at the very great ikons of the Byzantine period, you see angels transfixed as they gaze upon God. I've often thought: is it possible to produce that kind of ecstatic frozen petrified silence in music? I've certainly tried to do it in various pieces. This kind of silence one could almost take even further and say it was frozen or uncreated Eros, because it comes in the form of longing (this is...
something beyond the yearning of religious sentiment), it's a petrified longing, it's a longing that goes beyond the longing of one person for another... it is the longing for God... This longing for God which, as in icons, is somehow petrified and silent (Tavener, 157).

Tavener's theology of silence as an expression of the divine and a musical work has not been without criticism. In his book, *Theology, Music and Time*, Jeremy Begbie offers a musical description of Tavener's compositional style and a criticism of Tavener's theological approach to music. Begbie argues that, although a helpful antidote to the noise and clutter of our lives, like the cold cathedral Tavener's music is too far removed from the reality of God's entrance into time, redemption of time, and ultimate restoration of creation in time. Tavener frequently depicts the Resurrection in his music, but Begbie worries that Christ's suffering on the cross is overlooked in the rush to Easter. Ultimately, Begbie finds Tavener's depiction of the eschaton to be shallow. “The eternity of Revelation is one of multiplicity, activity and abundance—the new earth and the new heaven, complete with heavenly city (Rev. 21, 22). Tavener's eschaton appears to entail a divine eternity of absolute simplicity, and the negation of temporality...” (Begbie, 146).

But Tavener's eschewal of directional harmonies and formal structures that have a clear progression does not actually equate with the negation of temporality itself. The very bounds put on music by the sounds which surround it require that it always be a temporal art. The breaking through of the sound of eternity, what Tavener calls silence, is rather a kind of Sabbath music. As Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “It [the Sabbath] is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world” (Heschel, 10). Heschel described the Sabbath in terms much as Tavener described the ison in his music: “For the Sabbath is the counterpoint of living; the melody sustained throughout all agitations and vicissitudes which menace our conscience; our awareness of God's presence in the world” (Heschel, 89).

Begbie's criticisms perhaps predicted Tavener's later universalism. Like some other famous apophatic theologians, such as Thomas Merton, Tavener found that Hindu, Sufi, and Jewish mystical writings ultimately express the same truth about God and our experience of the Divine as silence. But, seeing Tavener's works as Sabbath music addresses Begbie's worry. As with the Sabbath, Tavener's sound of eternity cannot stand on its own, but must be tied to the other six days of the week, the creation which God delights in and redeems. For those times when we need to hear the Divine voice break into the clatter of our busy lives to bring a word that the toil and fleeting hours are not the ultimate things, Tavener has left us with a great many treasures.

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**Works Cited**


SHERWOOD ANDERSON'S SHORT STORY "THE Corn Planting" seared my soul on first reading it nearly fifteen years ago, especially the closing image of the old farm couple sowing seed corn into the ground by moonlight, the night they learned of their only son's death. Anderson described it as "a kind of silent cry... putting corn down into the earth. It was as though they were putting death down into the ground, that life might grow again, something like that:'

That latent image sprung vibrantly to my mind's eye last autumn while watching the start of the 2012 film The Odd Life of Timothy Green. Instead of an elderly couple mourning the loss of their only son, the film begins with a young couple mourning, after much fruitlessness, their inability ever to have a child. Before lamenting their barrenness and moving on that night of their fateful news, the Greens indulge themselves by imagining what their long-desired son would be like. Recording the descriptors with pencil on paper, they place their dreams in a wooden box and plant it in the garden. In the midst of a drought, rain comes only to their place that night, and their son Timothy sprouts up from the soil.

While I will leave the rest of the film's happenings for you to discover, one of Timothy's repeated actions—along with a spoken reaction—is illuminating and worth relating. When the sun is at its height and emerges from cloud-cover, Timothy stretches his arms outward, lifts his face skyward, and basks in the glorious light. His mother's sister wastes no time demonstrating his differentness by pointing to him and saying, "Like that! That's not normal!" That scene and the rest of the film deftly engage considerations of what truly is normal, and should be viewed as such, for people who come to understand their place in nature, community, and world.

The film hit home for me on a number of levels as I head into my mid-forties and realize that I will, most likely, never marry or have a "biological" child—both of which seem perfectly normal to me but not to the many who have made sure I know otherwise! I have assumed a fatherly and brotherly role in various ways as a pastor and community leader, engaged with people on society's ragged edges over the years and have come to relish the availability my singlehood allows in that regard. Even though I realize I will probably never be able to bestow the initials ASK on a son (A for Albert—Grandfather, Schweitzer, and Einstein, and S for Soren—Kierkegaard), I have bestowed (and will continue to bestow) the wisdom and experience of these men, as well as of a lot of women; challenging people of all ages and backgrounds to ask and seek answers. I have found that endearment can grow between unrelated people as easily, or sometimes even more so, than with those of a blood bond and shared history.
One of the enticing joys of “biological” parenthood is seeing in what ways your offspring looks and acts like you, but that also has to be somewhat disconcerting when looking at “self” in the mirror includes acknowledging characteristics and behaviors that are far from stellar. I delight, however, in finding “relations” where least expected and honoring those bonds in all the ways they seem far from normal, which in a way involves lifting my face skyward and stretching my arms outward. After all, Jesus said that everything hinges on loving God with our whole being and loving others as much as self, and stretch outward is what he did in his ministry and death on the cross.

I realized a couple of years ago that the desire for a child, as well as the mourning of one, is in many ways connected to the loss of one’s own childhood and the desire to reclaim it or make it what it “should” have been. I was walking on a forested German nature trail one day (before seeing The Odd Life of Timothy Green) when I saw a boy of about ten with a half-grown pup emerge ahead of me. Those few minutes behind them conveyed the deep companionship and love between a boy and his dog and took me straight back to the best carefree and alive moments of my childhood. Whenever I revisit that scene in my mind, heart, and soul, I am aware how graced I was to witness it. And yet in the mysterious way of memory and association, it is now linked to my third visit, this past autumn (after seeing The Odd Life of Timothy Green), to one of the Ugandan AIDS orphans I sponsor through school. Unabashedly expressive, this junior-in-high-school young man took me by the hand and introduced me to his classmates as his “father from America.” Needless to say, I felt I was basking in the sun even as tears were in my eyes. Many seeds of hope have been put into the ground, and I have been privileged to see them sprout and flourish.

I remember back one Lent a number of years ago, while caring for my dad at the end of his life, that I read Alan Paton’s Cry, the Beloved Country from Ash Wednesday to the morning of Easter Sunday. That novel of a native South African Anglican priest navigating his son’s waywardness ends with hope dashed to the ground by execution. But that is not all. As he awaited his son’s execution at sunrise, the father sat alone atop a mountain and asked himself question upon question about his son’s final moments. As morning dawned, he put bread and tea upon a stone, gave thanks, and ate and drank. Then he prayed deeply, raising his eyes to the east after each petition. When he was sure his son’s life had ended, “he rose to his feet and took off his hat and laid it down on the earth,

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains as is; but if it dies, it brings forth much fruit.”

John 12:24

and clasped his hands before him” as the sun rose. He knew the words of the Son who rose with the sun on Easter morning: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains as is; but if it dies, it brings forth much fruit” (John 12:24).

In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul wrote about seeds needing to die so that they can come to life and pointed to the glorious resurrection yet to come (15:35–49). Planted in the ground of Christ’s death, the losses we know and grieve give way to a realized hope more glorious than anything we can ever expect.

Lent is the season of seeing anew the place of cross and resurrection in our lives. Even in Lent, every Sunday is a celebration of Jesus’ rising. Maybe Timothy can teach us all how to reach out like branches of a tree, and the one nailed on one, so that we can live raised up in the hope-filled light of resurrection.

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RISE

It comes unsought—only unsought.

It comes uninvited—only uninvited—and by preference at the core of sorrow, when sorrow without relief

slumps into the mind like thick, obvious mud: the sick child, the fallen marriage, the failing god who hides his fragments in debris, weeks when you learn sorrow is the only possibility.

It comes like this. One evening you trudge along, broken, a street chosen because choice doesn't matter, watching your numb shoes—and for no reason at all the late-spring light lifts itself up from the late-spring lawns, and the two sullen teens, glaring as you pass, move toward each others' hands, and the sun through thin cloud has just enough day left to burn the glass of a stone church free of its gray blur, so that gold and blue now flash and yearn, and the sky trembles, ready.

James Owens
Good Faith Accommodations
On the Constitutionality of Legislative Prayer
Frank J. Colucci

This spring, the US Supreme Court decides whether a New York town’s practice of beginning board meetings with public prayer violates the First Amendment’s prohibition against establishment of religion. The arguments in Town of Greece v. Galloway force the Court to revisit its precedent upholding legislative prayer and to consider what practical accommodations governments must provide to citizens of different faiths.

In 1999, Greece (population 96,000, northwest of Rochester) replaced its moment of silence at the beginning of monthly board meetings with prayers, which were first led by the elected town supervisor. Later, town officials solicited local religious officials chosen from a local community guide to serve as a “chaplain of the month.” Over the next eight years, all chaplains were Christian. (A Jehovah’s Witness church and Buddhist temple within town borders were not listed in the guide.) About two-thirds of town prayers mentioned Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, or the Trinity, and several concluded “in Christ’s name.”

In 2008, Susan Galloway and Linda Stephens—residents who attended town meetings to express concerns about public access cable television channels, the condition of public parks, and other issues—questioned this practice. That year the town began four of its monthly meetings with prayers from a Wiccan, a Baha’i minister, and a lay Jewish man. From January 2009, for the next eighteen months all prayers were led by Christians.

By then, Galloway and Stephens had filed suit in federal court. They initially argued the town intentionally discriminated against non-Christians in its selection of prayer-givers; on appeal, they emphasized that the prayer practice had the effect of government endorsement of Christianity. Individual citizens attending town meetings are not mere spectators, as in Congress and most state legislatures, but active petitioners and participants. In this context, they argue, “religious minorities are pressed either to feign participation in an act of worship that violates their own beliefs, or to publicly display their dissent from majoritarian religious norms.”

The Greece case is clarified and complicated by the US Supreme Court’s decision in Marsh v. Chambers (1983), which upheld Nebraska’s practice of having a state-paid Methodist chaplain lead the legislature in prayer. Based on “unambiguous and unbroken history of more than 200 years” dating to the First Congress, Chief Justice Warren Burger wrote, “there can be no doubt that the practice of opening legislative sessions with prayer has become part of the fabric of our society.” Nebraska’s practice showed “no indication that the prayer opportunity has been exploited to proselytize or advance any one, or to disparage any other, faith or belief,” Burger wrote. “That being so, it is not for us to embark on a sensitive evaluation or to parse the content of a particular prayer.” Following Marsh, a federal district court upheld Greece’s prayer practice.

The Second Circuit Court of Appeals reversed, striking the prayer. Marsh v. Chambers remains good law, it ruled, but Greece’s prayer practice allied the town too closely with Christianity. The town “fails to recognize that its residents may hold religious beliefs that are not represented by a place of worship within the town.” The town did not adequately publicize its willingness to accept volunteer prayer leaders or explain the purpose of its prayer practice. In addition, “most prayer-givers appeared to
speak on behalf of the town and its residents, rather than only on behalf of themselves.” The appeals court concluded “an objective, reasonable person would believe that the town’s prayer practice had the effect of affiliating the town with Christianity.”

Greece appealed to the Supreme Court with support from the Obama Administration. “The government must allow the prayer-giver to deliver the prayer in accordance with his own religious beliefs,” the United States argues in its brief, “including by praying to his own religious deity and in his own idiom.” While *Marsh* requires some determination whether a prayer is proselytizing or disparaging other religion, “it is not the place of the federal Judiciary, a Town Board, or Members of Congress to compile a list of religious words that may be used in legislative prayers and a list of religious words that may not.”

At Supreme Court oral argument in November 2013, the most searching exchanges explored the extent of accommodations local governments with prayer must provide. “If all that were left in the case were the question of you’re making a good faith effort to try to include others,” Justice Breyer asked the town’s attorney, “would you object to doing it?” Other justices asked whether it would be sufficient to require the town “to appeal to other religions who are in that area,” to publicize on its website not merely to churches but to the general public that any citizen could lead the prayer, and to tell each prayer leader in advance that the audience “is comprised of members of many different faith traditions.” Douglas Laycock, Galloway’s attorney, argued Greece should “instruct the chaplains, keep your prayers non-sectarian,” avoid “points on which believers are known to disagree,” and remain “in the American context, the American civil religion.”

The ideal of an inclusive and even nonsectarian legislative prayer—an American civil religion—seems well established. The National Conference for Community and Justice (formerly the National Conference for Christians and Jews) publishes “Guidelines for Civic Occasions” with a section on “Public Prayer in a Diverse Society.” Because of “the public nature of the occasion,” leaders should engage in “Inclusive Public Prayer” that is “nonsectarian, general, and carefully planned to avoid embarrassments and misunderstandings.” Inclusive prayer “uses universal, inclusive terms for deity rather than particular proper names for divine manifestations”—phrases like “Almighty God,” “Source of All Being,” and “Creator God.” Public prayer should not be seen “as an opportunity to preach, argue, or testify.” Inclusive Public Prayer “seeks the highest common denominator without compromise of conscience.” Such inclusive public prayer remains “authentic” while it “enables people to recognize the pluralism of American society.” Instructions similar to the NCCJ guidelines are provided to prayer leaders by thirty-six state legislatures and the US House of Representatives.

*ONE APPARENTLY ATTRACTIVE PATH FOR the Court to resolve the Greece case is to reaffirm *Marsh v. Chambers* allowing for legislative prayers, while requiring that*
legislatures adopt affirmative policies toward inclusion. The town could appeal to the public, contact religious houses in nearby towns, and separate the prayer from the portion of the town meeting devoted to public petition and public comment. But attempts to require legislative prayer to be “nonsectarian” or “inclusive” raise concerns about government influence on religious officials and religious individuals.

One issue is whether the prayer-leader is perceived as speaking for the government or as a private person. Galloway's attorney states, “they’re taking on a government function when they agree to give the invocation for the town board.” Providing guidelines is merely government “editing the content of government sponsored prayers.” But if, on the other hand, prayer leaders are acting primarily as individuals, Scalia stated, “people who have religious beliefs ought to be able to invoke the deity when they are acting as citizens.”

Requiring legislative prayers to be nonsectarian and inclusive compounds this concern, as it may move prayer leaders to employ language they would not normally use in worship. “Sanitizing legislative prayers of ‘sectarian’ references,” the State of Indiana argues in a brief supporting Greece, “deprives adherents of the chance to undertake religious exercise based on core beliefs, to the point where some otherwise willing citizens may forego offering legislative prayer entirely if they cannot do so according to their consciences.” The NCCJ recognizes that “some persons are reluctant to offer Inclusive Public Prayer. This position should be respected.” But government promulgation of instructions—even if intended to promote pluralism, diversity, and awareness—may have the opposite effect. “It is an insult to individual expression and religious exercise,” Indiana argues, “to permit prayers only by those who agree to pray in the government-ordered fashion.”

Fears of government supervision of prayers by religious officials and citizens seemed to drive Justice Kennedy. “Town councils like Greece can have prayers if they are non-provocative, modest, decent, quiet, non-proselytizing?” he asked at oral argument. Distribution of guidelines—and the implicit suggestion that the town decides who may be re-invited—to Kennedy “involves the State very heavily in the censorship and... the approval or disapproval of prayers.”

Kennedy’s concerns have roots in his majority opinion in Lee v. Weisman (1992), where the Court struck clergy-led prayer at a public school graduation as a violation of Establishment Clause. Kennedy’s opinion focused on the “real conflict of conscience faced by the young student... who has a reasonable perception that she is being forced by the State to pray in a manner her conscience will not allow.”

In Lee, Kennedy explicitly mentioned the government’s role in distributing the NCCJ Guidelines to religious officials. He concedes it may have been “a good faith attempt by the school to ensure that the sectarianism which is so often the flashpoint for religious animosity be removed.” Yet “the suggestion that government may establish an official or civic religion as a means of avoiding the establishment of a religion with more specific creeds strikes us as a contradiction that cannot be accepted.” As laudable as finding “common ground” may be, the Constitution cannot “permit the government to undertake that task for itself.” Kennedy restated these objections in the Greece v. Galloway oral argument. If government chooses prayer-leaders and then provides guidelines to ensure their prayers are inclusive and nonsectarian, he suggested, “then you have the problem... that we are misrepresenting who we really are.”

Litigation over legislative prayer has already had an effect on some local governments. The appeals court ruling against Greece stated that although Marsh v. Chambers remains good law, “difficulties... may well prompt municipalities to pause and think carefully before adopting legislative prayer.” The rethinking already has occurred in legislatures which had previously adopted prayer. Under threat of lawsuit, Hawaii’s Senate became the first legislature to drop its prayer. After the US Supreme Court decided to hear the Greece case, Mayor Thomas M. McDermott Jr., of Hammond, Indiana wrote on his Facebook page that his
city's practice of prayer at the opening of meetings—including references to "our Lord" and "Jesus"—was "not appropriate." As McDermott told a local newspaper, "I am trying to avoid Hammond getting sued for violation of the First Amendment's Establishment's clause."

In deciding Town of Greece v. Galloway, the justices must choose between competing claims of history, inclusion, and individual liberty in a religiously pluralistic society. Over the past three decades, Supreme Court decisions involving public manifestations of religion have featured compromises allowing some holiday or Ten Commandments displays but not others, or dismissal on technical grounds (such as the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools). But as Justice Kagan stated at oral argument in Greece, "every time the Court gets involved in things like this, it seems to make the problem worse rather than better." After a barrage of questions about how "nonsectarian" prayers could be truly inclusive to all people—including atheists, devil worshippers, and polytheists—Galloway's attorney eventually conceded "we cannot treat everybody, literally everybody, equally without eliminating prayer altogether." The court is left with two real alternatives: follow his suggestion, or take refuge in history.

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MY TAMARACK

It took me an hour to find the sapling buried in the snow bank and another to uncover it—in the end, it stood spindly and slight in the whiteness, and I apologized for not coming sooner. Its lower branches sagged, encased in ice—having nothing else, I sat, bent forward, and held the fragile arms against my neck. Cold fingers melted down my chest.

Later, my grandma, who had watched from the kitchen window, asked why I had dug a hole to pray.

John Allen Taylor
Poverty and the Family
LBJ Today
Peter Meilaender

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the war on poverty launched by President Lyndon B. Johnson in his State of the Union address on January 8, 1964. On that day, President Johnson declared "unconditional war on poverty in America" and promised that "we shall not rest until that war is won." In recognition of this anniversary, we have been treated to a steady flow of articles and assessments evaluating the war on poverty's success and asking to what extent we have achieved victory. Most of these assessments conclude—sometimes reluctantly, sometimes with a "we-told-you-so" note of justification—that, though the war on poverty has had some specific and limited successes, on the whole it has fallen well short of the lofty ambitions that inspired it and the goals it set for itself.

Interestingly, one could imagine a new, bipartisan war on poverty with more modest goals but a more realistic understanding of what might lead to success. In recent decades we have learned quite a bit about the factors that lead to and keep people in poverty. In particular, scholars on both the left and right agree that the decline of stable marriages and families has contributed significantly to poverty's persistence in the US. Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill of the Brookings Institution have written,

Changes in family composition have been a major force driving Americans into poverty. The story of family composition and poverty is straightforward. In most years, poverty in female-headed families is four or five times greater than poverty in married-couple families. High divorce rates, falling marriage rates, and rising nonmarital birthrates over the past three decades have more than doubled the share of children living with single mothers. ("Introducing the Issue," The Future of Children, Vol. 17, No. 2: 4)

In Coming Apart (Crown Forum 2012), the American Enterprise Institute scholar Charles Murray presented a wealth of data illustrating the relationship between poverty and family composition through his comparison of the semi-fictional towns of Belmont and Fishtown, populated respectively by America's "new upper-" and "new lower-" classes. Murray emphasizes that these classes are characterized as much by their cultural as their economic differences. Among the most important factors accounting for the greater success of those living in Belmont is the significantly higher likelihood that they will get married, stay married, and avoid having children out of wedlock.

Readers not prepared to tackle Murray's lengthy analysis and looking for a shorter discussion might consider a recent volume by Nick Schulz, Home Economics: The Consequences of Changing Family Structure (AEI Press 2013). In one hundred short, clear pages, Schulz, while deliberately avoiding "values" debates over topics such as abortion or same-sex marriage, compiles a mass of evidence clarifying the links between poverty and changes in family structure such as increases in divorce, single-parent households, and children born out of wedlock. Just a few of the findings that he reports:

- Haskins and Sawhill of the Brookings Institution, after reviewing Census Bureau data, found that "if young people finish high school, get a job, and get married before they have children, they have about a 2 percent chance of falling into
poverty and nearly a 75 percent chance of joining the middle class by earning $50,000 or more per year."

- Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, in their book *Growing Up with a Single Parent* (Harvard 1994), report that "adolescents who have lived apart from one of their parents during some period of childhood are twice as likely to drop out of high school, twice as likely to have a child before age twenty, and one and a half times as likely to be 'idle'—out of school and out of work—in their late teens and early twenties."

- A group of researchers from the Pew Research Center compared the median household incomes of married adults with unmarried adults in 1960 and again in 2008. Half a century ago, the gap in household incomes was 12 percent. In 2008, the gap had grown to over 40 percent."

This is just a small sampling from a large body of research confirming what is by now an indisputable fact: if you want to reduce poverty, you should want as many children as possible to grow up in stable families with their own two married parents.

We are accustomed to hearing conservatives talk about the importance of the traditional family unit as a building-block of society. In light of this evidence, however, it is clear that liberals, committed to the poorest and most vulnerable members of society and concerned with income inequality, should also make the health of the family a policy priority. Indeed, one could imagine this as the potential fulcrum of an important bipartisan coalition, in which politicians of the left and the right search in common for reforms to strengthen the family and simultaneously reduce poverty. In my more radical moments, I sometimes think that what America most needs is a new political party, perhaps the "American Families Party," that would judge every proposed policy reform by its likely impact upon the family unit.

Yet it is difficult to imagine such a coalition actually forming, for at least two reasons. First, it is simply very hard to talk forthrightly about the personal and social benefits of marriage in a world where so many people are divorced or the product of broken families. To praise marriage as a social institution is, implicitly, to tell large numbers of people that they or their loved ones have failed at one of the most important tasks in human life. This is a message compassionate people—to say nothing of politicians seeking votes—understandably prefer not to send. The second reason, less obvious but perhaps more significant, is the importance of access to abortion among large portions of the left as an untouchable and fundamental personal right. Ross Douthat reached this conclusion in a recent *New York Times* column calling for just such a bipartisan effort to reduce poverty through strengthening marriage. He suggested that a combination of "wage subsidies and modest limits on unilateral divorce, or a jobs program and a second-trimester abortion ban" might have bipartisan appeal as an anti-poverty, pro-family strategy, a "hypothetical middle ground on marriage promotion." But he nevertheless concluded that "[t]he chances of liberals embracing this hypothetical are... nonexistent," because of their commitment to abortion ("More Imperfect Unions").

Although there is no necessary reason why one cannot support both abortion rights and stable families, any attempt to combine these will be uneasy. The right to an abortion has come to rest, in American public discourse, on a far-reaching ideal of individual autonomy—the right, in the words of the Supreme Court, "to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life" (*Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 505 US 851). It is not easy to defend both the bonds of the family and also this unfettered conception of personal autonomy. The linkage may often be subterranean rather than conscious, but many on the left instinctively recognize that a defense of the family calls into question the foundation of the abortion right, and they therefore shy away from it. (The extent to which the logic of abortion influences our domestic politics
across a range of issues is an underexplored topic that deserves greater consideration.

Nevertheless, although what one might call the “penumbras formed by emanations” of personal autonomy make a pro-marriage coalition difficult to envision, the stakes are high enough, especially for poor children, that people on both sides of the aisle should continue to seek common ground where it is available. It seems at least possible that some pro-family reform efforts could gain bipartisan support. One strategy seeks to decrease the incidence of nonmarital childbearing through programs that discourage teen pregnancy, often through a combination of abstinence encouragement and sex education programs for those who are sexually active (Amato and Maynard 2007: 120–124). Another approach focuses on the problem of “unmarriageable” men. A report from the National Marriage Project and the Institute for American Values suggests that apprenticeship programs in which young men acquire valuable job skills from a trusted mentor, as well as innovative marriage and relationship programs within both the military and criminal justice system (where unfortunate numbers of African American men in particular are incarcerated for relatively minor offenses), can help many young men become more attractive potential marriage partners (The State of Our Unions 2012: 18–24).

Other reforms might seek to ease financial strains on families. We could increase the child tax credit, for example. More creatively, we might make the tax credit available only to married couples. Or we might introduce an additional tax credit targeted specifically at married couples that choose to forego a second income so that one parent can stay at home full-time with their children—a reform that would be far more helpful (and, no doubt, less costly) than the current efforts to relieve parents of their children through universal pre-school. Senator Marco Rubio recently entered the fray, in a speech marking the war on poverty’s anniversary—in which he identified marriage as “the greatest tool to lift children and families from poverty”—with a proposal for a “federal wage enhancement” aimed at making marriage more economically feasible for people holding low-wage jobs.

Finally, other policies might focus on preserving existing families through reducing the divorce rate. Paul Amato and Rebecca Maynard—writing in The Future of Children, a journal jointly produced by the Brookings Institution and Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs—cite studies showing the effectiveness of “[m]arriage education and relationship programs... designed to improve couple communication, teach conflict resolution skills, increase mutual social support between partners, strengthen commitment, help troubled couples avoid divorce, and generally improve the quality and stability of marriages,” and they recommend increasing the percentage of couples who participate in such programs (Amato and Maynard 2007: 124–128). They suggest incentivizing such participation by “reduc[ing] the cost of a marriage license for couples who complete a premarital education workshop taught by a certified provider” (126). Retreating at least somewhat from no-fault divorce and making divorce modestly more difficult to obtain also merits consideration. Data suggest that many couples in the divorce process would welcome some form of therapy or counseling aimed at saving their marriage. Perhaps a waiting period between the filing of divorce papers and the actual finalization of a divorce, during which couples could be offered access to marriage counseling would reduce the rate of divorce.

Some may take issue with government efforts to promote marriage and the family on neutrality among the choices of adults may be less defensible when it carries substantial costs for children who are ill-equipped to defend themselves and lack a voice in the adult political process.
the grounds that public policy should be neutral among the choices that citizens make with respect to personal, intimate matters such as marriage. But neutrality among the choices of adults may be less defensible when it carries substantial costs for children who are ill-equipped to defend themselves and lack a voice in the adult political process. Moreover, such neutrality is simply a myth. As Maggie Gallagher has pointed out,

Government is deeply involved in the family lives of poor single parents and their children. Government actively instructs youths in the value of contraceptives, education, jobs, and delaying childbearing until the post-teen years. In this context, the absence of any government effort to support marriage does not represent neutrality. Instead, the message conveyed by the looming absence of the M-word in programs serving low-income couples and communities is this: The government does not believe that marriage matters (2004).

By now, however, the evidence is overwhelming: marriage does matter, and it matters a lot.

Strengthening marriage and the family is, to be sure, a daunting task. Family decline has been a product of diverse and interconnecting cultural factors, and public policy is a blunt instrument for effecting large cultural change. Fifty years ago, however, Lyndon Johnson told Americans, "Very often a lack of jobs and money is not the cause of poverty, but the symptom. The cause may lie deeper in our failure to give our fellow citizens a fair chance to develop their own capacities, in a lack of education and training, in a lack of medical care and housing, in a lack of decent communities in which to live and bring up their children." Those today who remain committed to his cause, whatever their political affiliation, should remember that poverty—like so much else—begins at home.

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Works Cited


UNDERTOW

For a week I open
the blinds to the tree
and the blue, to the blue behind it.

Should be that this tree is a river,
the pull taking in
whatever will fall,

the bridge that buckles
and disconnects shores, the rocks
dislodged that skid down the bank,

the girls gone out and soon
gone under, the mother who reaches
one, not the other.

Laura Van Prooyen
The Health Care Exchange
A Personal Experience

H. David Baer

Such is my luck that a few weeks after the Obamacare rollout I found myself shopping for insurance on the infamous government exchange. In October, my employer announced a significant reduction in its health care benefits, and I wanted to find out if my wife, who was insured under my plan, could get better coverage through healthcare.gov. True, as a well-informed political observer and columnist for The Cresset, I knew the government website was unworkable, but necessity left me no choice. I ventured onto healthcare.gov, where I managed successfully to fill in my wife's personal information and ascertain her eligibility, only to discover that I could shop on the exchange for different health care plans without a problem. And this wasn't in November after the "tech surge" had averted near total disaster, but in October, at the height of the rollout debacle. It wasn't as easy as shopping on Amazon, which surely did raise my anxiety level, and, in all honesty, when I returned to the website a few days later it wasn't working at all. But then I struck upon the idea of calling the health insurance companies directly, and I discovered these companies had agents who had heard about the Affordable Care Act and who knew how to help me. Slowly it dawned on me that anyone with a modicum of wherewithal could purchase insurance on the exchange.

But what, I wondered, explained the difference between my personal experience and the reports in the news? Might there be, I wondered, groups with an interest in seeing Obamacare fail that were exaggerating its difficulties? Could it be that the news industry, seeking to boost television ratings, was overdramatizing the story? Would political pundits, who earn their living by finding something to say, ever blow things out of proportion? Perhaps a conglomeration of interests was generating play-by-play tactical commentary on the vicissitudes of Obamacare that made it difficult to get a clear picture of what was actually going on. I needed a reality check. I wanted to think concretely about the state of American health care and the alternative proposals for improving it. I even did some research.

According to a survey of eleven industrialized nations conducted by the Commonwealth Fund, 37 percent of adults in America went without recommended care in 2013, or failed to see a doctor when they were sick, or chose not to have prescriptions filled because of prohibitive costs. Twenty-three percent of adults reported that either they could not pay or had serious problems paying their medical bills, compared with 13 percent in the next highest country on the survey. Health care in America, despite resting on free-market principles, is significantly more expensive, both as a share of GDP and in terms of per capita spending, than in any other industrial nation. According to 2013 OECD data, the US spends $8,500 per person on health care, $3,000 more than the per capita spending level in the next highest country, and more than twice the median spending of twenty-one industrial countries. The US health care system is also significantly more bureaucratic than that of other countries. The United States spends $606 per capita on administrative costs related to health care, more than twice the next highest country, France, and vastly more than the administrative costs ($55 per capita) in that American bugbear, so-called socialist Sweden (Commonwealth Fund). To top it all off, more than forty million Americans are denied access to health care, because they do not (or did not prior to the Affordable Care Act) have insurance. Lack of access may explain why the United States falls
behind most other industrial countries in basic measurements of health such as life expectancy and infant mortality rate. Indeed, the American health care system is so abysmally inefficient and inequitable that 75 percent of Americans surveyed by the Commonwealth Fund stated they thought the system was in need of basic reform.

Ugly facts like these convinced me that the status quo ante Obamacare was unacceptable. Health care reform was long overdue. That doesn't mean that Obamacare gets a free pass on criticism, but it does mean criticisms need to be contextualized. What are the alternative proposals for reform? Do critics of the Affordable Care Act propose something better, or are they seeking to restore the status quo ante? Insofar as I can discern, existing alternative Republican proposals to Obamacare are piecemeal approaches that trade away the goal of universal coverage.

After all, the identified strategies for getting to universal coverage are relatively few. One way to get there is through socialized medicine, but no one proposes anything as radical as that. Some on the American Left would like to see a single-payer health insurance system. They argue that if the entire population paid into the same health insurance fund this would distribute risk more effectively than do multiple insurance companies and also reduce administrative costs. However, a single-payer system would dismantle the private insurance market and increase the government's role in health care in ways that depart from current practice quite dramatically. A more conservative approach is to push the private insurance system toward universal coverage by creating a market exchange in which everyone is required to participate, generating both competition and choice in ways that may also reduce costs over time. The idea of a mandate requiring all individuals to purchase health insurance was once considered a conservative idea and was promoted by the Heritage Foundation in the 1980s. This strategy was used by Mitt Romney in Massachusetts, but today it is associated with Obamacare and unpalatable to Republicans. Perhaps a new generation of Republican leaders has developed a different and better strategy for arriving at universal coverage, which for unknown reasons they are keeping a secret. Or perhaps they have abandoned the goal of universal coverage altogether.

That the latter might be the case is suggested by the kinds of criticisms Republicans make of Obamacare, which often begin by invoking something akin to the Ayn Rand apocalypse. We need to take a good hard look at reality, they say; taxes and spending are out of control, and if we don't rein them in soon we face a Doomsday scenario. According to this argument, Obamacare is simply economically unfeasible. But if Obamacare is unfeasible, the same must be true of universal coverage, yet somehow almost every other industrial nation has managed to achieve it.

Moreover, the realities about government spending are not as Republicans describe. In 2013, total federal spending amounted to 22.7 percent of GDP, which is in line with the forty-year historical average. Nor, by international standards, are Americans overtaxed. Total US tax revenues (including federal, state, and local taxes) in 2013 averaged a little over 30 percent of GDP, well below the median 44 percent of GDP for industrial countries. Furthermore, in 2013 the fiscal deficit dropped to $680 billion, a 51 percent reduction from 2009. The reality is that American government is one of the smallest in the industrial world. It is quite arguable that the size of the US government is less of a drag on the US economy than suppressed aggregate

The status quo ante Obamacare was unacceptable. Health care reform was long overdue. That doesn't mean that Obamacare gets a free pass on criticism, but it does mean criticisms need to be contextualized.
demand, caused in part by stagnant wages, which are caused in part by the increasing percentage of their income Americans devote to health care.

Never much flummoxed by facts, the prophets of Randian realism eventually invoke principle: Obamacare means the end of liberty. You see, it requires everyone to have health insurance. Universal coverage, it turns out, is an evil we should eschew rather than a goal we should attain. The "liberty dilemma" arises from the fact that universal access is economically feasible only when both the healthy and sick participate in the system. If people are free to opt out of health care when they don't need it and then opt back in when they do, the system collapses. But unless people are free in precisely this way, the argument goes, we will live under tyranny. The cost of achieving universal coverage is simply too great; it means abandoning the American way of life.

One never knows for sure if this is a slippery-slope argument (any fool can see that universal coverage opens the gates to collectivization of private property and a dictatorship of the proletariat) or an argument from libertarian principle. Government has the authority to conscript young people and send them to their death in war, it requires parents to educate their children, and it levies taxes on the willing and unwilling alike. These instances would seem analogous to the ordered exercise of freedom needed to achieve universal health care coverage. One thus suspects that the "liberty dilemma" rests upon a Randian libertarianism that is antithetical not only to the idea of a common good, but even to the idea of government itself.

The truth is that America's failure to provide universal access to health care has been a long standing moral affront. Obamacare attempts to redress that failure, whatever its flaws. Its flaws are certainly a legitimate object of criticism, but critics who reject Obamacare completely need to state clearly what they would put in its place. They should also come clean on the question of universal coverage. 

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IN AN ERA OF SCHOLARLY (OVER) SPECIALIZATION, there exists a tendency to dissect the thinking of a particular figure of historical note into discreet parts according to our modern disciplinary typology. This tendency sets the framework for our study of the "great books" and writers in the scholarly canon. We allow our disciplines to impose questions on texts that they were not designed to answer. We "extract" theories from a larger theoretical corpus to use for our own purposes, unwittingly damaging those theories in the process of "extraction" from the supporting context. The historiography of Martin Luther's writings serves as a case in point. Living in one of the most remarkable times in human history, Martin Luther wrote in the context of decisive political, scientific, artistic, cultural, and, of course, theological/eclesiological change. Our modern scholarly tendencies prompt us to ask, "Is Luther a liberal?" or "What is Luther's political theory?" and the process of "extraction" begins. As we carve out a "political thought" from Luther's writings, we may cut off the rich theological framework that is essential to his political conclusions.

On this note, Jarrett Carty, Assistant Professor in the Liberal Arts College of Concordia University, Montreal, nudges those who read and study Luther to let his texts comprise the starting point for theoretical development and scholarly inquiry. Luther is not a modern political thinker, envisioning a state "separated" from the tumults of the church. Luther does not discuss the nature of politics or government abstracted from humanity's relationship with God. Carty's *Divine Kingdom, Holy Order: The Political Writings of Martin Luther* provides a rich collection of Luther's writings that engage politics from within Luther's profoundly complex theological corpus. The conclusion for Carty: "[Luther's] theological ideas were intimately connected to his politics and he saw them to have profound political implications" (4). Endeavors that seek to understand Luther's political views without a theology, or that fail to conceive of the political ramifications of Luther's theology, risk being both incomplete and misleading. To help us avoid this waywardness, Carty includes writings that one would not normally associate with political fare, including Luther's commentaries on various passages of Scripture.

In this collection of primary sources, the writings of Luther are divided into three sections: "The
Reformation of Temporal Government,” “The Political Teachings of Scripture,” and “Luther's Applied Political Thought.” Each of the writings has an introduction, offering background and interpretive guidance for the reader. Carty's mastery of the historical context helps the reader discern the immediate objectives of Luther's writing, as we weave each piece into a larger political vision. The standard Luther essays on politics are included, such as “Christian Liberty” and “Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should

This is an indispensable collection of Luther's essays not only for those most concerned with political theory, but for those who take seriously the moral and social implications of theology.

Be Obeyed,” as well as some writings that are not usually associated with the “political writings”: “Commentary on Psalm 101,” “Commentary on Psalm 2,” and “Lectures on Zechariah.” This is an indispensable collection of Luther's essays not only for those most concerned with political theory, but for those who take seriously the moral and social implications of theology. Luther's position in the history of the Christian church and Western civilization generally demands that we read him correctly, and we can only do so if we have access to the relevant writings. Carty's excellent and detailed collection expands our knowledge of Luther's political thought beyond those narrow passages that mention politics and government specifically and should be imitated by those seeking to do the same for other Christian authors. Politics and theology cannot be artificially separated for these thinkers.

Carty does his own interpretive heavy lifting with the inclusion of an “Introductory Essay.” As opposed to being distracted by the modern political questions often imposed on Luther's writings, Carty keeps Luther's political thought in its theological context. The main thesis of the essay bears this out: “Luther always emphatically praised secular government for its divinely ordained purpose to bring order to the temporal world” (9). Yes, it is possible to contend that Luther's “political theory” is that government should provide order, perhaps even expand that into a theory of limited government akin to classical liberalism, and leave it at that. But this misses Luther's larger point: government's purpose exists within a much larger structure created by God. Government should seek its purpose, i.e. order, but should not pursue a purpose beyond that assigned to it in God's design. Government has limited capabilities, rendering it ill-equipped to achieve spiritual ends. Carty explains the oft-misunderstood Lutheran typology of the two kingdoms: “The two governments were the manifestation of two divine gifts, though seemingly contradicting one another, but in fact complementing each other as two distinct ways in which God directed human beings on earth” (12). Luther's two-kingdoms theory refers not to distinct physical realms with different governments, but rather to two different modes of moral thinking. In the Kingdom of God, the law of the Gospel is authoritative. In the Kingdom of the World, civil law and worldly rulers govern, though as instruments of God. Because both kingdoms are ultimately rooted in the authority of God, they cannot be fundamentally opposed to one another. God hands down the law of the Gospel through Christ, and orders temporal governments to maintain the larger human society.

The obvious question is how does one know whether one is in the Godly or Worldly kingdom? When does the moral authority of the Gospel take precedence, and when does the rule of temporal authorities reign? Carty draws upon Luther's distinction between the “inner” and “outer” natures of the human being to assist in answering this question: “No person was wholly Christian or righteous, and thus throughout life on earth, even life in faith, each person remained a sinful creature that must necessarily be restrained, controlled and brought to order through temporal government” (13). We see echoes of this all over Luther's
writings. In *Christian Liberty*, Luther actually takes the argument a step further and contends that good works, compelled by the laws of the Kingdom of the World, "reduce the body to subjection and purify it of its evil lusts, and our whole purpose is to be directed only toward the driving out of lusts" (81). The temporal realm assists in the purgation of evil from fleshly existence, "to make some progress in that which shall be perfected in the future life" (80).

The two kingdoms track a different distinction, even more interesting for understanding the way in which the Christian is to behave in larger society, in Luther’s *Temporal Authority: The Extent to Which It Should Be Obeyed*. As opposed to distinguishing between two natures in one person, Luther argues that the two kingdoms reference two different types of people: the ("real"/"true") Christian that does more than the law commands and the unrighteous/not-Christian that needs the law to constrain behavior. An interesting set of questions arises for Luther: can the use of the sword cohere with Jesus’ command to “turn the other cheek” and to “love your enemy”? Can a Christian follow the dictates of Christ and support or even participate in the violent activities of the government? Carty suggests in his introduction to *Temporal Authority* that these questions are best addressed within the framework of the “inner” and “outer” natures of the person: “The troubled conscience of the Christian prince could be put at ease: insofar as his use of force was for the public good of order and the just punishment of sin; like the hangman, he was doing his divinely ordained duty to curb sin, violence, and transgressions and therefore love his neighbor” (104). Carty’s “Introductory Essay,” unfortunately does not emphasize this crucial point, leaving it to be discussed in the introduction to *Temporal Authority*. Luther walks right up to the line of pacifism (understood as non-violently dealing with conflict), essentially admitting that Jesus teaches pacifism for believers, and then he bridges the gap between pacifism and the use of sword by arguing that many of the Christians’ neighbors “have not attained to such heights” (116) and the Christian has the responsibility to love one’s neighbor. So, there are two different modes of moral thinking, each of which applies to the Christian at different times, in different circumstances. Luther writes, “In what concerns you and yours, you govern yourself by the Gospel and suffer injustice toward yourself as a true Christian; in what concerns the person or property of others, you govern yourself according to love and tolerate no injustice toward your neighbor” (117). The command to “love your neighbor” shifts the moral focus away from the self toward others, and hence confers a different set of moral options (and even responsibilities) on the Christian. When dealing with yourself and your property, the Christian must be pacifist. When dealing with others and their property, the Christian can (and sometimes must) wield the sword.

I believe Luther gets this wrong, but that is another essay. At least one thing is clear, however. Carty’s book, in both its excellent compilation of primary sources and his expert commentary, is essential not just for scholars of politics and/or theology, not just for Lutherans, but for all Christians and for all people who struggle with the relationship between the Christian faith and temporal existence. This is a book to have permanently on the shelf.

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You sprinkle the dead, closer than usual  
as if something inside this rock  
is just now learning to survive  

without roots, already talks  
about lying awake, afraid your fingers  
will crack it open for the mouth  

to cover the one that's started  
the way night over night your hands  
spread out as the distance  

that empties only into river water  
so it comes up each morning  
held in place, not yet breathing.  

Simon Perchik
WHEREVER AND WHENEVER ACADEMIC minds gather, the conversation can always be kept alive by a discussion of the future of the liberal arts in America. By liberal arts we mean those intellectual disciplines and subject matters which are truly liberating, which free the mind from ignorance and prejudice and narrowness and hate. The liberal arts are the only subjects in education which make man really man and not a machine or an economic unit or an animal. They are involved in all those disciplines which truly make an educated, liberated, disciplined man or woman.

I have long contended in these discussions that there is a deep intimate connection between religion and the liberal arts. The highest possible effectiveness of the liberal arts, the point where they become most relevant, most necessary, and most wise is when they are informed, illuminated, and dominated by high religion. By “high religion” I mean the Christian reading of the ultimate realities of life and living, the realization of the sudden brilliant lighting of the landscape of life and history by the mystery of the Incarnation, the miracle of Jesus Christ and the resulting new understanding of God and man, man and man, man and the universe, man and his origin, destiny, and nature. This is finally the heart of the matter, this meeting on a Cross of the timely and the timeless, the temporal and the eternal, the human quest and the divine quest, the human question and the eternal answer. This is the only kind of religion which does not make God the prisoner of a certain inherited way of thinking and feeling.

The relationship between this high religion and the liberal arts is exceedingly complex. It is basically the relationship between Athens and Calvary. The divine Word enters into human culture, imparting new creative power to it. It is a curious fact that the Gospel condemns certain pretensions of human culture but also renews it. Here the Church and the world intermingle. The Gospel sends out vital shoots into all human learning and art. It presents the Christological understanding of man. It requires us to see a connection between the creative, inquiring, liberating spirit and the Holy Spirit of the living God. It tells us that man created in the image of God even though lost can inquire and create but it demonstrates that by reason of sin his works are always ambiguous, wrought out of insecurity and marked with a tragic sense of incompleteness.

And yet he is on a great quest. Even though the ultimate vision is denied, the aspirations are there. Religion, high and intelligent, always reminds man that the culture of the world is like Belshazzar’s feast. There is handwriting on the wall, change and decay in the air. The Church must always be crying to all life and learning, to all the Athenses and Romes of time: “Remember the end.” All things purely human, also knowledge and beauty, are under the law of the dust, and all that is finally left is God and the Gospel and the eternal wisdom of heaven.

Religion, therefore, exercises a limiting, illuminating, and sobering influence on the liberal arts. It places them “sub specie aeternitatis.” While it readily admits that the goal of all liberal arts education is to produce the informed, independent, and critical mind, it also says more definitely than anything else that living is understanding and that this has never been more clearly expressed than by the man who was trained at Tarsus: “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.” The critical mind knows that our judgment is never quite independent of the
approval of past and present authority. Both the liberal arts and high religion insist, however, that it be a tested authority, one that has been refined in the crucible of history and experience and revelation, and the last of these is the greatest.

The proper relation between freedom and responsibility, so important for the life and thought of the modern world, can be established most effectively by a fusion of the liberal arts and high religion. Many of the problems confronting the afternoon of the twentieth century are intellectual and spiritual at the same time. It means, therefore, that the liberal arts and high religion must be studied together and in the same way, by long, lonely hours of study and meditation. Neither comes at a low price. Faith is the free gift of a pitying God, but what is done with that faith in the academic grove and the marketplace requires hard work and profound thought, testing and trial, thought and meditation. In this respect the liberal arts and high religion are very close to each other.

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PENITENT

- St. Jerome, Leonardo da Vinci

Jerome's sunken face belies his forty years. The desert can be hard on a man, hunting a meal a distraction from prayer, seeking water an exercise in humility. Where rocks become both shelter and weapon, the lion's roar at the saint's pain gets lost in the grotto's stones and desert wind. Jerome bruises the flesh that covers his heart. Is this pain all that God offers? Jerome cranes for heavenly light above him. Is this despair all that God offers?

Trina Gaynon
Submission Guidelines

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On The Poets


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Trina Gaynon's poems have appeared in the anthologies Bombshells and Knocking at the Door, and numerous journals including Natural Bridge, Reed, and Runes. Her chapbook An Alphabet of Romance is available from Finishing Line Press.
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