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Robert Farrar Capon

The Fingerprints of God: Tracking the Divine Suspect through the History of Images

Let me expand on my fine introduction you just heard. I have been an ordained priest for 51 years. I have been married twice and divorced once. If someone asks us how long have the two of you been married, what we do is add up her seventeen years of her first marriage, my twenty-seven in my first marriage, and our twenty-three together twice. So the net result is that we have been married ninety years. The next thing is that out of those marriages I have eight children, six out of my first marriage, two from Valerie's first marriage, and that means I have been through age sixteen, nine times, only once when I was dishing it out. What I am portraying here is my less than triumphant career in the church. I was a mission priest for 27 years. For 22 of those 27 years I was the dean of the Diocesan seminary, which was not accredited. It was just a training school for those who would be ordained. I don't know if Lutherans are familiar with what a mission priest is. A mission priest is not the director of a parish. Rather, such a person is the bishop's appointee somewhere who is looked down upon by all really respectable rectors of important parishes. So you are the scullery of the world. At the end of that 27 years, I came to my decision to divorce and marry Valerie.

I was fired from all the jobs that I had. The mission and the seminary were all appointed positions and my bishop didn't approve of divorce. So I spent from 1977 to 1984 "free lancing." That is known as taking out a licence to starve. During that time I wrote magazine pieces and all kinds of stuff. During that time I also got a connection with the *New York Times* newspaper which eventually evaporated. In 1984 I went to work as the assistant to the rector of East Saint Luke's Church, East Hampton in the Hamptons, the home of the rich and famous, Hollywood East; big money, huge important people. So I was there for 12 years, and I was invited to leave from there too. I have never held a job in the church from which I wasn't left off, fired, or invited out. And I have had a wonderful time, because in all that time, I have never believed that I was working for the church as an "institution." I was being who

the church ordained me to be. I was standing in the Order that the church had bestowed upon me. I was standing in that Order whose principle responsibility is Word and Sacrament, and then all the rest of the activities. That is, my focus was first and foremost Word and Sacrament, and not computers, meetings, and all the stuff that surrounds everybody. The net result is that I consider I have had 51 years of a vacation to the priesthood. I was paid by the church, not always well at all, but I enjoyed every moment of it. All I know now is that prior to 1977 when I was fired, I had written four books and since then I have written 22.

So God apparently has in mind for me to get some time to do something God wants me to do, if God wants me to do it. But I did it anyway. I have authored a number of books which are out of print, and 2 failed novels (which were fun and deliberately failed because I kept butting into the novel all the time and pontificating). But I am no longer doing "food" writing because I was fired out of all my food writing jobs. I think I am finding that I am fired for being myself, for being who I am. I am fired for being an apostate from all the "religions" that surround me, especially from the religion of food.

In the early days I wrote pieces on butter, salt, and heavy cream at times. Eventually they invited me to stop doing that because of the "religion" of the food establishment. This is the religion that has 7,000 commandments, redated and updated every year, which tell you what you can't eat; you can't eat cream, you can't eat pork fat, you can't eat beef suet. I finally got around this once. The magazine called *Eating Well*, which is a food conscious magazine, asked me to write a page. So I wrote up a recipe that I had been doing for years. I'll tell you what the recipe is.

You take a big skillet and a lot of pork chops, an inch thick, with the fat left on. You then brown the pork chops in the skillet in lard on both sides. And then while they are browning you sliver up three if not five huge onions. After the pork chops are brown you cover them with the onions, sprinkle some salt and pepper on the top of the onions, and cover the skillet tightly for two hours. At the end of two hours, you take off the lid. If it was too high you burn it. But if it was just nicely low enough, the pork chops are swimming in onion broth. You then take the pork chops out, and put them on a serving platter. Then you crank up the heat and boil down the onion broth adding to it a pint of heavy cream. You boil that down until it reaches the consistency of a

suitable gravy. No thickening should be added. You then salt and pepper it to taste, pour it over the pork chops and serve it.

Now, obviously, given the “religion” of food, the *New York Times* newspaper refused to publish this recipe. A friend of mine asked me how is it that I could suggest a diet like that? I answered, “It is not a diet, it is only a dish.” If you ate it only once a year and you had no medical complications it wouldn’t kill you. You would be very happy. Because unlike most of the pork chops or beef you eat, it doesn’t taste like a shingle. What I did for the magazine *Eating Well* was to write out the narrative recipe like I just described to it you (no list of ingredients). Then I numbered the sentences, and made the piece an exegesis of the verses of the recipe. It was fine. So they published it.

The last thing I want to talk about regarding my introduction, is that my being a heretic or an apostate from the “religion” of food is small potatoes compared to my being an apostate from the “religion” of religion. The Gospel is not the announcement of a “new religion.” “Religion” as an end in itself is trying to find how to “con” God, by your behaviour, to be favourable to you. But the Gospel announces that is quite unnecessary. Jesus, who is God himself, the Son of the Father, has already with the Spirit and the Father together, kindly settled into being kindly disposed to the entire human race. This includes Adolph Hitler as well as your brother-in-law. In this regard consider the reading from John 12:32 where it says, “And I, when I am lifted up from the Earth, will draw all people to myself.” Please note that it does not say “some” people, nor does it say just the “cooperative” people, nor just the “faithful” people. Rather, it says “all” the people. Jesus is the Divine “Hoover” vacuum cleaner, moving over all of the world, everywhere, and sucking up everything into the heavenly bag. That is how it works. It doesn’t work by our cooperation, and it certainly doesn’t work by our “faith.”

Faith is the only way we can recognize that we have laid hold of something that we can’t see, taste, touch, or prove. Faith is trust, in a person, period; end of subject. It is not credence, or accession to a body of doctrine, or to a series of propositions, or anything else. It is trust in a person, including trust in Jesus and trust in that person that Jesus sends to the congregation.

This means the congregation is supposed to have faith that the preacher who has been sent to them will preach the Gospel. It doesn’t always work out right, but it’s still the way the thing works. But none

of this stuff that we proclaim regarding salvation is in any way a reward for our behaviour. The resurrection from the dead is not a reward for good behaviour. In the resurrection of the just and the unjust Jesus gets them all. If you say anything less than that, if you say anything less than Grace forgives all the sins of the world in full and in advance, from now until the final rule, you are proclaiming “bad” news.

“Religion” is “bad” news, because religion gives you all kinds of things you must do to be accepted by God; like you must stand on your head and put your right thumb in your left ear, and grunt and pray all night, and then God may hear you. Similarly the suggestion that you have to fast for forty days, or you have to behave yourself well, or you have to do stuff like this before God will favour you, is all “bad” news. Because sin in the world will make the fulfilment of this expectation impossible.

Very often the church acts as if some kind of competence is assumed in the people we preach to; that they have some kind of control over their lives that we ought to urge them to further use more. But we don’t have that much control over our lives. I have control over only a handful of things in my life. I don’t have control over my psyche. My psyche has buttons all over it which were installed when I was six months old, at two and one half, three, five, seven years, and so on. I can go along as the nicest person in the world and someone can come up to me and press one of those buttons, and bang I am back where I was where I haven’t been for years. Life for us is not a perpetual progress in virtue. That is, it doesn’t operate according to the theory that in the first decade of life you get rid of the first deadly sin, in the second decade you get to work on the second deadly sin, in the third decade you add on the third deadly sin, etc. The idea is here that when you finally get to your seventh decade, when you have conquered all seven deadly sins, then you are ready to die in perfect peace. Have you ever met anybody like that? Nobody’s life goes that way.

We are not here to pass tests. We are not here to qualify. Rather, we are here to trust the insane, wild, gift of the acceptance of God in Christ of all of us. This is an acceptance given not because we are a part of the church or because we are “faithful” ones. The church is the witness to the salvation of the whole world. The church is really a random reality that is not better than the world. By all count, the church is a random sample by the word of baptism. That is, to say that if we could say all this wonderful stuff over a rag-tag broken down group of

folks like the church, we could ipso facto say it over the whole world. We have not improved. We simply trust that God has done it for us. We are clothed with prime righteousness, not our own hard work. And now I shall get on with what I was going to do to begin with.

I am going to talk about the perception and use of the Bible today. My most recent book, *The Fingerprints of God: Tracking the Divine Suspect through History*, came out in July, 2000, and I am going to be touching on a few things in that book. But mostly I want to focus on the images we have of the Bible itself. What do we think or what pictures do we have in our head when we say “Bible” or “Scriptures”? What do we think we are talking about?

You know what the “literalism” image of the Bible is. It is about “truths” that move only through sacred particles. Therefore you are to go to boxes of these particles, put your hand in (without any regard to the shape of the box or the constitution of the particle), pull out a particle, which by definition is true. It is as true as the whole box of particles. Now, this is a sort of madness. However, I want to remind you that this is a literalism of the “Right.”

There is also a literalism of the “Left.” This is a reality that has been at least present for the latter half of the 20th century or more. That is the literalism that says, the “Right” literalism that everything in Scripture is uniformly true is nonsense, but somewhere there has to be something that is true that we can say. So those of the “Left” begin a great reductionist crusade to find the thing that is true. This always is done by culling out the stuff that “isn’t true,” the stuff that isn’t historically respectable. Which means you get rid of the stuff that is morally reprehensible, and in that way you begin to clean up the act of the Bible. So finally all you may have left is five verses of Mark, or whatever. By doing this one is looking for the true sacred original.

However the literalism of the “Left” is no better than the literalism of the “Right.” It fails to understand that while the literalism of the “Right” takes the wholeness of the Bible seriously and then in a reductionistic-like fashion narrowly defines its context role, what the literalism of the “Left” does is break up the wholeness of the Bible and only talks reductionistically of the truth of a few parts. We think we have the same Bible, and we do in fact, but with literalism of the “Left” in biblical criticism, you didn’t have the same Bible from person to person. For example, in some seminaries you are taught you mustn’t preach from the Gospel of John, but the church still continues to do

that. The point here is that it is important to remember that literalism occurs on both sides, "Left" and "Right." It is just that the literalism of the "Left" has been invested with the idea of critical thought of the language. But either way, the box of true particles is the wrong way to go about it. You should not be looking for true particles in the Bible you can pull out.

The next image persons today have of the Bible is that it is a "manual." This is bad too. I have heard preachers use the phrase, "the Bible is the manufacturer's manual" (God being the manufacturer) for the operation of human beings." Well, that is also wrong. The Bible suggests all kinds of things that one would be ill advised to try, like plucking out one's eye. It doesn't work that way, you can't realistically use it that way. The trouble with the "manual" image can be further seen when you consider how we approach manuals. When you get a manual with your new car, what do you do with it? If you are like most people, you put it in the glove compartment and leave it there, until you have a problem or don't know how to do something. Then you go to the manual to try and find an answer.

But that is totally wrong as far as use of the Bible is concerned. It is not something we simply go to with our questions, because Jesus is famous for never answering a question, except with another question. He really frustrates everybody. The simplest illustration of why the "manual" approach is bad is to ask yourself the question, "Would you join a group that was going to hear someone expound or exegete a Ford manual every Sunday?" You wouldn't. The whole idea that the Bible is a manual which answers your questions misses the point. If anything, the Bible is a book that tells you to forget about your questions, because it is going to ask you many more questions than you ever thought of. It is going to pose problems for you. That was Jesus' whole method.

You will remember that Jesus was asked by a person, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Here was a real capital "S" spiritual seeker. And Jesus says, "What are you asking me for, you know the commandment." In effect, Jesus doesn't answer the question. What he says finally to the man is to sell all he had and follow him. That is it. And the man goes away sad because he had many riches. He asked Jesus a question, Jesus didn't immediately answer it, and when he finally gave a kind of response, the man didn't like what he heard and went away depressed. This is how it works. This means also that whatever you say about the Bible, it can't be a book of doctrines. In fact there

are many different systems of doctrines in it. Similarly, it can't be a book of moral advice. It can't be a book of ethics, because there are a number of ethical systems in it. For example, what Jesus says about what should be done with a woman caught in adultery is not the same as what is said should be done in the Book of Leviticus. So where are we?

All that we know is that Jesus loved losers, he delighted in sinners, and he spent his whole career hanging out with them. If Jesus had no problem hanging out with them, why should we? One of the funniest things that happened at one of the General Conventions of the Episcopal Church was a resolution of substance regarding the fact that the church would not ordain practising homosexuals to the priesthood. In the process of debating this resolution a suffragan bishop of Massachusetts got up with a smile on her face and said, "Mr. Chairman, I would like to move an amendment to this resolution." The chairman asked her what her amendment was, to which she replied, "that the Episcopal Church will not ordain practising homosexuals to the priesthood any more." And with that the matter was exposed for what it was. If there is any truth to the claim that homosexuality is genetically determined, we are clearly, cheerfully, and gladly baptizing little homosexuals all over the place. Infant baptism is the wire in the dark across the road of modern theology. Because infant baptism says there are no requirements to be risen in Christ. So every little child brought to infant baptism, who knows nothing, believes nothing, has done nothing, this child has the Bible right now, full and correct. And the remarkable thing about this is, if this can be said over that child, ipso facto, it can be said over the whole world.

There are no requirements for redemption in Christ. Not even one's non-faith can affect Christ's giving of the gift. The foolish virgins didn't have enough faith to stay at the party they were already at, but they were still called by God to be members of the wedding. The dumb guy who buried the talent is still the possessor of the gift. The gift is given at the beginning of every one of Jesus' judgment parables. The first judgment in every judgment parable is a favourable judgment of every human character in the parable. The first word at the last judgment over "everybody" in the world is going to be, "you're okay by me." Consider the king in the king's son's wedding. Consider the king's judgment over the no-goods who killed all his servants and then he killed them. Consider the guy who wouldn't put on a wedding garment.

His first judgment over everyone of those was “you’re okay by me.” The only place in Jesus’ parables of judgment that you can go to hell from, is the heaven of the acceptance of the God character at the beginning. Everybody goes from inside the party to outside, but they begin inside the party. And the image of the party was a known favourite of Jesus. You get into the party because God includes you, and then you get out because you’re really stupid, because you choose to deny the party you are already at.

Let me note one quick thing in passing. In Jesus’ parables he normally uses images of separation (such as outer darkness) but in one parable he uses present images for hell, and that is the parable of the prodigal son. At the end of the parable Jesus brings on the older brother; Mr. Responsibility, Mr. Complainer, Mr. Grouch, Mr. Resentment for anyone he ever met. But where is he when he starts complaining? He is at the party, right outside the house in the courtyard. And that is where he is standing when the father goes out to plead with him. They are in the midst of the party. The father is the Christ figure in the parable. This is nothing other than the descent of Christ into hell. The older brother is in hell already. He is in the hell of his own bookkeeping, when the father in the parable has cancelled all bookkeeping on everyone.

Turning to another image, Scripture is not a book. True, in one sense, it happens to be in the form of a book since the invention of printing, or since the invention of folio or scroll. But as Bible, the Bible strictly speaking is a voice in the church. The Bible is a “sound,” that in faith one hears, and in hearing it one finds the Word of God. That’s the whole purpose of the lectionary. That is why the three year lectionary cycle is the best thing that ever happened to preaching. We hear this voice now, seriously and considerably, again and again over the three year cycle. And preachers are to seriously preach on all the selections, and not simply on their five favourite passages. So the Bible is a voice. It is a voice of course of the Word of God himself. It isn’t the church, but it is in the church that we hear it. While you can buy a concordance of the Bible, the only concordance that really matters much for you as a preacher is the concordance of the “human.”

The sound of the Word as concordance comes in this way. When you hear the word “sin” you also hear the passage, “He has made him who knew no sin to become sin.” The echoing of the concordance in the head, that is what makes real preaching. Consider the theologian Augustine. He didn’t have such a thing as a printed concordance in

which to look things up. The stuff was in his head.

In line with this, a powerful thing has happened to the church. That is, the wonderful proliferation of different versions or translations of the Biblical text. The net result is that we do not for a lifetime read the same version or translation all the time (unless you read it in Greek or Hebrew). Now, to a degree, it must be admitted that people who are a certain kind of evangelical, who only use the King James version, have an advantage. Whether or not they handle the Scriptures they have well, they still know the Scriptures they do have well. They often know them better than many of us who embrace a variety of translations. But still the Voice is not heard clearly through the King James language because that language is not the language of people today, and therefore a strange translation to people today. So my advice to anybody is, as much as possible, work like mad at reading the Bible in the original languages of Greek and Hebrew. And then read it in other translations. The point is, the Bible is not primarily a thing or a book. It is a voice in the church. It is a sound, and it should be a sound in our minds. That's why the "Daily Office" is provided, to remind you the Scripture is not something you read to make a summary of. It is not a little pit you mine once a week. Rather, it is a place where you live daily, on any ongoing basis.

A better image I would propose for the Bible is that of a "container," but not an inanimate container holding stuff together. Rather, I mean a "living" container. Consider, for example, the Bible as the "womb" of the Word of God. Remember, the Word of God in the first instance does not refer to the Bible. It refers to the only begotten Son of the Father, the Word by whom all things are made. That's the Word of God. Jesus is God's Word incarnate, and Scripture is God's Word written. But the primary reference of Word is to God. The Word is present to us in the Pascal lamb, in the Red Sea, in the rock in the wilderness. So we want something that is a living container, and I suggest that we use the image of a womb. Further, following from this, if you say the Scripture is the Word of God, that is like saying Mary is the mother of God. This is a most orthodox claim. The Bible is the Word of God, because it is the womb of the Word of God.

One good thing about the image of the womb is that, when you think about it, you have to wait for what the womb contains. You can't go barging in there at three weeks or four months and grab what you want and take it out. You have to wait for the time of the Word's own

delivery. This affirms the importance of the patient waiting on Scripture.

Another good thing about this image, is that there are things in the womb which when the Word is delivered are discarded: placenta, umbilical cord, and the embryonic fluid. In parallel fashion, while those things were necessary for the gestation of the fetus in the womb (of the Word in the womb), they are not (when the Word, or the baby, is finally delivered), necessary for the manifestation or proclamation of the Word at that point.

One of the simplest illustrations of this is can be found in the Old Testament. Animal sacrifice in the Old Testament is the placenta of something that is discarded in the development of the life of the Hebrews. It is something that once was fact and is later lifted up as an image of that incomprehensible thing Jesus did when he died on the cross. It becomes something it wasn't. It was necessary only to get the Word to this point. And when the Word gets to this point it transcends animal sacrifice as the inspired word of the Scriptures. We believe that however the Holy Spirit deals with this grab bag of historical accidents (you know, J, E, D, P, Q, and all the other surmised documents) we believe it is one story or one novel. This is what it really is, one whole. Somehow or other, we are invited to believe that it is one story and that it has one star. That star is the Word of God, the second person of the Trinity, who eventually is, of course, the Word incarnate in the Christ of history. That is the story from start to finish.

Actually you could take the Bible as a boy meets girl love story. In the first two chapters of Genesis, boy (the boy is God), meets girl (the girl is creation), and falls in love with her. This is very good. I love you, he says. And in chapter two, everything is beautiful. Everyone is naked. Everyone is having a good time. Everyone is getting everything they want. And there is no "religion." There was no religion in Eden. It was invented on the way out. In the third chapter, of course, boy loses girl because girl (creation) "blows it." Adam and Eve blow the whole thing. And then the rest of the Bible, until you get to the end of Revelation, is boy pursues girl. That is it. The Word is always pursuing the fallen one. When God cast them out of the Garden, God followed them into the brokenness of the mess they have made. And God saves them, not from the mess, but in the mess. That finally is revealed by Christ's own dying in the mess, of the mess, and making the mess the vehicle of his presence to the whole world, by the power of his resurrection.

And at the end, of course, finally you get boy marries girl. The boy is the lamb. The girl is the new Jerusalem, the new creation, the bride coming down from heaven, adorned for her husband. And the marriage covenant of the lamb of God and his bride is the happy ending. You can tie the Bible together in many ways, but it is “one” story. And if it is not one story, it isn’t worth preaching. It is not a manual. It is not a respectable compendium of theology. It is not a consistent compendium of ethics. So go find something else to do if you can’t preach it as one story. Peddle your papers somewhere else. This is what it is about. It is “the” story. That is what the earliest baptismal creed was all about. It was simply facts about a story. It wasn’t basically statements of doctrine that came into the forefront. To be sure, it included some doctrine, but the form was still the recitation of the mystery by which we were saved; a recitation of the shape of the story. When someone is baptized you get them to tell you the story back. The tradition is what you taught them, and in the baptismal ceremony they were to render it back. That is what baptism is about, it’s about giving back what we gave you. The Lord is saying, hey, you’re a page in the one story.

I am going to do something different now. What I’ve said so far you could more or less find in my book, *The Fingerprints of God*. But I am on to my next book already. Therefore I am going to give you some background on my next book. I am going to tell you what the main image of the Scripture is in the next book. In my next book the Bible is seen as a film, a movie, whose director is the Holy Spirit. This approach I believe will save people from all the bad images that I described before, because it handles all kinds of stuff. Allow me to illustrate this.

How many of you have seen the film, *American Beauty*? Good. This image of the Bible as “film” is something that arose as a result of some lectures I gave at Valparaiso, Indiana. After the lectures, Valerie and I were relaxing in the hotel room and she said why don’t we watch a movie. So we rented the movie *American Beauty* in our room. At the end of the movie I think I said something like, “what a bunch of losers.” And on that note we went to bed. The next morning in Chicago’s O’Hare airport, while waiting for our flight, we discussed the film. I want to share with you the results of that discussion. It was in that discussion that we began to think about the shape of *American Beauty* as one story. I believe the director had in mind this one thing. These then are the notes that came out of that discussion.

First of all, I want focus on some notes regarding the characters. Everyone in the film is a bona fide loser. They are all trapped in dying lives. The lead character, played by Kevin Spacey, is as good as dead from the very beginning. In fact the first thing he says in a voice over is "I'll be dead in 6 months." For the rest of the picture his life is running relentlessly downhill, despite his attempts to make something of it. And at the end he is literally dead, shot in the back of the head. His eyes are open, there is a smile on his face, and again in the voice over, we hear him make an upbeat speech expressing satisfaction with the way things turned out.

Spacey's wife is also a loser. Whatever kind of life she and her husband may once have had together, it has long since gone. She is a married single. She mirrors her husband in his mood swings between wistfulness and anger. But she excludes him through a preoccupation with her own lifestyle. Her attempted career in real estate sales gets her nowhere except into bed with her biggest competitor, a user who discards her at the first inconvenience. And just before the end of the film we see her driving home, pistol in hand, swearing she won't be a victim anymore.

Their daughter is initially presented to us as a passive-aggressive piece of teenage work, gasping for air in the vacuum of her parents' marriage. Eventually she softens a bit when she falls in love with the boy next door. And in the end the two of them are planning to go off to New York and support themselves by selling drugs.

The daughter's high school girlfriend, the "American Beauty" of this film, for most of the picture is presented as a blond bombshell, bragging endlessly about her sexual encounters with men. But just before the end, when the Kevin Spacey character (having long fantasized about bedding her), finally makes a serious pass, we see her confess that her "super slut" identity has been a lie. She has been a virgin all along.

The boy next door is portrayed as a bright independent type, who nonetheless knuckles under to his father's discipline. But when his father is out of sight, he goes his own way with his strange hobby of video taping everything and everybody. He has a pornographic career on the side.

The father of the boy next door is a "gay bashing" ex Marine Corps colonel, who rules his household with a rod of iron. But after the film is well along, and after he has been prying into the tapes in his son's room, we see him watching through the bedroom window as the

boy apparently commits fellatio on the Kevin Spacey character. Later we see the colonel walk over in the pouring rain to the garage next door and make a homosexual advance of his own on Spacey. In a scene of massively mixed signals, Kevin rebuffs him in embarrassment and we watch the colonel walk back home destroyed. However, next we see an off-camera person with a gun steal up behind Kevin and fire a single shot into the back of his head. Only at the very end of the film, when we catch one last glimpse of the colonel wearing a bloody t-shirt, does it become clear that he, and not Spacey's wife, was the murderer.

And finally there is the character of the colonel's wife. She is the most nearly dead of all the characters of the film. Throughout the movie we see her as a mere shell of a woman, drained of all signs of life by her husband's harshness. This we are left to surmise at the end of the film is because of the collapse of all sexual connections with him.

There is one other thing I thought of after I wrote this, and that is there are two other characters in the movie that intrigue me, the two gay guys. The fascinating thing about them is one of the director's big jokes, the thing he has most fun with. The director seems to be saying everybody else in the film is going to "hell in a handbag." Everyone else is a victim of the fallen world and the misery of the mess the world has created. What the director has done is taken two "gay" guys, who the world would say are the mess, and made them the image of the unfallen world. The guys are nice. They are friendly, kindly, and they are in love with each other. They are wonderful people. Isn't there a glorious piece of humour in this story, using the worst candidate in most people's eyes to depict the unfallen angelic order? This is a part of creation that is still Eden, which is paradoxically portrayed by what has to pass for messed-up people, in the eyes of many people.

So Valerie and I proceeded to have a discussion about the film. Since Valerie and I used to run a film class in the parish I worked at for 12 years, I asked her who she would identify as the Christ figure in the film. I didn't mean the one that looked like Jesus, but the figure in the film that worked to resolve the plot. Now, the Christ figure could be a person, a human being, or not. For example, in all the Lassie stories the Christ figure is Lassie, the dog. The dog is the one who makes the plot get reconciled. In Woody Allen's film, *September*, the house, in which a totally dysfunctional family was brought to act functionally, was the Christ figure.

Valerie's first candidate for the Christ figure in *American Beauty*

was the colonel's son. She said this because she observed that he even acts like Jesus. When his father physically abuses him he never strikes back. Further, his use of his video camera supports this choice. He loves and preserves everything he sees with it, which is a pretty good image of his having the whole world in his hands. And on top of that, when he's about to leave for New York he says to his mother, "Take care of dad." This she noted was a neat twist on Jesus' request, "O mother, woman behold your son."

The next candidate, Valerie said, is the Kevin Spacey character himself. If you remember, after he overhears his daughter's girlfriend say she likes men who are in great physical shape, he goes into a middle-age frenzy of push-ups, and weight training. But then in the scene where the girl confesses she is still a virgin, his fantasy life instantly dematerializes, and without laying a hand on her gently smiles at her. That smile, so far as I'm concerned, said Valerie, is the image of his restoration to the truth of his existence. In that moment, the way forward to being a caring, loving husband opens up to him. For the first time he is truly alive. And to drive the point home, the director has the brilliant idea of bringing that smile back in the shot of Kevin Spacey after he is dead. It is the smile, not the words he says in the voice over, that becomes the crowning image of the movie.

And then Valerie said, there is also the Marine Corps colonel. Of course the movie doesn't show you if he dies or rises, but when he kills Kevin Spacey he doesn't destroy his whole previous life. He can't fake his previous life, he destroyed himself. And when his wife implicitly accepts the job of taking care of him there is at least a hint of resurrection. "I realize," she said, "I am making someone who virtually committed suicide into a Christ figure, but that's okay. For all practical purposes," she continued, "Jesus was a suicide. He set himself up to be crucified. He said, 'No one takes my life from me, I lay it down myself.' If he would have stayed out of Jerusalem, at least he wouldn't have died at that particular Passover."

"But," Valerie continued, "it's the colonel's wife who's my best candidate for a Christ figure. You see she's dead for the whole film, and she has no apparent resurrection. But, if you are going to talk about life in the midst of death why can't we see her on-going death as at least an image of new life. Sure, most people would say it's just her way of coping, but so what. Corpses don't cope, only the living do, and anyway she's the only one who understands everything that is going

on.” “Understands,” I asked, “how do you figure that?” Valerie responded, “She understands the way God understands. Like God, she just puts up with everything. She takes the messy lives of those around into her death and lets them be; just as God takes all the sinners of the world into His body on the cross and lets them be. Moreover, her son seems to have faith in her tolerant forgiveness when he commits his father to her care. But about his father we just don’t know. The movie gives us no image of the faith of his father.” “However, that doesn’t matter,” she said. “Whether he comes to faith or not, she still understands and forgives. All of which is made clear by her final scene in the movie. She’s sitting at the foot of her staircase, head bowed, ears covered with her hands, and when we hear the gunshot go off, she doesn’t even move a muscle. If that doesn’t point to ‘Father forgive them, for they know not what they do,’ I don’t know what does.” After saying this, Valerie indicated that she just figured out what the title of my next book should be, it should be “Genesis, the Movie,” because it was going to be a commentary on the first three chapters of Genesis. And I said, “I’ve got the subtitle, that is, ‘A Foreign Film with No Subtitles.’”

Now I am going to give you one more thing to lay some groundwork. This is a poem by Marianne Ann Moore, a great and good friend of E. E. Cummings. A wonderful poet in her own right. It’s a free verse poem of five stanzas. The title of this poem is “Poetry.” However, every time the word “poetry” comes up replace it in your mind with the word “Scripture.” And whenever the word “poets” comes up replace it in your mind with the word “preachers.”

POETRY

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important
beyond all this fiddle.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it,
one discovers that there is in
it after all, a place for the genuine.

Hands that can grasp, eyes
that can dilate, hair that can rise
if it must, these things are important not because a

high sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because
 they are useful; when they become so derivative
 as to become unintelligible,
 the same thing may be said for all of us, that we
 do not admire what
 we cannot understand; the bat,
 holding on upside down or in quest of something to

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll,
 a tireless wolf under
 a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse
 that feels a flea,
 the base-ball fan, the statistician —
 nor is it valid
 to discriminate against “business documents and

school-books”: all these phenomena are important. One must
 make a distinction
 however: when dragged into prominence by half poets,
 the result is not poetry,
 nor till the poets among us can be
 “literalists of
 the imagination” — above
 insolence and triviality and can present

for inspection, imaginary gardens with real toads in them,
 shall we have it.

In the meantime, if you demand on one hand,
 the raw material of poetry in
 all its rawness and
 that which is on the other hand
 genuine, then you are interested in poetry.

The crucial thing, of course, is that the preachers among us must become literalists of the imagination. The Bible is an imaginary garden with the real toad of the divine frog in the midst of it, leaping in astonishing bounds. Therefore what this does for us is get us out of the fact-fiction trap; fact is true, fiction is false. Take the first two chapters of Genesis, the two creation accounts. We know what they are. They

are updated Babylonian stuff plus other stuff that came from various places. But there it sits, it's poetry. The garden of Eden is an imaginary garden with a real toad of the mystery in it. That's what it is. Nobody claims it was a reporter's account, because there was no one around to take notes. No one ever claimed they could prove it literally happened (but of course some have tried). But that is not the point. There are lots of facts, all of which are boring. There are lots of fictions which are truer than any fact, because they get to you. They reach you, they carry through to you something important for you, something important about your being, about your existence. This gets us off the hook of imaginary is false and factual equals real or true. The imaginary arrives at truths through different methods. The imaginary arrives at truths by images. You have to get used to the transformative power of the Gospels which can and do a remake of Genesis, and begin with the same "in the beginning." And then you can't finally decide what you're going to do with that until you get to the very thing, the revelation "I am, the beginning and the end, the alpha and omega." That's how it works. You have to listen to the images speaking to each other. You have to listen until the image of "the beginning" reappears now under the image of the "pascal lamb." You have to go back to the image of "a covenant made in blood" (namely, Noah's covenant followed by the rainbow, mercy, and Abraham's covenant of circumcision, and the Sinai covenant of law, torah). You have to wait for the meaning of all that until you finally see the rest of the blood; the blood of the pascal lamb, the blood on the doorpost, the blood of Christ, the bloody sweat, the water and the blood. This is how it works. As all the greats in the church have always known, it works this way. They have always played with these images. They have always tied them together.

In light of this I am concerned with the church's hymnody. We have so many didactic, explanatory hymns that tell God the things we need to have done. By contrast, the earlier hymnody of the church involved a playing with images. The half-poetry of so many present hymns doesn't know how to play with images. Present hymnody doesn't know how to listen or work with images. Unfortunately, that's the kind of world we're preaching to. Despite the fact that we are in films bombarded with images, our films tend to go to the lowest common denominator.

Another wonderful thing about the Spirit being the director of the Genesis and biblical film, is that you know perfectly well that the director

of a film doesn't actually care two figs for what the author of the script had in mind. The director will go where the director wants with this thing, irrespective of how the original author or the script writers conceived it. The director is going to play it the way the director wants to play it, in light of the way the director hears the interplay of conversation among the images, back and forth. And that is what happens. We are not bound into this original intent business. It may be interesting and helpful in some ways, but it doesn't govern the film called the Bible or any part of it.

Let me do one more thing. Imagine with me briefly the interplay of images at the beginning of the creation story as a film.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. You're seeing a film. What is on the screen? Do you see black? Augustine said that day "one" was outside the other six days of creation, that it was the eternal today. By that he meant that it was creation existing fully but inchoatively as its beginning in God, in the dialogue with the Trinity, in the Word itself, and not yet existing on its own terms. And the earth was without form and void and darkness covered everything. Then the Spirit of God moved on the face of the waters. What is on the screen now? You shouldn't see anything. It is still a blank screen. There is nothing to see. Augustine said God made the whole creation out of nothing, but God did it by intermediary steps. God's recipe for creation has three steps. In the first step, you take a big, huge bowl full of nothing. And the second thing is that the word of the Spirit kneads that nothing until it turns into a "must," but it's not yet something. This is brilliant thinking. It sounds like thinking science has only recently gotten to thinking of. And then God said, "Let there be light." What's on the screen now? Do you see light? No, you don't. There is nothing there for light to shine on, and light itself is invisible. What colour is space? It is black, except where the light is reflected. And yet it is filled with light. One can see the parallels to the Word that is the light of the world, yet is invisible.

And God called the light day, and the darkness night. He divided the light from the darkness. But there is still nothing, because the light is invisible. The sun had not come up, because the sun doesn't arrive until the fourth day. So there is nothing on the screen. The whole job is done by God, but God never one day decided to make a movie. God is God. God does not play by our rules. God does not have a time before God made the world. The point is, even the Hebraic authors who cleaned

up the Babylonian creation myth were no “mean” theologians. They were not about to claim the Eternal played with the same book of rules as we do. It is only when you get to verse six of the story, when God said let there be a firmament, that you get something you can see that ruffles the darkness. Then you get the light on the water.

This is how you play with the images of Scripture. Now I would be happy to entertain questions. Thank you.