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## The Cresset (Vol. LXXVI, No. 2, Advent/Christmas)

Valparaiso University

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# CRESSET

A review of literature, the arts, and public affairs    Advent/Christmas 2012

MOELLERING COLLECTION

VALPARAISO UNIVERSITY



**Valparaíso**  
University

**The Scientist's Finger**

Thomas Cathcart

**The Films of  
Kenneth Lonergan**

Fredrick Barton

**Thinking About Thinking**

Harold K. Bush

**The Knight of Faith and  
The Dark Knight**

Ross Moret



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On the cover: Nalini Jayasuriya (Mount Lavinia, Sri Lanka, b. 1926). *Offering (Wise Men)*, undated. Acrylic on fabric. Gift of Crossings Community and of the Reverend Dr. Edward H. and Mrs. Marie (née Hoyer) Schroeder. Purchased by the Schroeders in 2002 from Nalini when she was the Paul T. Lauby Artist in Residence and Edward was Senior Mission Scholar at the Overseas Ministries Study Center, New Haven, Connecticut. Brauer Museum of Art, 2011.21.003.

In *Offering (Wise Men)*, Jesus is luminous in Mary's arms. The wise men bring gold (bottom), frankincense (middle), and—not myrrh, but—a dove of peace. (Marie Schroeder, quoting the artist.)

Nalini Jayasuriya is a third-generation Anglican Sinhalese Christian in predominantly Buddhist and Hindu Sri Lanka. As a precocious young teacher, musician, poet, and painter in the Anglican St. Thomas College prep school, Mount Lavinia, Sri Lanka, Jayasuriya received a three-year British Council Scholarship to study art in England and Europe. In 1979–1980, she received a research scholarship to the "Religion and the Arts" program at Yale University Divinity School. At her master's degree exhibit, she said "My expression is that of a Christian believer, a Hindu observer, and a student of Buddhism." Later she added, "Within the expression of every religion and wisdom teaching of the human race, however much they differ, is a unified intention to reveal that there is in this world a much greater power than ourselves." As to her *Magi* paintings, she has written, "The Asian strives to escape his selfhood... In sharp contrast, the Magi appear, seeking the miracle of a new creation. 'Behold, I make all things new.'" -Richard H. W. Brauer



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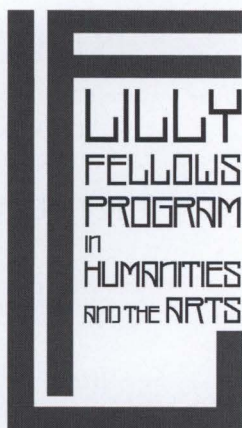
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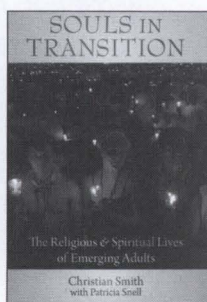
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## 2011 WINNER



**Souls in Transition:**  
The Religious and Spiritual  
Lives of Emerging Adults  
By Christian Smith with Patricia Snell  
Oxford University Press, 2009

## 2009 WINNER

**The American University  
in a Postsecular Age**  
Edited by Douglas Jacobsen and  
Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen  
Oxford University Press, 2008

## 2007 WINNER

**Protestant Theology and the  
Making of the Modern  
German University**  
By Thomas Albert Howard  
Oxford University Press, 2006

## 2006 WINNER

**Educating for Shalom: Essays  
on Christian Higher Education**  
By Nicholas Wolterstorff  
Edited by Clarence W. Joldersma and  
Gloria Goris Stronks, Calvin College  
William B. Eerdmans Publishing  
Company, 2004

## Announcing the Fifth Biennial

# Lilly Fellows Program Book Award

The Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts invites nominations  
for the Lilly Fellows Program Book Award.

The biennial Lilly Fellows Program Book Award honors an original and imaginative work from any academic discipline that best exemplifies the central ideas and principles animating the Lilly Fellows Program. These include faith and learning in the Christian intellectual tradition, the vocation of teaching and scholarship, and the history, theory or practice of the university as the site of religious inquiry and culture.

Works under consideration should address the historical or contemporary relation of Christian intellectual life and scholarship to the practice of teaching as a Christian vocation or to the past, present, and future of higher education.

Single authored books or edited collections in any discipline, published in 2009 to 2012, are eligible.

A Prize of \$3000 will be awarded at the Lilly Fellows Program national Conference at the University of Scranton, October 18-20, 2013.

The committee will receive nominations of academic faculty, clergy, and others. Authors or editors cannot nominate their own works.

## Nomination deadline is March 1, 2013

For nomination procedures and further information, please visit:  
<http://www.lillyfellows.org/GrantsPrizes/2011LFPBookAward.aspx>

### The Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts

The Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts, established in 1991, seeks to strengthen the quality and shape the character of church-related institutions of higher.

First, it offers graduate and residential postdoctoral teaching fellowships for young scholars who wish to renew their sense of vocation within a Christian community of learning in order to prepare themselves for positions of educational leadership within church-related institutions.

Second, it maintains a collaborative National Network of Church-Related Colleges and Universities that sponsors a variety of activities and publications designed to explore the Christian character of the academic vocation and to strengthen the religious nature of church-related institutions. The National Network represents a diversity of denominational traditions, institutional types, and geographical locations.

The Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts is based in Christ College, the interdisciplinary honors college of Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Indiana.  
For more information, please consult the Lilly Fellows Program website at

[www.lillyfellows.org](http://www.lillyfellows.org)



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# IN LUCE TUA

## *In Thy Light*

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### An Advent Fast

**A**NOTHER ELECTION IS BEHIND US. “AND there was much rejoicing.” American election campaigns have evolved into marathons that test the endurance of both candidates and voters. If not everyone is happy with the outcome, everyone at least is happy when they are over. The candidates spend months on the road giving speeches, working the crowds, and raising money. We as voters only have to watch, listen, and make up our minds. That ought to be easy enough, but we still find the process a burden. In my experience, this campaign was no worse than others. Of course, it had its share of negativity, mendacity, and absurdity, but when people complain about our ugly elections, I remember political scientist Samuel Popkin’s observation: if American politics are vulgar it is because Americans are vulgar. Our politicians are no fools. We might tell them that we want a modern-day version of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, but they know that we would not watch the Lincoln-Douglas debates even if they came in an iPhone app. They also know what actually makes us pay attention, what gets us excited, and what kinds of things we remember. Campaigns are crass, ugly, and loud, because we respond to them when they are that way.

But now the campaigns are finally silent, and just in time, because the Christmas noise is well underway. A few radio stations start playing Christmas music as early as November 1, but our holiday observances really get started every year when Americans finish giving thanks for all the blessings in their lives just in time to rush off and go shopping. Almost no one is happy that the Christmas season gets started so early. This year, stores like Target and Wal-Mart were widely criticized for launching their Black Friday sales

on Thanksgiving Thursday, but the stores were as full as ever and labor union protests against retailers had little impact. I am tempted to paraphrase Popkin: if Christmas is vulgar, it is because Christians are vulgar. If Christmas is not what it should be, maybe we should stop blaming capitalists, or the “War on Christmas,” or whomever. If there is something wrong with Christmas, perhaps the fault is our own.

The time of year called “the Christmas season” is also known as Advent. Advent was once a time of repentance and fasting, a season of preparation during which we simplified our lives and awaited the coming of the Lord. It has since become a time of excess and consumption. We overeat, overspend, and generally overdo it. But if we no longer fast from food, there are other fasts we might undertake. In “Thinking about Thinking,” Harold K. Bush proposes a digital fast. For a couple of days each week, shut the computer off and leave the smartphone behind. Give your brain a rest from electronic stimulation. And after reading Jennifer Forness’s reflections on the absence of silence in contemporary music (“Turn That Stuff Down”), I have decided that this Advent I need a noise fast. Noise, like many other kinds of physical stimulation, is addictive. We surround ourselves with artificial noise: music constantly in the background, television news and sports that we mostly ignore anyway, and the constant beeping and buzzing of various gadgets.

If we can turn down the noise, we might be able to hear something much more important. Without all the artificial noise, we will be better able to hear the real sounds created by people and places near and dear to us. As Josef Pieper wrote in *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, “only the silent hear and those who do not remain silent do not hear.” When we are silent, we can experience the world and God’s presence in it. So many things come and go noisily, hurling themselves at our senses and disappearing as soon as the next one pushes them aside. But at the Nativity, God the Eternal comes into our world as God the Incarnate and comes to us as a child born in the silence of night. During Advent, we wait and listen for this God. ✠

—JPO



# The Scientist's Finger

Thomas Cathcart

**P**AUL TILlich USED TO TELL HIS CLASSES about a scientist at Harvard who approached him to say he would not be attending Tillich's public lecture that evening because he knew it would be irrational. Tillich invited him to "please come, sit in the front row, and anytime I say something you think is irrational, raise your finger, so I will know." "No," said the scientist, "I would have my finger raised the whole time."

And then Tillich would laugh. We thought he was probably laughing at the absurdity of what the scientist said. But it occurs to me now that perhaps he was laughing instead at a sort of cosmic joke. Perhaps what struck him funny is that the scientist had pinpointed the nature of the dialogue, or lack thereof, between people of faith and people outside the community of faith.

Tillich famously wrote that theology occurs only within the circle of faith, that it is by, and principally for, those who are already grasped by faith. Looked at from outside the circle of faith, theological statements *are* in a sense irrational. In Christian terms, if you are not grasped by the power of Jesus as the Christ, no amount of theologizing will convert you.

Karl Barth thought this meant that theology has little to say to those outside the circle, but Tillich was unwilling to go that far. He thought that clarifying the questions of human existence and showing how they correspond to assertions of faith can sometimes open up a space in which genuine dialogue between the church and the world becomes possible, a dialogue that can sometimes even remove a barrier to faith.

## People Have Faith in God Because They Want To

We will take a look at an extreme instance, a statement that looks totally different from inside and outside the circle of faith and see if elucidation can create the possibility of dialogue:

"People have faith in God because they want to."

Who was the author of this statement? Was it Freud, who thought religions are wish-fulfilling illusions? Or perhaps Marx, who called religion the opiate of the masses? Or was it Nietzsche, who thought Christianity springs from resentment of the strong by the weak? Or perhaps Richard Dawkins, the contemporary biologist, who called one of his books *The God Delusion*?

Actually, these words—"People have faith in God because they want to"—were spoken by Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement.

"People have faith in God because they *want* to?" What could she have meant? Was she capitulating to the taunts of the agnostics and atheists of her day? Was she unaware of the seeming irrationality of what she said? If we were "new atheists," we would certainly pounce on her statement as evidence of the wish-fulfilling character of religious faith. What could make it clearer that religion is an irrational attempt to fashion a God from our own desires?

As it happens, we don't know exactly what Dorothy Day had in mind, but the notion that people have faith in God because they want to



just may contain the secret of religious faith. It is a secret that the faithful tacitly understand, although often through a glass darkly. It is also a secret that, even when revealed, has been unpersuasive to millions of people throughout history and perhaps to most people in the northern hemisphere in our day. Indeed, how one reacts to this secret may indicate whether one is inside or outside the circle of faith.

Much has been written recently about the difference between faith and belief; Harvey Cox, for example, has written an entire book about that difference (*The Future of Faith*, 2009). In both the Bible and much of Christian history, we find that faith is not synonymous with “belief,” at least not in the metaphysical sense that one believes or does not believe in Santa Claus or the tooth fairy. Rather, faith is synonymous with “trust.” Faith in God means trust in God.

In English, we do sometimes use the word “faith” to mean belief, but we also use the word in several other ways. If I say, “I have faith in myself,” I do not, of course, mean that I believe that I exist; I mean that I have a basic trust, or confidence, in myself. When, as a Red Sox fan, I tried to “keep the faith” during the eighty-six years without a World Series victory, I was not trying to believe that a team called the Red Sox exists—although there were years when one had to wonder. What I really meant was that I should not give up the trust that next year or the year after might be The Year.

We will leave aside temporarily the obvious issue of whether “trust in God” necessarily implies a metaphysical belief in the existence of an entity called “God”—that is to say, the Santa Claus question. It is, of course, a question on which religious thought has often foundered. Before we can examine that question, however, it is important to know exactly what we mean by faith or trust in God.

The way the synoptic gospels and Acts pose the issue of faith is: do you trust in the “good news”? Mark’s gospel, for example, has Jesus begin his ministry by announcing, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in [*pisteuete*, trust in] the good news” (Mark 1:15, NRSV). The early Christians went so far as to name some of their most important texts “good newses.” So what is this good news? Why is

it news, and why is it good? And the most difficult question: what does it mean to trust in it?

The answers to these questions, of course, fill entire libraries, but the basic answer to what the good news is, is really rather simple. The good news is that we are accepted into the Kingdom of God. That’s it. We are accepted.

Why is this news? It is news because deep down people of faith know they are unacceptable.

We have now entered very dangerous waters. Sin has gotten a bad name, so to speak, in the last

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century, replaced by psychological “issues.” What do you mean, you’re unacceptable? Isn’t that neurotic? Morbid? A delusion of grandeur? As if your pathetic peccadilloes amount to anything as grand as unacceptability! Unacceptable to whom? To yourself? Then deal with it. To your parents? See a psychotherapist. Isn’t this feeling of being unacceptable just a manifestation of what Nietzsche saw as the self-loathing of the weak? Real men don’t feel unacceptable.

These are all legitimate questions and criticisms, and, unfortunately, they often point to a sad truth. Millions of people do harbor neurotic, morbid, self-loathing experiences of unworthiness, and hundreds of thousands of psychiatrists, psychologists, and other mental health workers have emerged to try to help these people sort out the unconscious or interpersonal sources of these feelings.

People of faith, however, feel that there is also a non-neurotic sense in which they are



unacceptable. It stems from our human ability to see ourselves and our lives, as Spinoza put it, *sub specie aeternitatis*: that is, "from the point of view of eternity." Whenever we ask, "What does my life add up to anyway?" we are speaking *sub specie aeternitatis*. (How else could a life "add up" to anything except when seen as a whole and, metaphorically speaking, "from above"?) When we ask ourselves whether we are living up to our ideals, we are speaking *sub specie aeternitatis*. (Ideals reside, after all, in "Plato's heaven," beyond space and time.) When we feel guilty, we may be exhibiting neurosis, but we may also be speaking *sub specie aeternitatis*. We may be feeling that we are not the persons we were somehow "meant to be" (Aristotle) or that we are not our ideal selves (Plato) or that we are "fallen" (Judaism and Christianity).

Tillich's scientist might object that stating our feeling of unacceptability in this way—as stemming from seeing ourselves from the standpoint of eternity—is to already be speaking the language of faith, and that is correct. To someone who professes not to know what "the standpoint of eternity" could possibly mean or who thinks that it is an illusion, or to someone who thinks the question, "What does my life add up to?" is meaningless or a result of linguistic confusion, or to someone who simply doesn't care, there is no answer. Answers of faith can only be given to questions of faith. In other words, this is one juncture at which some people will opt out of the circle of faith. As we will see, there are many other such junctures. But our question is: Is it less *rational* to think that looking at one's life *sub specie aeternitatis* is legitimate than to think that it is not? It is the question of the scientist's finger, and it is a question that each person must answer for himself.

What can be said about people who do experience the question of their own worth as a legitimate question? In particular, what can be said about the subset of those people who, upon examining themselves, find themselves unacceptable? First of all, what do they mean? And why do they not consider their experience of unworthiness a neurotic symptom?

Some people feel unworthy because they have deviated from some societal norm, but the more

interesting case for our purpose is people who may or may not have deviated from social norms but who know they are, in some way, untrustworthy. They may have actually broken a trust. They may have betrayed a person who placed her trust in them. They may have placed their own interest before that of their own children and witnessed a sad or even tragic outcome as their children developed or didn't. They may feel they are in someone else's debt, perhaps even that they owe another person a debt that can never be repaid, because the harm has been done and can never be undone. No matter how much remorse they have, they know the toothpaste can never be put back in the tube. They may have fallen into a cycle of addiction that makes them a stranger to themselves and those who loved and trusted them. They may have been tested and responded in a cowardly way. If they have not actually violated a trust, they may know nonetheless that under the right circumstances they would. This is the experience that Kierkegaard called being pursued by the hound of heaven. It is to take what Alcoholics Anonymous calls "a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves" and to face the fact that we are not worthy of our own trust. We have not kept faith with our own potential. We are not the god we hoped to be—or perhaps assumed we were.

Therapy will not help such people. They do not want their self-insight to be medicated or, indeed, to be "cured" of it. In fact, they despise the fact that they often allow themselves to fall asleep to the ways in which they fall short of their own ego ideal. They feel compelled to affirm, with Kierkegaard, that "this is required of everyone, that before God [that is, *sub specie aeternitatis*], he shall candidly humble himself in view of the requirements of ideality" (Kierkegaard 1972: 71).

This is a juncture at which many more people opt out of the circle of faith. They may be people who do not take self-inventories for whatever reason, perhaps because they consider such assessments neurotic. They may be people who can honestly say that they never suffered from the delusion that they are a god. They may be people who can honestly say they find no cowardice in themselves. They may be people who make occasional or frequent self-assessments,



but find themselves basically acceptable: “no worse than anyone else” or “on balance, good and decent people” or “understandably inconsistent, given human nature.” People of faith should not be quick to judge these people. It may be tempting to think the non-guilty have simply not heard the bad news yet, but the safer course is to simply say, as Jesus did, “Those who have ears to hear, let them hear,” and “Those who are well have no need of a physician.” Again, Alcoholics Anonymous is helpful: don’t take someone else’s inventory.

It is enough that the person of faith take his or her own inventory. And when he does, he is troubled. To use the ancient metaphor, he feels that he is “stained” in some way. He feels that there are parts of himself that he would not want to see the light of day, characteristics of himself that he would not put in his memoir, shadow qualities that he tries his best to hide in his everyday presentation of self, parts that he tries to hide even from himself. He acknowledges that he has hurt other people, perhaps irreparably, by putting his own interests before what he knows is good and right. He is aware that those closest to him know that in many ways he is a coward and a fraud. Perhaps he can make amends for some of his behavior, but he has to admit that he would not blame the people he has harmed if they were unable fully to trust him again. He is not even sure he fully trusts himself.

Is such a self-assessment irrational? Is it neurotic? Again, each person must decide for himself.

The next step for the person of faith, however, is irrational. It is at this point that Tillich’s scientist *should* raise his finger. What the person pursued by the hound of heaven is in need of is forgiveness. Only forgiveness—the wiping clean of his slate—can help the person with a troubled conscience. And forgiveness is at its core irrational.

What is rational is “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” What is rational is that the righteous brother of the prodigal son should be rewarded, not the prodigal! What is rational is that the laborers in the vineyard who started work at dawn should be paid more than those who came at the eleventh hour. That is what makes sense. Forgiveness does not make sense. It isn’t fair.

What makes the good news good? Nothing, if you are the righteous brother. It is the worst

news possible. If you are the brother who played by the rules all his life, who always did the acceptable thing, who maintained all his relationships responsibly even when the going got tough, it is understandably infuriating that the brother who trashed his relationships and wasted his life in debauchery gets the feast. And yet the person of faith experiences that he is forgiven and accepted, that all his debts have been cancelled. When he expresses this in the language of religious symbolism, he says, “God is like the father in the

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parable. God forgives and accepts me, not because I deserve it or because I am basically okay, but because he loves me beyond reason, as a father or mother loves a child.” As Tillich put it, we find ourselves accepted, not because we are acceptable, but in spite of our being unacceptable.

This is irrational, not just because we have now introduced the idea of God and raised the Santa Claus question, but more fundamentally because forgiveness is itself irrational. It would be irrational for a person convicted of a crime to expect that he will be immediately set free. It would be irrational for a borrower to expect the lender to simply write off her debt. Both law and ethics rest on the idea of moral consequences for our actions. Forgiveness is an apparent *acte gratuit*, a gratuitous, off-the-wall event, not subject to any rational rule.

But what if forgiveness were seen, not merely as a judgment on the past, but as a creator of the future? As it happens, that is faith’s view of the fact



of forgiveness. It is not that the prodigal son cleans up his act and is therefore forgiven. It is the other way around. It is only possible for a prodigal son to clean up his act *because* he finds himself forgiven—or, as in the story, because he has faith that he will be. Otherwise, he could never have gone home.

Forgiveness does not merely judge the old situation; it creates a new situation. The New Testament is full of metaphors for this phenomenon of faith. John has Jesus say that we can be born again. Paul says that we are a new creation, that we die to our old selves and are resurrected as a new self. But isn't it irrational—indeed, delu-

**The mark of genuine forgiveness is that we forgive. Forgive us our debts *as* we forgive our debtors.**

sional—to trust that the utterly new can happen, that a new future can be handed to us? Well, perhaps it would be—if it hadn't happened to us.

But what about our acceptance of being accepted? Isn't that necessarily suspect? Are we simply letting ourselves off the hook, deluding ourselves that we have "been accepted" so that we can rid ourselves of our burden of guilt? This is another juncture at which people may understandably opt out of the circle of faith. They may judge that those who "experience forgiveness" are really only excusing themselves and covering up the self-serving nature of their bogus act of faith, hiding it from themselves to lend legitimacy to the experience. This is a sincere and damning objection, and the person of faith must wrestle constantly with it.

The New Testament's answer is that it is the future that will tell the tale. The unmerciful servant in the parable has his debt cancelled by his master, only to grab his own debtor by the throat and demand repayment. The mark of whether we have truly experienced the magnitude of our being accepted is how we behave toward those in debt to us. The mark of genuine forgiveness is that

we forgive. Forgive us our debts *as* we forgive our debtors.

Perhaps, though, it is fraudulent to accept acceptance even if it does eventuate in our being merciful to others. How dare we attribute our own excusing of ourselves to having received divine pardon?

Because faith is a sort of confidence, an analysis of the logic of confidence may shed some light on the phenomenon of religious faith. Many adolescents struggle with issues of self-confidence. It is easy to see why this is so. It is impossible to perform well without confidence, but it seems impossible to have confidence without foreknowledge that you will perform well. Without confidence, adolescents spiral downward, becoming more awkward and consequently even less confident. With confidence, adolescents spiral upward, becoming less awkward and consequently even more confident. What determines which way an adolescent develops is an *acte gratuit*, something external that breaks the cycle, breaks *into* the cycle, and determines its direction. Perhaps it is the blind love of a parent or the interest of a teacher. Perhaps it is dumb luck: the adolescent succeeds at something "in spite of himself" and is thereby launched in an upward spiral of confidence and success. Or perhaps she has had early successes based on her particular set of inherited or developed skills, and it never occurs to her that her competence in any other sphere is a terrifyingly open question. In any case, the determining factor is always something external to the cycle of confidence. The adolescent is *given* the wherewithal to break the cycle. Through no merit of her own, she is handed a get-out-of-jail-free card. Here Tillich's scientist can raise his finger again. Confidence—trust, faith—in ourselves is always in the end dependent on something that cannot be rationally derived from the situation itself. No amount of saying "Be confident!" to oneself can produce confidence. It is a gift.

The same is true of the faith to accept acceptance. Such faith is not a judgment based on a single experience of feeling accepted. People "grow in faith." When you experience yourself as forgiven, you may find you are no longer an unmerciful servant. On the contrary, you may



find yourself freed to be merciful to others. In this way, you participate in creating a new situation, for yourself and for someone else. This freedom in turn strengthens your trust in the fact that *you* have inexplicably been given a gift, a clean slate, cleared of the smudge of your own past.

This scenario is obviously fraught with the possibility of doubt. The chief question is why you would deserve this gift. The answer is that you do not. Then why should you allow yourself to accept such a gift? Because you want to. Is this a wish-fulfilling fantasy? Or is it that you want to so badly that you are willing to pay the ultimate price, which is *letting go* of your own wishes, giving up all effort to justify yourself, all effort to think well of yourself, all pride? Perhaps you want to because thriving, flourishing, growing, creating feel to you to be at the heart of human existence, and if accepting the gift of acceptance allows you to flourish and to participate in creating a new self and new relationships and a new world, you feel there is nothing to be said but thank you.

### The Santa Claus Question

Thank you to whom? Acceptance by whom? Is it not demanded of people of faith that they *believe* in the existence of some supernatural being who, among other things, accepts them? This is the question that in recent centuries has produced more rhetoric than any other religious question, most of it rather silly.

The first thing to be said is that *all* religious language is, as Tillich says, symbolic. Do we really at this late date need to say that when we speak of God as creator, we are not positing an alternative to the Big Bang? That when we speak of human beings having been created in the image of God, we are not proposing an alternative to evolution? These questions were sorted out in principle in the eighteenth century (although of course neither the Big Bang nor the theory of evolution had yet been proposed).

The Enlightenment skeptics are often said to have won these arguments, and that is certainly true; but the deeper truth is that, when the skeptics won, humanity won. When we take religious symbols literally, we do an injustice not only to

reason, but also to faith. The doctrine of biblical inerrancy is not only irrational; it is blasphemous.

The reason these literalistic questions persist three hundred years after the Enlightenment is that people of faith have not done a very good job of answering a key question: if religious language is not to be taken literally, how is it to be taken? What sort of validity could it possibly have? How does it differ from fantasy?

It is tempting to think that perhaps people of faith should simply stop at the point at which we have arrived. Perhaps it is enough to speak only of our own existential experience of being accepted without adopting any particular religious symbols of the source of our acceptance. There are several religious traditions that take this tack, from the Theravada Buddhist experience of the Void to the Hindu practice of *neti neti* (not this, not this) to the Western medieval "way of negation," the *via negativa*. The problem, as Tillich says, is that this is not a space in which most of us can live. Most of us are like the man in the parable who was cleansed of an unclean spirit; when it found his soul swept clean, it brought along seven other unclean spirits and moved back in. To put it another way: for most of us, the alternative to calling the source of our new life "Thou" is to call it "me." But putting myself in the place of God is the very worldview that brought on my self-alienation, my experience of being unacceptable, in the first place. "Thou" expresses the experienced radical otherness of the source of our acceptance. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." "Thou" also expresses the living *relationship* the person of faith feels to the source of his new life.

Who is this Thou? We can only answer symbolically. "He" is *like* a father whose prodigal son has returned to him. "He" is like a vineyard owner who chooses to pay the workers who arrived late in the day the same amount as those who worked all day. "He" is like a shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep to find the lost one. "He" is like a master who distributes money in the expectation that it will not be put in the ground but will be put to use in order to make it grow. "He" is like a lender who especially loves the debtor for whom he forgave the greater debt. "She" is like a hen that gathers her brood under her wings.



That is all very well, says our scientist, but does he or she exist? In a word, no.

Entities exist. God is not an entity, not a "being alongside other beings" (Tillich). At this juncture people of faith struggle for language. God is being-itself or the *ground* of being (Aquinas). God is the *power* of being (Tillich). In biblical language, God is the *Creator* of all being. In a sense, all such language is irrational. That is, it resides at the boundary of rational discourse.

Heidegger's question, "Why are there beings rather than nothing?" does not mean, "What is the cause in the chain of causation that produces being?" It means, "What is it about this power of being that distinguishes it from nothing; what is it that 'overcomes' nothingness?" At the organic level, what is the *elan vital* that (fleetingly) favors life over death? What is the mysterious power to heal and to grow? At the level of our libido, as well as our intellectual and spiritual striving, what is this irresistible desire that drives us beyond stasis? At the level of our relationships with other persons, what is the drive that makes us want to deepen them? At the noetic level, what is it about the strange power of consciousness that allows it to be conscious of itself? At the spiritual level, what is the power that makes it possible for us to accept transformation and go on despite our anxiety and despair? To the religious imagination, these manifestations of the power of being are all aspects of one power; call it the power of self-transcendence at every level of the chain of being. Is this irrational? Well, it is certainly non-rational. Rational argument can never demonstrate that we should relate to the self-transcendent power of being in a personal or spiritual way. That is a personal decision. Are there rational criteria for making that decision? No. We either experience it as a gift or we do not.

In the past, people stood more firmly within a historical tradition in which their forebears had

defined themselves by the particularities of their relationship to the power of being. Now for the first time in human history, multiple historical traditions, sacred and secular, have become accessible to us. We cannot escape the frightening task of taking a personal stand. Kierkegaard called it by a very different word; he called it a leap, the leap of faith. In a sense, the reason we leap in one direction rather than any of the myriad others is "because we want to." And the reason we want to is that we have received a gift.

Our scientist is perhaps right after all to keep his finger in the air the whole time. ✦

Thomas Cathcart studied with Paul Tillich as both an undergraduate and a graduate student in the 1960s. He is co-author, with Daniel Klein, of the New York Times best-seller, *Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar: Understanding Philosophy through Jokes*, as well as *Heidegger and a Hippo Walk through Those Pearly Gates: Using Philosophy (and Jokes!) to Explore Life, Death, the Afterlife, and Everything In Between*.

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# Arrested Development

## The Films of Kenneth Lonergan

Fredrick Barton

**B**Y THE TIME HE WAS THIRTY-EIGHT YEARS old in 2000, Kenneth Lonergan was already an established playwright with enough New York productions and award nominations on his resume to constitute a distinguished career for a man two decades his senior. He had also already dipped his toe into the more financially lucrative world of Hollywood by selling his spec script for the mob comedy *Analyze This* (1999) that eventually starred Billy Crystal and Robert De Niro. Then Lonergan wrote and directed *You Can Count on Me* (2000), a film that was both a commercial success and a critical smash. *You Can Count on Me* won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance, along with a score of other awards and landed Oscar nominations for star Laura Linney and for Lonergan's screenplay. Those of us who love movies in general, and *You Can Count on Me* in particular, couldn't wait to see what Lonergan did next. Two years later, he landed another screenwriting Oscar nomination for Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* (2002), and he returned to the New York stage with so much success that he was hailed in certain quarters as the nation's most important playwright of the last two decades.

But where was that next movie, not for hire, but for himself? Where was the follow up to *You Can Count on Me*? The answer: in Hollywood hell. Shortly after finishing his work on *Gangs of New York*, Lonergan undertook the writing of the film that would be released a long time later as *Margaret* (2011). His reputation was such that he attracted A-list filmmakers Sydney Pollack and Scott Rudin as his producers and was granted the special privilege of authority over the "final cut,"

as long as he delivered an edited film of no longer than 150 minutes. That length restriction eventually became a stumbling block of Himalayan proportions.

Lonergan worked on the *Margaret* script for two years, revisiting many of the themes he had first raised in *You Can Count on Me*. But when he began shooting in the summer of 2005, he had a screenplay for a three-hour film that he hoped he could reduce to the required 150 minutes in the editing suite. This proved to be a horrible miscalculation. Despite two years of post-production efforts, Lonergan just wasn't able to cut the material to contracted length. The result was several lawsuits by investors that further held up the film's release. Lonergan ended up having to borrow several hundred thousand dollars from his friend and collaborator Matthew Broderick. His mentor, Scorsese, was eventually brought in to produce a 160-minute cut, an undertaking of loyalty and friendship that came to naught when investors rejected Scorsese's efforts, some have said just to punish Lonergan. Sufficient compromises were finally achieved, and *Margaret* was released in September 2011, if you can call being shown in one theater in New York and one in Los Angeles as "being released." It returned a gross box office of \$46,495 on an initial investment (not including Broderick's thousands) of \$12.5 million. In practical terms, no one saw the movie. Nonetheless, critics have called it a "masterpiece." *The New Yorker* termed the film "a cinematic wonder."

From the very outset of *Margaret*, Kenneth Lonergan probably attempted the impossible. Our public cinemas are now the homes of special



effects extravaganzas, the purview of super heroes in the land of fantasy and science fiction. And though that trend was already underway when *You Can Count on Me* was released in 2000, it is so far advanced today that enticing an audience to sit still for over two and a half hours for a drama about a self-centered high school junior, seems a fantasy of a different kind and order. Whatever its considerable artistic ambitions and merits, as an act of commerce *Margaret* was probably dead on arrival from the moment it was conceived. That's the bad news—for Kenneth Lonergan, all his sup-

Kenneth Lonergan's scripts continually shift the angle from which he examines his characters, and thus we see them in an unusual wholeness, their blemishes as well as their beauty.

porters, and cinephiles of a certain kind, like me. The good news is that *Margaret* is now available on DVD and can be appreciated on the home flat screen the way we appreciate such superior television fare as *The Wire*, *Treme*, *Mad Men*, and *Homeland*.

Kenneth Lonergan's storytelling is rich and challenging because he refuses to see human beings in black and white. His scripts continually shift the angle from which he examines his characters, and thus we see them in an unusual wholeness, their blemishes as well as their beauty. In *You Can Count on Me*, Samantha Prescott (Linney) would seem the epitome of small-town propriety. She is the chief loan officer at the Scottsville bank in upstate New York. She owns her own home. And she provides the energetic kind of loving concern for her eight-year-old son Rudy (Rory Culkin) that has turned the nation's so-called "soccer moms" into a potent political force. But maybe Samantha is not quite the rock of stability and good sense she seems.

And perhaps some of the other folks we meet in this film are not quite what they seem either.

The story in *You Can Count on Me* largely concerns Samantha's relationship with her brother Terry (Mark Ruffalo). Samantha and Terry were orphaned as young children when their parents were killed in an auto accident. We do not know exactly how they grew up, whether they were placed with relatives, in a foster home, or in an orphanage. We do know, however, that even as adults in their late twenties or so, they remain fiercely, if imperfectly, connected to each other; their bond, no doubt in significant part, forged from their shared suffering. That Samantha fiercely cherishes her brother cannot be doubted. When she gets the letter announcing that he is coming for a visit, her face lights up with a rapturous glow, and on the day of his arrival, she dresses up as if she's going on a date. But how outwardly different these siblings have become. Samantha is resolutely middle class and responsible. She earns a good income, and she lives modestly well. Terry, in contrast, is a mess. He is an itinerant laborer with undefined skills in the building trades. He would appear to know a little carpentry and perhaps some plumbing, but he has certainly never settled down. Thoroughly alienated from the small-town atmosphere in Scottsville where he and his sister were born and where Samantha still lives, Terry moves from place to place, never settling for long anywhere. Perhaps foremost among her concerns about Terry, Samantha worries constantly about his whereabouts. He has been in Florida, and he has been in Alaska, and, more problematic, he has been in jail.

We have lots of reasons for questioning Terry's judgment. When we first meet him, he is taking his uncomfortable departure from a troubled young woman named Sheila (Gaby Hoffmann). Sheila is pregnant with Terry's child, and neither of them possesses the money for an abortion. More painfully, Sheila appears far more attached to Terry than he to her. Terry seems to have no desire to hurt Sheila, but on the other hand he apparently lacks the good sense to avoid getting seriously involved with someone he does not love. Terry visits Samantha for the express purpose of borrowing enough money to fund Sheila's abortion.



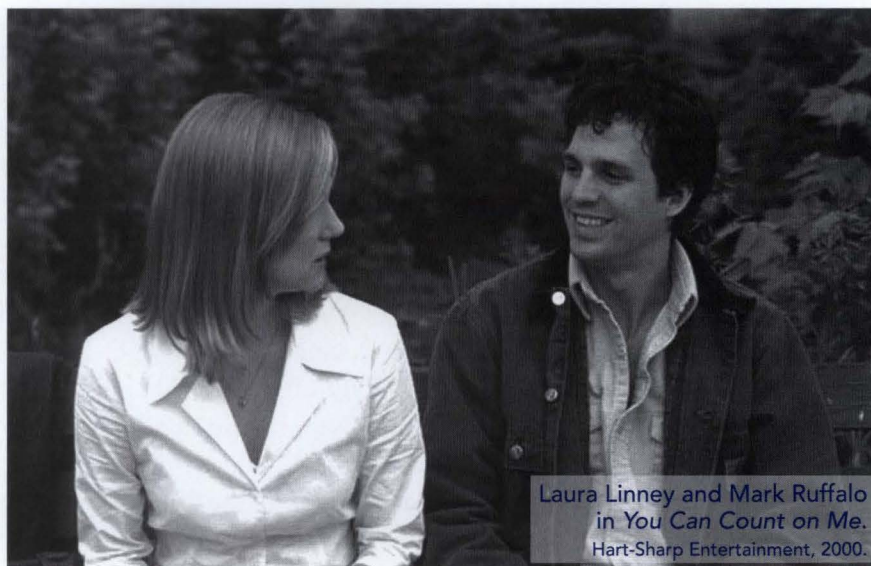
In a host of other ways, Terry continues to exhibit throughout the picture a core quality of habitually poor decision making. While staying with Sheila, he forgets to fetch Rudy from school as requested and leaves the child out in the rain. On another occasion, Terry takes Rudy to a bar instead of putting him to bed. And at his most irresponsible, Terry takes his nephew to see the boy's father (Josh Lucas), a scruffy lout who denies his paternity to Rudy's face.

Just as we begin to determine that *You Can Count on Me* is a story of diametrical personalities, however, we begin to spy the cracks in Samantha's facade of respectability. In a metaphor for her darker nature, when authorities show up to tell a thirteen-year-old Samantha about her parents' accident, the kids for whom she is babysitting decide that she has sneaked outside for a smoke. Nonetheless, we are stumped by her later teenaged involvement

with a man like Rudy Sr. The answer perhaps lies in Terry's oblique reference to Samantha's "wild side." After a time, we conclude that by "wild," Terry probably means "ill-considered." Nine years ago, surrendering to an attraction that must surely have been fleeting, Samantha allowed herself to become pregnant by Rudy Sr. Today, Samantha goes to dinner with an old beau (Jon Tenney) she has not dated in over a year and nonetheless ends up in the man's bed before the end of the evening. And then, in an almost inexplicable fit of carnal surrender, she plunges into a clandestine affair with her boss Brian Everett (Matthew Broderick), a man she does not even like and one who does not even pretend he might leave his pregnant wife Nancy (Nina Garbiras). Samantha isn't even entirely faithful to the person she believes she loves unconditionally: Terry. Samantha *does* care deeply about Terry, but her concern often manifests itself in irritation

and scolding tirades. It's no wonder that he's so morose around her.

In short, Samantha is neither as responsible nor as reputable as we initially presume, and certainly not as wise (Lonergan cleverly manipulates our class prejudice for his own thematic ends). She justifies running personal errands on company time because they inevitably involve child care issues. She fails to keep her employers properly notified when she has a family crisis. And in so doing she



Laura Linney and Mark Ruffalo  
in *You Can Count on Me*.  
Hart-Sharp Entertainment, 2000.

exhibits far more in common with Terry than she would ever admit. In the film's most artfully subtle moment, Samantha coolly threatens Brian with a sexual-discrimination lawsuit and flirts with the idea of corporate insurrection. At the same time, Terry is not quite the uncaring leech we at first judge him. His actions are often unwise, and he is completely, unreconstructably undisciplined. But his heart is often in the right place. He does care for his young nephew. Terry tries to teach Rudy about carpentry, and he manipulates a barroom pool game so that Rudy can sink the winning ball, much to the child's pride and pleasure. Terry also genuinely cares for his sister. He tells Rudy that the boy's greatest luck is the goodness of his mother. Terry even cares for Sheila in a way that wins him at least partial redemption.

A significant theme in *You Can Count on Me*, as in *Margaret*, is the extent to which adults continue to act like children. We even have a scene



in which, like a child, Terry plays intently with Rudy's Gameboy. Terry engages in a snit about tattling with Rudy that recalls the argument of youngsters in a schoolyard. Samantha's sexual promiscuity, and Terry's as well, is like that of adolescence. Consequences don't enter their consideration. Samantha's trysts with her boss Brian initially even take place in his car, just like teenagers on a back-road lovers' lane.

Loneragan refuses to place blame on the usual suspects. The people of Scottsville are not the monsters and perverts who stand in every small-town storefront created by someone like David Lynch. The local sheriff (Adam LeFevre) is a man of patience and concern. The local pastor (Loneragan) is a man of considerable compassion and reluctance to judge. In the end, Loneragan avers the role of fate in our lives. The trajectories of Samantha's and Terry's lives were no doubt unalterably changed by the deaths of their parents. Today, they have the virtue of genuinely loving each other, but neither can change the nature of the other. As a result, they will continue to disappoint each other for some time to come, maybe forever. And that is the downbeat message in this film's almost shockingly quiet conclusion. On the other hand, in the magic of a thematic paradox, their love endures. Terry goes away again, but promises to stay in touch, promises to return. And maybe he will. And born of love, maybe he and his sister will finally find a way to fulfill each other as both of them do so desperately desire.

**S**amantha and Terry Presscott obviously stand for many of us as we try to wend our way from youth to adulthood, but the canvas of *You Can Count on Me* is small, a brother and a sister in a small town. *Margaret* is more ambitious and explores more and broader themes, not in a rural, isolated village but in New York, one of the world's busiest and most crowded cities. Loneragan likes to establish visual metaphors from the physical landscape surrounding his characters. In *You Can Count on Me*, the director's camera notices a graveyard as Terry's bus takes him to visit his sister, establishing that the bond that connects them was forged by their parents' accidental deaths. And though we can extrapolate

lessons for ourselves from the lives of Samantha and Terry, Loneragan urges that kind of connection explicitly in *Margaret* with his repeated shots of New York cityscapes: the crush of pedestrians on daytime sidewalks, the endless lights of countless high-rises gleaming through the night, the inevitable clot of traffic stretching to the urban horizon. The characters he deals with in *Margaret* are instructive, but representative. There is a narrative for everyone we pass on a crowded street, for everyone tapping fingers in a car waiting for the light to change, for everyone in every office and apartment from which silver light spills into the night-darkened sky.

Like *You Can Count on Me*, the story in *Margaret* is propelled by an accident. High-school junior, Lisa Cohen (Anna Paquin) runs along a daytime Manhattan street, flirting with bus driver Gerald Maretta (Mark Ruffalo) at the wheel of his Transit Authority bus. Distracted, Gerald runs a red light and drives over middle-aged pedestrian Monica Patterson (Allison Janney), tearing her body to pieces and leaving her only minutes to live. Lisa doesn't know Monica, but she rushes to hold her while they wait for an ambulance that arrives only after Monica has bled to death in Lisa's arms. When the police arrive, Gerald and Lisa exchange furtive glances and then tell the same story: the bus went through the intersection on green; Monica walked against the light.

But, her conscience stricken, Lisa first tells the true story to her mother, Broadway actress, Joan Cohen (J. Smith Cameron), who observes that perhaps Lisa should think of the bus driver and his family before returning to the police to correct her story. Monica's death was still an accident, and acknowledging that the driver was distracted will not bring the victim back to life. Particularly in retrospect, this is good advice. But Lisa refuses to take it. She changes her police report, but the police say that even if Gerald was distracted as a result of her flirting, Monica's death was still an accident and no grounds exist for charges. Enraged, Lisa makes contact first with Monica's cousin Abigail (Betsy Aidem) and subsequently Monica's best friend Emily (Jeannie Berlin). In the latter, Lisa finds a kindred angry soul, and together Emily and Lisa devise a plan to bring a



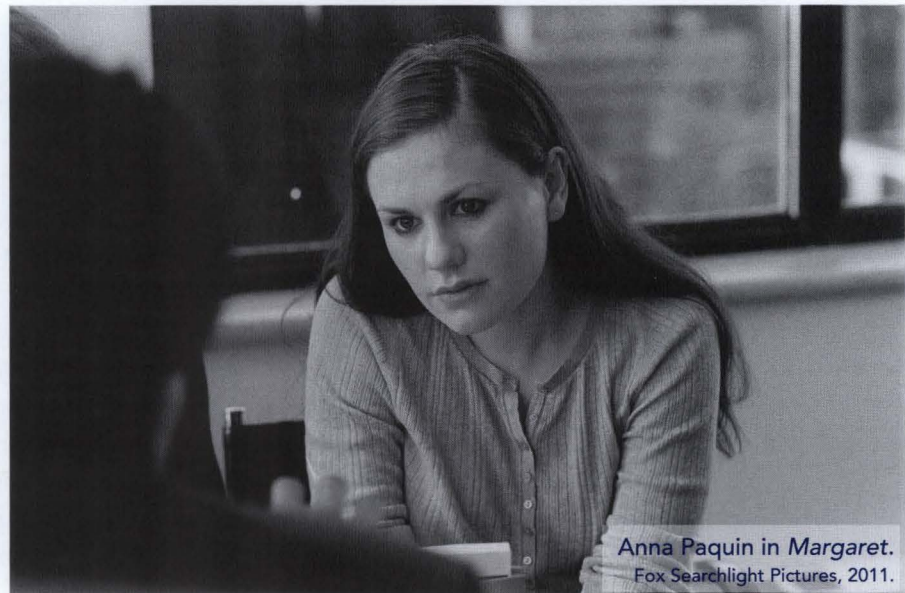
wrongful death suit against Gerald, a court action they hope will get him fired. Complications ensue. Emily and Lisa have no standing to sue, so they do so in Abigail's name. But once Abigail is involved, it is clear that she will gladly take whatever money can be extracted but cares little about anything else in the matter. She and Monica weren't even on friendly terms. And, of course, Gerald hasn't any money, so the suit ends up against his employer, the Transit Authority. One wouldn't expect much good to come out of any of this, and none does.

Along the way, however, we are confronted with a series of characters, very few of whom elicit much in the way of our sympathy. Lisa's divorced father Karl (Lonergan) lives in California and stays in occasional contact with his daughter by telephone, but his self-absorption is so noxious we can almost smell it. When Lisa tells him about her bad conscience, his first reaction is to invoke the advice of a lawyer to protect Lisa and himself

from a prospective, and never threatened, lawsuit. Joan is somewhat better. We do believe that her caring for her daughter is real, but Joan is also so self-absorbed that when she meets Emily, rather than talking about Monica, Joan rambles on about her own career and how nice it is to enjoy the occasional success and attract critical praise in the reviews. Emily is an emotional monster. Her grief has turned into such fury that she simply wants to hurt someone. She isn't ever particularly nice to Lisa, even though Lisa provides her the weapon with which to wield her anger. She is flat and pointlessly rude to Dave (Michael Ealy), the lawyer friend who tries to help her. She creates a horrible public scene when confronted with an insensitive remark by Joan's boyfriend Ramon (Jean Reno). And ultimately Emily turns her wrath on Lisa, accusing the teenager of "caring

too easily," and upbraiding Lisa that "You're not the one this is happening to." That we agree with both of these observations in no way lessens the cruelty with which they are delivered.

But if an array of the characters are unsympathetic, Lisa stands foremost among them. She is a bright girl, and, except in math, a good student. But she is also frighteningly immature and needlessly mean. She bullies her younger brother, simply because he is too little to stop her. When Darren (John Gallagher), the socially shy boy who tutors her in math, asks her to the movies,



Anna Paquin in *Margaret*.  
Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2011.

like a cat toying with a trapped mouse, she tries to tie him in knots over whether the invitation is a "date." She relates to her imperfect mother with a series of sneers, sarcastic remarks, and outbursts, and when her mother stands up to her, she threatens to move to California to live with her father. When Lisa is with the police, she is needlessly combative even before she is denied her desire that Gerald be arrested, and afterward she accuses the detectives, outside of all context, of being racists. Outside of school, to his face, she ridicules her English teacher (Broderick), even though he is trying to look out for her, and she snidely asks her math teacher, Mr. Aaron (Matt Damon), if being a high-school geometry teacher is "the summit of his ambition." When Mr. Aaron is uncomfortable around her, she sniffs that he's "acting just like a little kid."



Along with an ingrained nastiness, this last jibe is an example of another of Lonergan's themes: hypocrisy. Lisa repeatedly acts like a spoiled child, yet accuses others of this characteristic. When Emily attacks her, Lisa complains, "I don't understand why if I do something wrong, you can't just give me a break." But, of course, her crusade against Gerald is a prime example of her doing the same thing. Even the few "good" characters suffer from hypocrisy. Joan's boyfriend Ramon, a Panamanian who has made a fortune in Paris and used his wealth to build orphanages in his home country, is nonetheless capable of dismissing a pro-Israeli argument (he's pro-Palestinian) as a "typical Jewish response." He would recoil at being disregarded in that manner but cannot bring himself to understand that he has been offensive.

And as in *You Can Count on Me*, Lonergan once again has things to say about careless sexual behavior. Joan and Ramon move from mere acquaintances to bedmates perhaps too soon, certainly before Joan is sure that Ramon is the man with whom she wants to spend the rest of her life. But again, Lisa is our chief offender. When we first see her with Mr. Aaron in her math classroom, Lisa is wearing a skirt so short it barely covers her panties, if she's wearing panties. Yet, as she is discussing his concern that she used unauthorized assistance on a take-home geometry test, she sits in front of him, and akin to Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct*, ostentatiously crosses her legs in a way that flashes him. Because Mr. Aaron does not respond, we don't know if he's looking at her at that moment or, for certain, even if she has done this on purpose, but in her dress and physical movements she will win no trophies for appropriate modesty. She is a virgin, however, or at least believably claims to be. For after making out with Darren at a party and heartlessly telling him that she loves him, she calls another boy from her school, the drug dealing Paul (Kieran Culkin) and asks him to deflower her. That their night of sex together seems to reveal her almost utter lack of experience and confidence might otherwise elicit our sympathy, had her behavior not already turned us so stubbornly against her. And what sympathy she does command on her night with Paul is soon squandered when she goes to Mr. Aaron's house

and aggressively seduces him. The teacher flunks adulthood for surrender to a teenager, but as Lisa admits, the idea, overture, and determination all came from her.

Also akin to *You Can Count on Me*, Margaret worries about the stubborn childishness that we cling to. This is related to the theme of self-absorption discussed above, for any parent knows the ways a child can see things from his or her perspective alone. It is, thus, no accident that two of Joan's party tricks are to sing in the voice of the four-year-old Shirley Temple and to cry like a baby awakening for a nighttime feeding. Like Samantha in *You Can Count on Me*, when Joan is frustrated, she is prone to smash things around her house, to sweep a dinner's worth of plates crashing to the floor. Mr. Aaron is childish in surrendering to his student. Ramon is childish by resorting to contempt rather than rational discussion. Even the English teacher is childish for a moment when he cannot dissuade a student from repeating the same, wrongheaded, extra-textual point in a discussion about Shakespeare. Elsewhere, Lonergan drives home this concern about childishness when he has the English teacher read Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem, "Spring and Fall, to a Young Child," in which the poet counsels a girl named Margaret (hence the movie's title) who is worried about the coming of autumn and ends with the couplet "It is the blight that man was born for/ It is Margaret you mourn for." In short, ours is a youth-obsessed culture, and we do ourselves no favors by refusing to grow up.

And there is more. Working from a script begun in the months after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, there are heated discussions about Islamic terrorism and the reasons that America is hated by so many in the Muslim world. And lest we forget an underlying cause of all that, in his shots of the physical environment, Lonergan's camera sometimes spies gigantic oil tankers easing into the ports of New York harbor.

In sum, though I am a fan of Kenneth Lonergan and an admirer of this movie, I can understand why he had such a difficult time producing the final cut that was his obligation and prerogative. First, I think he was too devoted to all those shots



of Manhattan streets, buildings, waterways, and anonymous people. They interrupt the action repeatedly to diminishing effect once we realize the point he is making. And, in every case, he lingers on them longer than necessary. They slow things down in a way that doesn't serve the movie. The more extensive problem, though, stems from Lonergan's early decision to make so many of his characters so deeply dislikable. *Margaret's* lineup of characters includes few saving graces. We may recognize that Emily is suffering over the loss of her dear friend, but she doesn't have to be so ugly to everyone and so superior in her ugliness to boot. We may realize that Mr. Aaron is the pursued, not the pursuer, but it is his obligation to resist the very kind of temptation he surrenders to. We may realize that Ramon is a decent man, but that is no defense against his anti-Semitism. We may realize that Joan lacks self-confidence and is involved in a career that fans the flames of her insecurity, but that doesn't excuse her lack of maternal strength. We may recognize that Gerald's momentary irresponsibility merits forgiveness, but that doesn't forgive his lying, his refusal to accept responsibility, and his knee-jerk hostility toward Lisa. And we may recognize that Lisa's instinctual effort to comfort the dying Monica and her subsequent pangs of conscience about her role in the accident may indicate that someday she may indeed grow up, but until the very closing scene we see no solid evidence that Lisa has honored her pledge not to turn Monica's horrible, tragic death into her "own

personal moral gymnasium." I can't help but wonder if Lonergan didn't stymie himself in his desire to save characters that his audience would find so distasteful.

Still, there is not a sliver of doubt that save them he intended. And that is why we get the film's closing scene, mother and daughter, emotionally broken, holding on to each other for dear life. In the complex structure of *Margaret's* story, brilliance lies; in its insistent conclusion, wisdom blooms. That we will sin is a given of our human nature. That we can be redeemed is the grace offered by the divine and the possibility that we must all extend to one another. ♣

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# Brain Memoirs

## Thinking About Thinking

Harold K. Bush

**J**UST OVER FORTY YEARS AGO, HAL LINDSEY published his harrowing account of the apocalypse, *The Late, Great Planet Earth*. One of Lindsey's key texts for prophesying the end of the world was Daniel 12:4, which describes a time when "many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased." Little did he know, in the early 1970s, how prescient those words would become for today's "millennials" in the light of the Internet's climb to cultural dominance. To and fro, indeed.

Given our peripatetic tendencies, some educators are becoming alarmist. Recently, it has come to our attention that we may be facing a readerly apocalypse, that our brains are being radically rewired, and that the mark of the beast may very well be our IP addresses. The reading habits of the young, including university students, are of particular concern, given that they have never known a time when the beast has not been in full control. The dire challenges presented to them by the onset of the Internet revolution are becoming regular headline grabbers in books, magazines, and on the web itself.

Thus, while Hal Lindsey has all but vanished from cultural relevance, a new kind of doomsday prophet is emerging. Some observers have even returned to that obscure verse in Daniel, and the explosive growth of the Internet is usually considered to be the key culprit (along with its ancillary accomplice, smartphones, which like God seem omniscient, omnipresent, and wired to the heavens 24/7). The Internet's mind-blowing content fosters a disruptive "to-and-fro-ness" within our fitful imaginations, as we surf around the vast ocean of data, never settled for very long on any one site.

It promotes, in Nicholas Carr's famous formulation, a "shallow" encounter with both print and digital texts (*The Shallows*, 2010). Carr wonders if the Internet is doing more than making us stupid: he asks us to face the possibility that computer technology (the most powerfully transformative medium in world history) has become obsessive for many Westerners. To state it in the booming popular term, the Internet has an uncanny ability to foster neuroplasticity. It also seems to be undermining authority by breeding uncritical acceptance of virtually any opinion. My students nowadays cite with unqualified confidence just about anything they find online in their "research" papers. They are evidently unable to make useful distinctions or discriminations about the trustworthiness of one site over another.

Debatable as Carr's conclusions may be, what I like most about his bestseller is the introductory material about his own personal changes in reading and thinking. Carr is very good at drawing in older readers (like me) by narrating the changes that he has begun to notice more and more (as I have noticed them, and perhaps as you have). The motif that seems most prominent in Carr's account is "distraction." We troll the shallows because our brains have literally been rewired to fixate on an everlasting search for more, and better, and fresher, input. We have a hard time concentrating, says Carr, and that restlessness is becoming a hard-wired feature of our physical brains, a feature that, in Carr's view, is contributing to human stupidity. His most sinister culprit is Google, for its unwieldy stake in our growing obtuseness, as famously stated in the title of his cover-essay in



*The Atlantic* ("Is Google Making Us Stupid?" July/August 2008).

Carr's tale is part of a growing trend in some sectors of the publishing world right now, a genre I would like to call "brain memoirs." These are the autobiographical musings of brains in transition, thoughtful accounts of the plasticity of one's brain. Brain memoirs can take several forms, such as that of the quirky book called *Losing It*, by William Ian Miller (2011), much of which describes how aging affects our reading habits and memories (*Losing It* also might scare the hell out of anyone over fifty). Miller's book is a metacognitive study of a brain looking at itself through the lens of aging and classical literature. Another example is Alan Jacobs's *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction* (2011), a beautifully written account of reading by a lifelong reader who frets over his changing readerly habits. Jacobs hits notes of mild despair and warns us against the monster of electronic media (even as he learns to like his shiny new Kindle). And like Carr, Jacobs is extremely articulate about the titular topic of "distraction."

Perhaps most influential in academic circles is Jaron Lanier's quirky yet, at times, moving manifesto of 2010, the title of which prophetically captures the author's angst: *You Are Not a Gadget*. Lanier's emotional plea for human dignity is reminiscent of the great scene in the film *Network* (1976), with countless disturbed Americans leaning out their windows to yell to the winds, "I'm as mad as Hell and I'm not going to take it anymore!" Lanier's jeremiad about the penetration of the digital into almost every area of our lives is additionally provocative given his own legendary status as famed programmer and innovator of such concepts as "virtual reality," a phrase he is said to have coined, and the use of "avatars" as graphic depictions of users online. Since he is widely considered one of the chief architects of the Internet as we now encounter it every day, Lanier's resounding critique of its dehumanizing and anti-intellectual effects is trenchant and highly informed.

These and other forceful volumes are taking advantage of the wave of popular neuroscience that has emerged recently. Thanks in large part to the extremely sophisticated machinery available to research scientists today, in tandem with the highly

creative experiments that psychiatrists and neuroscientists come up with for using those machines, we have learned more in the last twenty years about the way the brain works and which areas do what types of thinking than in all of human history before. This publishing boom began with the extremely successful works of Malcolm Gladwell, especially his wonderfully-titled and well-written volume *Blink* (2007), which has set the bar for sales and slickness, and has become the popular primer on the brain's plasticity (its ability to reform itself and establish new connections). Gladwell illustrates the brain's

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ability to "thin-slice" reality: to "know" something in the twinkling of an eye, thus the title *Blink*. And Gladwell has famously exploited the flourishing neuroscience of the past two decades, sometimes to much critical scorn for his *non sequiturs* and overgeneralizations. (More nuanced and motivated readers might go on to Norman Doidge's influential 2007 volume, *The Brain that Changes Itself*.) Despite the book's flaws of methodology and logic, *Blink* is compelling reading (as are his other volumes, especially *The Tipping Point* [2007] and *Outliers* [2011]), and Gladwell remains the pop-guru of this emerging field.

Combining vast scientific data with the popular, narrative-driven exposition perfected by Gladwell, many other interesting books have appeared recently in this emerging genre. Two of the most popular of 2012 have been *Imagine: How Creativity Works* by Jonah Lehrer and *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* by Charles Duhigg. Both are filled with intriguing stories and personalities, and both are good at introducing (some of) the scientific data to general readers. In all, the books



mentioned here so far, along with numerous others (many of which are often featured prominently on the front shelves at Barnes and Noble) comprise a growing and influential subfield in popular non-fiction. We should also remember that this genre of pop-scholarship hardly existed as recently as ten years ago. Thus, it seems that such “brain memoirs” and related studies of the brain “thinking about thinking” are here to stay.

How are we to remain as “wise  
as serpents, and as innocent as  
doves” in light of the growing  
body of literature about  
our brains and our lifelong  
stewardship of them?

And yet, hardly anyone has thought much or written about the implications of these materials for the study and practice of spirituality. For readers of this journal, that perspective would feature most prominently Christian beliefs and disciplines. And so I want to conclude by asking: What is the upshot of these findings for us as Christians? How are we to remain as “wise as serpents, and as innocent as doves” in light of the growing body of literature about our brains and our lifelong stewardship of them? And how might we augment a pious and robust spiritual practice with the help of the findings of current brain science?

A full and satisfying set of responses to these challenging questions is well beyond the scope of this essay. It would be a great book to write, one day. But for now, I would like to speak personally about how some of these insights have had an effect on my own thinking. As such, perhaps this is one more attempt—on a very small scale—of writing a brief version of a brain memoir—in this case, my own.

One very intriguing insight that is becoming clear in contemporary neuroscience is that we have the ability to “program,” or manipulate for good, our own brains, a technique that can allow us to find

increasing happiness in repetitive, habitual activities. The more we do something regularly, the more joyful and peaceful the activity becomes. In other words, through habits and exercise and discipline, even hard work like scholarship, or weightlifting, can become satisfying and foster happiness. Habits of discipline and practice eventually bring us more and more joy, and this seems likely for just about anything we do habitually—both good habits and bad habits, so beware. What at first seems like boring and repetitive work—practicing piano, gardening, walking the dogs—can end up becoming an almost addictive behavior that we feel compelled to do every day.

To say it another way: If we do something mindfully, over and over, with patience and close observation, there is great joy to be found there. One intriguing book that documents this is titled simply, *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (2007). *Thanks!* was written by Robert Emmons, editor of a prominent psychology journal. The upshot here is that thankfulness is largely a learned behavior. The more we practice being thankful, the more thankful we become, intuitively. If we telescope this out to all of the virtues, or the “fruits of the spirit” (Galatians 5), we might think about how fruitful attitudes like love, joy, peace, and patience are also things we can practice, improve at, and allow to become instinctive. Just like free throws in basketball, or difficult bar chords like F on a guitar, they become internalized.

These may be obvious pointers regarding how our brains work and reconnect in productive ways, but I also think we must beware that we do not become “shallow” readers or shallow followers of God. We need to keep working at the deep things, pushing ourselves to read the deep books, focusing on the deep conversations. All of these activities are under siege in our 24/7 digital world, and I hope this will not sound too dire or too pretty. But yes, I am concerned: perhaps not so concerned as Nicholas Carr (let alone Hal Lindsey), but seriously wondering how I can mindfully practice a kind of distance from the more sinister influences of the Internet and other technologies. To be blunt: I worry about how my own brain is changing, in many ways negatively, as it has been shaped by digital technologies. It is harder to read for long periods



of time; I'm much more easily distracted; and in short I often find myself longing for "connection," hoping for that certain email (usually disappointed, by the way), or just surfing around and seeing what is new in the world. But even as my MacBook boots up, I recall a wistful observation from Marilynne Robinson: "I miss civilization, and I want it back."

And so, in that spirit, I would like to end with a very brief list of ideas about how to balance our digital lives.

- Digital fasting: I try to turn off the computer from about midday Saturday through Monday morning. And yet it is hard; very hard. I do not always make it.
- Reading out loud long passages, including whole chapters from the Bible: we are doing this weekly in a study group I lead. Americans have almost forgotten how to listen to heightened speech.
- Refusing the tyranny of the urgent that is rampant among my students and their occasionally annoying or insulting emails: I encourage face-to-face encounters that seem to me more humane than code on a screen.
- Often leaving behind my cellphone: especially on walks or hikes, but also at the bookstore or other shopping venues, at films or concerts, parties or dinners, or other events. Certainly church (every week several cellphones ring in the sermon; I guess I just don't hear them during the worship). Frankly, I am astonished by the number of lit-up screens that dot darkened theaters these days, and I often have to ask other audience members to please shut it off.
- Download articles and print them out to read: too much staring into screens already.
- Silence. As much and as long as possible, in a host of different manners and settings throughout my week.

I am sure there are many other practices that the spiritually-inclined have devised to wrestle against

the imposing forces of the Internet in our lives. And honestly I would love to hear about them: please send me an email and tell me about them. But in closing, it strikes me that I do not wish to come across holier than thou in any of this. I am struggling with it all too. Like the authors mentioned above, I am becoming ever more alert to the ways my brain seems to have changed from younger days. Part of it is surely simple aging. But part of it is all this electronic noise and the concomitant "shallow" encounters with the newest, the flashiest. Probably if you have read this far, you are wrestling too.

So let us just say it this way: We all need to be mindful, as stewards of those wonderful organs we call brains, of how we form them through habit—lest we be drawn even further into the maw of the beast (is that too apocalyptic?). The good news is that we can do it; neuroscience now supports a view that there are specific, habitual acts of moral agency humans can deploy in the interests of their brains. It is ennobling to discover that we can in large part co-create the kind of brain we would like to have, and that it is up to each of us to nurture and cultivate our brains from today and through the balance of our earthly lives. All of this, however, does require work, and echoing most of the authors above, perhaps that is the key message I would like to impress upon this generation of frenetic, millennial college students—and myself. But after all, maybe it is not all so fresh. Henry David Thoreau wrote similarly over 160 years ago: "As a single footstep will not make a path on the earth, so a single thought will not make a pathway in the mind. To make a deep physical path, we walk again and again. To make a deep mental path, we must think over and over the kind of thoughts we wish to dominate our lives."

And so I ask you, dear reader: what sorts of thoughts do you wish to dominate your life? ✚

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## DESIRE

It arrives on your doorstep  
swaddled like an orphan.  
You glance around, check  
the mailbox for a note. Nothing.  
You feed it. It grows, begins  
to walk, helps itself  
to the olives in the fridge,  
sucking out the pimentos  
and spitting them on the counter.  
Before long, it's lounging  
in its underwear, scratching itself,  
telling you, *I'm hungry,*  
*make me a sandwich.*  
*Tuna, no crust.*

Or you starve it,  
shut it in a coat closet  
for weeks under a heap  
of forgotten shoes, turn the TV up  
till its crying stops and you kill  
the noise, soak in the silence,  
believe things are back  
the way they were.  
But when everything's still  
and you lie awake in bed,  
it whooshes about the house  
singing your name  
in the thin, bright tones  
of a castrato.

Brent Newsom



# The Knight of Faith and The Dark Knight

Ross Moret

**A**T FIRST GLANCE, AND PERHAPS EVEN AT second and third glances, it may seem strange to place the names of Søren Kierkegaard and Bruce Wayne in the same sentence. However, Christopher Nolan's recent trilogy of Batman films—*Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012)—explore many of the same themes as the work of the Danish, existentialist philosopher. Nolan's hero confronts fear, dread, loss, and isolation, human experiences that are among Kierkegaard's deepest concerns. And, despite the darkness, both Nolan and Kierkegaard end up telling uplifting stories in which the possibility of redemption is always present, even amidst the worst difficulties. Bruce Wayne achieves a kind of redemption, or what Kierkegaard would call repetition, as he proceeds through a long and difficult journey marked by despair, faith, and sacrifice.

Very little imagination is required to make a superficial comparison between the characters of Job, the biblical subject of Kierkegaard's *Repetition*, and Bruce Wayne. Both are wealthy individuals forced to undergo ordeals at the hands of demonic figures. Satan strips Job of his family, his wealth, and his health. His friends and his wife come to offer criticism, even blaming him for his troubles. In the end, Job receives everything back two-fold. Similarly, Wayne's parents are murdered by Joe Chill, his mansion is burnt to the ground by Ra's al Ghul, his great love and oldest friend is slaughtered by the Joker, his fortune is stripped by Talia al Ghul, and his body is broken by Bane. His faithful butler, Alfred, tries to convince him to give up on Batman while Selina Kyle looks to persuade him to abandon Gotham. In the end, Bruce also receives everything back two-fold, but his returns are spiritual

rather than material. In Kierkegaard's terminology, Bruce Wayne achieves a repetition.

What is repetition for Kierkegaard, and how is it achieved? Constantin Constantius, the pseudonym under which Kierkegaard published *Repetition*, compares it with the concept of recollection. Recollection and repetition, he says, "are the same movement, except in opposite directions" (131). The concept of recollection is drawn from Greek metaphysics. It refers to our ability through physical experiences of the material world and intellectual effort to recall the eternal, ideal forms that provide a source of meaning to all reality. Recollection is a process of remembering; repetition, in contrast, is the active practice of becoming. Repetition is a future-oriented effort that entails resolutely trusting God, despite our experiences with losses in the past and uncertainties of what is to come. Through repetition, we seek the wholeness of eternity not in memories of the past, but in ethical action that offers hope for restoration of ourselves and the world. (On this complicated and elusive notion in Kierkegaard's thought, see Mooney 1998; also Jackson 1999, 49 n 44.)

A repetition of this kind occurs when Batman saves Police Commissioner Gordon's son from the deranged Harvey Dent near the end of *The Dark Knight*. In the scene, Dent holds a gun to Gordon's son and forces Gordon to reassure the child with the words, "It's going to be alright, son." Dent does not realize, of course, that these words were twice spoken to a young Bruce Wayne in a similar situation: first by his dying father and second by a kind police sergeant, none other than Jim Gordon. Bruce heard these words as a helpless young boy, and he spent seven years training so that the next time he heard them he would be able to do something about the situation; he saves Gordon's son in a repetition.



For Kierkegaard, however, repetition is both an ethical and a religious phenomenon. While Job, the biblical subject of *Repetition*, would not have experienced a repetition if he had not acted in a way that was pleasing to God, ultimately it was God who saw to it that Job received everything back twice-over. For true repetition then, human action is required but is not sufficient; faith is required as well.

deemed Gotham City so corrupt that it warranted complete destruction. In a scene from *Batman Begins* that conjures up images of Abraham bartering with God over Sodom and Gomorrah, Wayne begs Ra's Al Ghul for more time to turn Gotham around and cries out that "there are good people here." In a scene in *The Dark Knight*, Wayne demonstrates faith in the people of Gotham when



Warner Brothers Pictures, 2005.

Nolan's version of Gotham City de-emphasizes the most fantastic elements of Batman's comic books, opting to portray a city that seems very much like one to which we might pay a visit. Likewise, while Nolan incorporates philosophical and religious themes into his films, they tend to be existential rather than transcendent in tone.

It might not surprise us, then, to find that Bruce Wayne's faith is not in God, but in something much more mundane: Gotham City. Or, perhaps to be more precise, Wayne places his faith in the goodness of the people of Gotham City. Two scenes are sufficient to illustrate the point. The first demonstrates a chief difference between Bruce Wayne and the vigilantes of the League of Shadows, the leader of which, Ra's Al Ghul,

the Joker manipulates hostages in an attempt to demonstrate the superficiality of "society's rules." The Joker plants explosives on two ferries that are attempting to leave the city. One ferry is filled with convicts, and the other with average citizens. The passengers on each ferry are provided with a trigger to detonate the other boat and told that in a few minutes both ferries will explode unless one ferry destroys the other. When Gordon is notified of the situation he tells Batman in desperation that "every second we take, those people on the ferries get closer to blowing each other up." But Wayne, as Batman, steadfastly replies, "That won't happen!" For Wayne, for Job, and as we shall see for Abraham, no amount of personal effort or integrity can bring about a repetition. Getting back what has been lost can only occur by virtue



of the object of faith, which Kierkegaard dubs “the absurd” in perhaps his most famous work, *Fear and Trembling*.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Johannes de Silentio, speaks primarily of two kinds of figures, the knight of faith, exemplified by Abraham, who, in Genesis 22, was commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac, and the knight of infinite resignation, a subset of which is the tragic hero. “The difference between the tragic hero and Abraham,” de Silentio writes, “is very obvious. The tragic hero is still within the ethical,” the universal social rules by which we live our lives among others (*Fear and Trembling*, 59). For the tragic hero, to go beyond that which everyone, everywhere and at all times, should do is a transgression. For the knight of faith though, the particular situation becomes higher than the universal rules by means of paradoxical faith. It is only by means of a direct and individual relation to God through faith, which de Silentio argues leads to “the teleological suspension of the ethical,” that Abraham can be saved. According to the universal, Abraham is a murderer; according to the paradox, he is the father of faith.

But such faith has further ramifications. Both the knight of faith and the knight of infinite resignation fortify themselves against the changes of the finite world by relating to that which is infinite: the tragic hero to the universal and the knight of faith to the object of faith. Were a tragic hero given the command given to Abraham, he would have carried out the sacrifice but would have given up all hope upon beginning to climb the mountain. Abraham, though, never gave up hope. He was ready to sacrifice Isaac, but he was also ready to receive him back with joy. Whereas the knight of infinite resignation gives up the world, the knight of faith receives the world back again by virtue of belief in the absurd.

Images of Abrahamic sacrifice are something of a motif in Nolan’s Batman films. In *Batman Begins*, Bruce Wayne lays in wait to shoot his parents’ murderer in front of a huge crowd in broad daylight, but just as he is about to pull the trigger a mob goon shoots the man instead. In *The Dark Knight*, the Joker threatens to commit a murder every day that Batman’s identity remains a secret; however, just as

Wayne steps forward to take responsibility, Harvey Dent declares himself to be the Batman.

Perhaps the most interesting such scene, and the most relevant, occurs at the climax of *The Dark Knight*, when Batman chooses to take the guilt of Dent’s (now Two-Face) crimes upon himself. This scene recalls the opening pages of *Fear and Trembling*, where de Silentio offers four imaginative renditions of how the sacrifice of Isaac might have played out were Abraham a knight of infinite resignation rather than a knight of faith. The first rendering is worthy of quotation at length:

Abraham climbed Mount Moriah, but Isaac did not understand him. Then Abraham turned away from him for a moment, but when Isaac saw Abraham’s face again, it had changed: his gaze was wild, his whole being was sheer terror. He seized Isaac by the chest, threw him to the ground, and said, “Stupid boy, do you think I am your father? I am an idolater. Do you think it is God’s command? No it is my desire.” Then Isaac trembled and cried out in his anguish: “God in heaven, have mercy on me, God of Abraham, have mercy on me; if I have no father on earth, then you be my father!” But Abraham said softly to himself, “Lord God in heaven, I thank you; it is better that he believes me a monster than that he should lose faith in you.” (11)

The similarities between the film’s climax and de Silentio’s first imaginative construction of the Genesis 22 sacrifice are striking. Here Batman is like the ram in the thicket. Wayne functions as Abraham. Dent has shifted from his role as the ram to become a god-character, a symbol of the goodness of Gotham. And the people of Gotham City have entered the picture in the role of Isaac, those whose faith must be maintained through deception. Gordon declares that when the people learn of Dent’s fall to madness they, “will lose hope.” Batman decides to deceive them in order to maintain their faith. “Because sometimes the truth isn’t good enough. Sometimes



people deserve more. Sometimes people deserve to have their faith rewarded." Batman seems to operate under his own faith-inspired teleological suspension of the ethical. He transgresses the rule of law, to which everyone everywhere is subject and according to which he is a criminal, worthy of life in prison. Batman, however, is not interested in following the rules: he is interested in the redemption of Gotham. "I can do those things," he tells Gordon, "because I'm not a hero—not like Dent. I am whatever Gotham needs me to be."

Batman's death provides a similar dramatic example, and his faith in the goodness of the city is rewarded. He resigns everything; however, this time he grasps everything as well. His repetition is complete.

But if Batman somehow believes that he operates beyond the ethical, Bruce Wayne suffers mightily from having made this sacrifice. While his actions follow those of de Silentio's first imaginative construction, the fallout is closer to the second rendition: "From that day henceforth, Abraham was old; he could not forget that God had ordered him to do this. Isaac flourished as before, but Abraham's eyes were darkened and he saw joy no more" (12). Indeed, while Gotham seems to have improved, this is how we find Bruce Wayne in the opening scenes of the third film, *The Dark Knight Rises*—aged beyond his years, unable to move beyond the death of his beloved Rachel Dent. The word that Kierkegaard might use for Wayne's mindset at this point is despair, which the pseudonym Anti-Climacus describes in *The Sickness Unto Death* as the desire "to want to be rid of oneself" (147). Alastair Hannay helpfully

glosses this explanation by writing that despair, for Anti-Climacus, is "a response to whatever it is about one's 'self' that makes one unhappy being it, its particular defects, its contingent historical situation, the human condition as such, or certain demands implicit in the notion of selfhood" (1997, 332).

It is clear to those around him that Bruce Wayne wants to be rid of himself. Alfred, Wayne's butler and oldest friend, fears not that Wayne will fail if he returns as Batman, but that Wayne's despair has finally reached suicidal proportions. And Bane, the villain of the film and a leader in the rejuvenated League of Shadows, even refuses to kill Wayne because, as he says to Wayne, "You do not fear death, you welcome it." But this moment is the beginning of Wayne's ultimate repetition. Bane puts Wayne in a prison designed to maximize despair by providing a glimmer of hope—the prison has no ceiling. Wayne has fallen in such a hole before but was taught by his father the meaning of such setbacks. "Why do we fall," his father asked. "So we can learn to pick ourselves up." And Wayne experienced despair once before, when he languished for years after the death of his parents before attempting to be rid of himself by killing their murderer in front of a large crowd. He found faith and purpose, however, like his father, in working for the redemption of Gotham. Ultimately he became the Batman. Now he must become the Batman once again, but before he can do that he must climb out of this prison. He tries twice, crashing against the wall as a rope saves him from perishing. Then, on the third attempt, he does something absurd; he makes the climb without a rope and, in the most strikingly Kierkegaardian of images, makes a great leap to freedom. It is also a leap to faith. He resolves to trust the cat burglar Selina Kyle even after she betrayed him. And when he is forced to sacrifice the Batman once again, and this time Bruce Wayne with him, all is not lost but gained. His parents' deaths, which we are told in *Batman Begins* shocked the city into saving itself, ultimately drove Wayne to become the Batman. Batman's death provides a similar dramatic example, and his faith in the goodness of the city is rewarded. He resigns everything;



however, this time he grasps everything as well. His repetition is complete.

A reading of this kind begs the question, were these themes intentionally incorporated into the films? Ultimately, the question is both unanswerable and largely immaterial, for the mere fact that we can discuss themes such as these in this manner of detail demonstrates that these films provide a level of sophistication and a depth of vision worth talking and thinking about. And that, after all, is the genius of both Kierkegaard and of the biblical stories of Abraham and Job upon which he meditates; they draw us to struggle with great questions and to search out the inadequacy of our easy, pat answers. Those of us with religious sensibilities might chaff at the reduction of faith to finite and fallible humanity, and in my mind we are right to do so. But perhaps then we are asking more of The Dark Knight than he can provide. We still need those old Knights of Faith after all. ✝

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## SATURDAY: ANIMATED CHERRY

Sometimes the dream gets muddled:  
one night, it's barn swallows; another,  
a gold rooster that flares up from double  
crust when the first cooled piece gets cut.  
Always, you're amazed that feathers come  
out clean, survive the oven's fire: Abednegos  
with wings. And it's your hands covered  
in canned cherry filling. Right before  
waking, it turns to red syrup—or blood  
dried from that day's slaughter—or the  
notyetbaby lost while picking apples.  
But in this dream, the daughter lives and  
the animals won't die. They're reborn into  
pale eggshells, they break free from pie plate,  
up from bubbling filling phoenix, and each  
speaking things you later can't recall. All  
you know is that the table's full—the hobo  
John, the minister's wife, your children young  
with school friends. They laugh and gape in  
wonder, as if such unexpected guests were  
what they'd wanted to be served all along.

Becca J. R. Lachman



# Turn That Stuff Down

## The Need for Silence in Music

Jennifer Forness

**O**LDER GENERATIONS FREQUENTLY complain that their children's music "all sounds the same." A recent study published in *Scientific Report* confirms this complaint: pop music really is getting louder. "Measuring the Evolution in Contemporary Western Popular Music" examined 464,411 distinct music recordings from 1955 to 2010 available in the Million Song Dataset. Researchers ran the songs through a series of complex algorithms to quantify harmonic sequences, timbre, and loudness of music in a variety of genres, including rock, pop, hip-hop, metal, and electronic. The study found that over the years, pop music has moved toward simpler harmonic progressions, more predictable and consistent timbres, and overall louder volume (Sera *et al* 2012).

That current pop music has fewer harmonies and timbres is not surprising. Much of what draws youth to popular music today is the "beat" of the music rather than interesting progressions and sound combinations. If you listen to any pop radio station for long, you cannot help but notice that much of the music is very similar. Blogger Scicurious recently (August 13, 2012, <http://scientopia.org/blogs/scicurious>) pointed this out. The first twenty seconds of Nicki Minaj's "Turn Me On" consist of eight bars of synthesized beats followed by the lyrics "Doctor, doctor, need you bad, hold me babe" sung over the same chord. Snoop Dogg's "Sweat" opens with four bars of synthesized beats followed by the lyrics "Can you be my doctor? Can you fix me up?" over the same chord. If you are not listening carefully, you might not even notice when the song changes.

Even more worrying than the homogeneity of recent pop music is its increasing volume. Recent changes in recording technology have resulted in records becoming louder, a phenomenon known

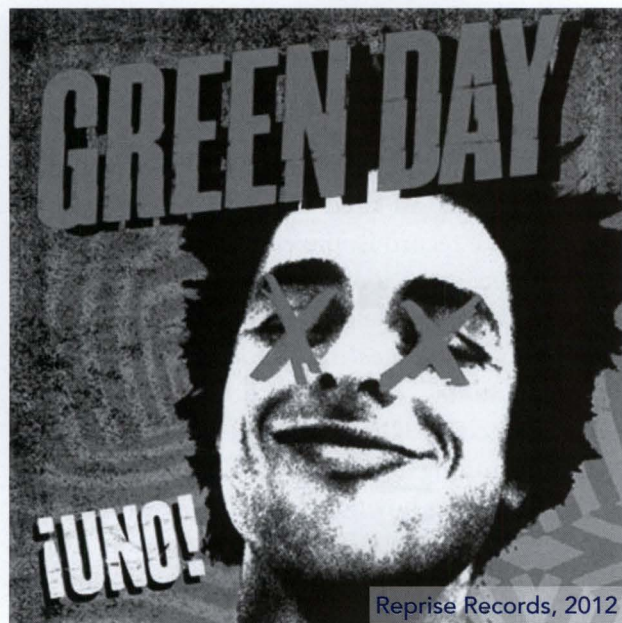
as the "loudness wars." In today's digital formats, music is compressed to fit into a smaller space. This technique has the unfortunate consequence of eliminating many dynamic contrasts. Instead of relying on dynamic contrast, the recording industry has adopted the philosophy that the louder the record is, the easier it will be for people to recognize it and for the record to become a hit. Matt Mayfield's "The Loudness War" on YouTube illustrates the unfortunate effects this approach has on music ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Gmex\\_4hreQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Gmex_4hreQ)). Mayfield plays the beginning of Paul McCartney's "Figure of Eight," noting how much punch the drums have when they enter. He then plays the song as if it had been recorded with today's compression levels and demonstrates how much louder the track is. When the track is compressed, the drums lose their punch, and the song becomes less effective.

While engineers and producers have played a significant role in making pop music louder, the artists are not without fault. Many artists have pandered to changing tastes in pop music and have written simpler, less dynamic songs. Much of today's popular music has few or no breaks in the volume; the songs are just loud from beginning to end. Unfortunately, the listener then loses all the benefits of quiet and silence in music. The listener needs periods of rest to react to a particular word or phrase that the artist has decided is important. The contrast of loud and soft enables the listener to explore how the music is affecting him or her and to interact with the music and use it in a meaningful way. The lack of dynamic range prevents the listener from engaging with the music in any but a superficial way.

A closer look at the punk/alternative band Green Day demonstrates both how silence can be used to great effect and how the lack of dynamic



contrast is a detriment. Their 1994 breakout album *Dookie* featured a variety of songs about coming of age in suburbia. The song “Longview,” with its iconic bass line, explores the monotony of living in the suburbs. The song starts off with the walking bass already creating boredom by repeating itself four times before Billie Armstrong begins to sing. The soft shuffle of the toms on the drum



set along with the bass give us time to absorb how bored Armstrong is as he changes “channels for an hour or two / Twiddle my thumbs just for a bit.” Because the beginning is soft, the listener is struck by the force of Armstrong’s anger in the chorus when the guitar begins to strum forcefully along with Armstrong’s cry to “bite my lips and close my eyes / Take me away to paradise.” The contrast of soft and loud gives us time to feel the tedium of living in the suburbs.

Almost twenty years later, Green Day’s newly released album, *¡Uno!*, shows how the changing music industry has affected the quality of the music. The song “Kill the DJ” harkens back to Green Day’s punk roots with its insistence on killing “the man.” The track starts loudly with a harsh minor guitar riff. Armstrong immediately butts up against religion by complaining about “Christian soldiers / Filled with mind jivin’ control.” Continuing with the same loud guitar riff, Armstrong commands, “Someone kill the

DJ, shoot the f\*\*\*ing DJ.” The rest of the lyrics bring up angry complaints against religious and cultural authorities and focuses mostly on the phrase, “someone kill the DJ.” In fact, Armstrong uses variations of that phrase thirty times in the song. Unfortunately, Armstrong never gives us enough of a break from his angry complaints to think about who the DJ is and why we should be upset with him. Instead, all the listener gets is the unchanging angry guitar riff throughout the whole song. Unlike “Longview,” which gives us time to wallow in our boredom, “Kill the DJ” slams the listener over the head with the same relentless complaint without giving the listener space to explore how or why one might want to get rid of “the man.”

Green Day’s journey from “Longview” to “Kill the DJ” illustrates how much louder and less interesting much of popular music has become. “Kill the DJ” bows to the whims of current listeners, while “Longview” falls into the tradition of more dynamic bands such as U2 and The Beatles, as well as most of Western history’s popular music. U2’s “Where the Streets Have No Name” engages the listener through its increasing sonic ride. The nearly two minutes of crescendo at the beginning of the song continue to rise once the vocals peak at the end of the lyrics before beginning a slow descent to the end. The rise and fall at both ends of the song give us time to absorb the lyrics of the text. Going back further to The Beatles, we hear the word painting in songs like “Let It Be,” where the music always gets softer on the phrase “Whisper words of wisdom / Let it be,” making sure the listener has to engage more closely as the song gets quieter.

Of course, silence in music extends beyond the popular music of Green Day and The Beatles to classical music. Impressionists like Debussy use silence to great effect, giving the listener time to reflect on nature and space. Beethoven explores the space between loud and soft, helping the listener experience the extreme ranges of human emotions. The alternation of recitatives, arias, and choruses in a Bach cantata gives the listener time to hear and reflect on the word of God. The music—and the silence—to which one listens encourages meditation on the meaning and



emotions in the music. One listens and receives the richness of music through its silences.

Great pieces of music are meaningful because the space which silence provides resonates with human needs and experiences. Silence rings true to the listener because it transcends. Spiritual practices have always recognized this need. Practices like visualization, prayer, and meditation invite the faithful to become aware of themselves and the ways in which God speaks to them. Silence becomes a prayerful conversation during which one speaks to and listens to God. In *Keeping Silence: Christian Practices for Entering Stillness* (Moorehouse Publishing, 2002), C. W. McPherson writes that “cultivating silence enables us to understand and recover our own humanity; it serves as a catalyst, bringing the presence of God into our lives and into the world” (6). Silence in spiritual practices, as in music, allows one to meditate on words or ideas, reflect on their meaning in one’s life, and explore how they will affect one’s thoughts and actions.

As faith practices demonstrate, silence is essential to meeting our emotional and spiritual needs. Perhaps this study will convince at least a few song writers and performers that we need

dynamics and silence in music. Maybe we can move beyond the loudness wars and finally turn the volume back down. ♯

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## RUMBLE STRIP

Speeding down the interstate at seventeen  
in my parents' Thunderbird, I am out to show  
I am fearless. Eighty seems a lifetime ago,  
gauges rising, grill grinning at the GMC Jimmy  
rattling in the passing lane. Cheers are heard  
on the CB radio. My boyfriend's hands are pressed  
against the dash. He looks at me, forehead creased,  
speeding down the interstate in my parents' Thunderbird.  
I am not fearless. I can't prove that I'll make it  
past ninety with my future husband I will meet  
four years down this road. A future daughter sits  
buckled in and yells, "Slow down!" son kicks my seat  
and points, "TRUCK! TRUCK!" never consider  
parents, younger brothers, my nervous passenger  
or his future wife and daughters, families  
and cars I pass as if I have nothing to lose

or gain on this freeway, dotted white lines  
speeding by on this open road, like ellipses.

Sarah Wells



# No Truth or Reconciliation

## Patrick Flanery's *Absolution*

Joanne Myers

THE CHARACTERS IN PATRICK FLANERY'S novel seem unable to believe in the possibility for grace evoked by its title. *Absolution* follows two white South Africans, Sam Leroux and Clare Wald, as they try to make sense of both their interlocking personal histories and their ties to the violent politics of their nation in the apartheid- and post-apartheid eras. As the novel's multiple plots unfold, absolution—for crimes both personal and political—is desired but also deferred, an infinitely vanishing point toward which Flanery's characters move without hope of arrival. Professional storytellers of different sorts, Clare and Sam nonetheless seem to have lost faith in narrative's ability to capture the truth. And without truth, the novel suggests, what kind of absolution is possible? The question clearly resonates in the South African context, but it is not always clear whether Flanery wants readers to apply his characters' dilemmas to modern life more generally.

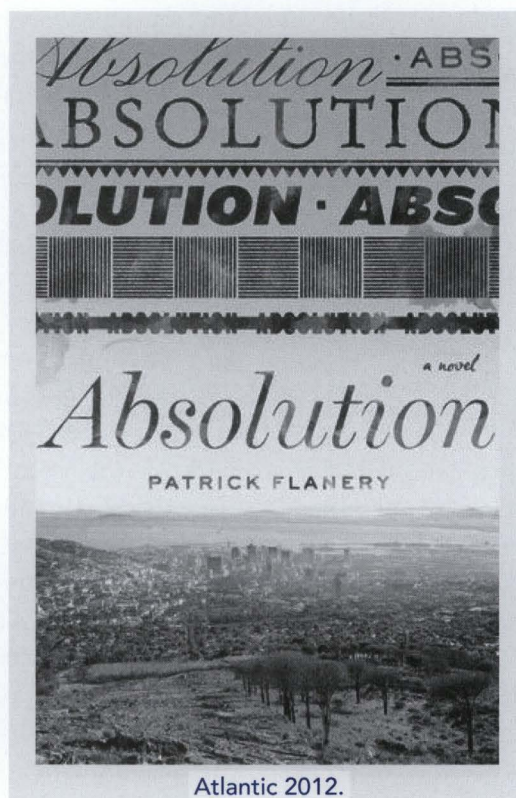
The novel's narrative threads are complexly interwoven. Ostensibly, professional causes bring the protagonists together: Clare, a novelist, has reluctantly acceded to have her biography written and has chosen Sam, an expatriate academic living in the US, for the task. Sam's and Clare's first-person narratives in the novel's present are

spliced with sections that narrate Sam's childhood experiences in the third-person and with excerpts from a fictionalized memoir that Clare is about to publish and that, in a further twist, is also entitled *Absolution*. Quite early in the novel,

Flanery lets readers know that Sam and Clare have more than professional ties, but their personal connection comes to light sooner rather than later, serving as a less significant driver of the plot than subsequent, more significant revelations that entangle them further.

In her first-person narrative, Clare is the character more obviously seeking forgiveness. These sections detail her wary interactions with Sam, whose scholarly acumen she regularly insults, but they also trace her pained attempts to understand her daughter Laura, an anti-apartheid militant who went missing years before and is presumed dead. Clare wants

to understand her daughter's actions, which she describes as "both too great and selfless as well as too dishonorable and horrific to be called heroic" (253). Even as she grapples with her inability to prevent her daughter's turn to violence, Clare seems to envy her clarity of purpose. The sections drawn from Clare's version of *Absolution* cast her as the victim of a home invasion—a common occurrence given the tense racial situation of contemporary South Africa but also,



Atlantic 2012.



in Clare's version of events, an act of revenge for careless remarks, made decades earlier, that may or may not have led to the murder of her sister and brother-in-law. As Clare meditates on Laura's inarguable guilt—the “dishonorable and horrific” guerrilla campaign in which she was engaged—she considers her own more questionable culpability as mother, sister, and novelist under apartheid. Unsure how to fix the blame for crimes undertaken on behalf of a greater good, Clare is also anxious because she does not clearly have a crime to which she can confess. “Even if

Absolution is elusive but also desirable, because it can retroactively invest one's actions with significance. To seek to be absolved is to make a claim that one has done something.

the crime is not a crime as such,” she tells her son, Mark, “I do and can only regard myself as guilty of something like criminal negligence, or if not negligence, then recklessness...” (287). Absolution, these sections suggest, is elusive but also desirable, because it can retroactively invest one's actions with significance. To seek to be absolved, for Clare at least, is to make a claim that one has done something, that one is not, as she intermittently fears, “[n]othing but a paper tiger in a paper cage” (349).

Sam's sections heighten the narrative's suspense by revealing glimpses of his own relationship with Laura, of which Clare is imperfectly aware. They also narrate his awkward reacclimation to life in a country that is less racked by violence than in his childhood but still charged by an atmosphere of constant danger. Sam's pursuit of Clare is both dogged and diffident, and the narrative provides little clarity—which Sam himself does not seem to possess—about what

exactly he wants from her. Dated sections that fill in the gaps in Sam's childhood help clarify some of the tensions in their relationship, providing details of a further connection between Laura and Sam's parents, also ANC militants, who died during a botched terrorist operation.

Initially, readers expect Sam to serve as a foil for Clare, whose habitual narcissism and tendency to evade responsibility establish her unreliability as a narrator. But as the novel progresses, Sam's status as the diviner of the truth erodes, and he ultimately seems, if not disinterested in the truth of the past, mistrustful that the truth can bring any consolation—or absolution. The complexity of the novel's plot seems designed to amplify the question, on which Flanery repeatedly focuses, of how the stories we tell ourselves are fragile and vulnerable to distortion. Describing her *Absolution* to Sam, Clare classifies it as “a weird hybrid of essay and fiction and family and national history... both fiction and something that is not quite fiction but less than proper history or memoir” (341). Here, generic hybridity functions, as the novel's fractured points of view also function, to undermine the ideal of an accurate and full reporting of the past.

The South African context puts added pressure on the situation: Flanery alludes to and provides fictionalized excerpts from reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), that entity charged with suturing the past's wounds via their narration. If the TRC's work was premised on the assumption that a full account of past horrors could serve as an adequate alternative to the more exacting pursuit of justice, *Absolution* questions the ability of story to be so faithful to history as to provide liberation from its claims and costs. At the same time, Flanery's characters exhibit no post-modern playfulness about the truth. Rather, *Absolution* depicts individuals for whom the truth's inaccessibility causes an anguish that registers as a flattening of self, an inability to grant either desire or despair the authority to anchor identity.

At the center of the characters' lives—and at the center of *Absolution* itself—is therefore a kind of nullity. Absent a robust sense of truth, notions of responsibility are leached of meaning,



leaving absolution an absent presence. Hearing his mother's confession of her past errors, Mark declines to dignify them with the status of crimes: "You have overplayed your role in history, Mother," he tells her, "and I suggest you do nothing else but get over it" (349). Sam gets at the crux of the problem when he articulates how his life has been shadowed by a notion of accidental harm:

Accidents were always happening. He had come from a country of accidents. He tried to understand what this meant. It seemed to mean that no one was ever responsible for anything if only you could tell the truth and most of all if you could say you were sorry. But he had not told the truth and he was not sorry.

Sam's focus on the accidental echoes Clare's description of her own actions as "careless." For these characters, the links between causes and effects are not only uncertain but ultimately inaccessible. Framed by a theologically resonant concept, the struggles of these characters play out in a resolutely secular world. Sam and Clare cannot imagine making sense of all that has gone wrong in their lives by making an appeal beyond the contingencies of history. The accidental is that for which no one can be blamed, for which absolution is beside the point.

At points, Flanery seems to want to distinguish Sam from this economy of the accidental. Sam, after all, "had not told the truth and he was not sorry." One way to understand Sam's flatness as a character is to see him as unwilling to forge an identity, as Clare does, by glamorizing mistakes as crimes. But Sam proves as unable as the other characters to pinpoint tragedy's causes by applying to the past a richer moral vocabulary. If absolution's grace seems inexplicable to these characters, so is the notion of evil. Violence past and present pervades the novel like a smog, its causes beyond pinpointing. Despite his exposure of the fiction of the accidental, Sam tries to mitigate the horror of his parents' violent death for his American wife by explaining that "You have

to understand it in context. It was an accident. It wasn't supposed to happen the way it did" (277). Without a more nuanced way of understanding the damage people can do to one another, Sam is as unable as anyone else to resolve the past's ambiguities, or to extend or accept absolution. The question of how things went so wrong for him, for his parents, and for Laura—and hence the possibility that those wrongs can be repaired—must go unaddressed.

At the level of plot, this means that the novel's climaxes, moments when scraps of truth finally emerge, are curiously understated. Readers may well find themselves frustrated as the characters seem unable to acknowledge the stakes of the truths they learn—an inability that ultimately feels like an evasion, on the novel's part, of defining absolution in this starkly-lit, Godless world. Flanery has set up his characters' interlocking problems cleverly, but *Absolution* ends by refusing to grant the truth, as it has come to be understood, any purchase on the characters' outlook. "I am prepared for the biography, when it finally appears, to bear no resemblance to the drafts he shows me," Clare muses in conclusion. "I hope that will not be so, but as much as I have—almost despite myself—come to love him and believe all that he tells me... I do not trust him, and never shall" (386). Unabsolved, ungraced, untrusting, *Absolution's* characters end up much as they began: alone with their own ambiguous versions of the truth. It is not always clear whether Flanery wants readers to see their predicament as unique to the South African context or part of secular culture more generally; the novel's setting gives him a fertile ground for raising questions about the road from truth to reconciliation, but its lingering ambiguities mean that readers may not understand how precisely to get from there to here. ✦

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## BUILDING

"The youth gets together his materials  
to build a bridge to the moon.... the  
middle-aged man concludes to build  
a woodshed with them."

Thoreau

These are the planks of our youth.  
We will haul them out.  
Here are the nails we collected in jam jars;  
here the nuts and bolts we bought with pennies.  
Far in the back of closets are the meticulous plans  
sketched in the margins of comic books  
and faded school assignments.

We will break open the toolbox  
rusted from neglect.  
We will grasp the old weight  
of hammer and saw.  
The earth and sky remember  
our eyes. We will begin.

Marjorie Maddox



# Toward a Theology of Zombies

A. Trevor Sutton

**T**HIS STORY BEGINS LIKE A BAD JOKE: A clergyman and three zombie experts walk into a room. They are presenting papers at an academic conference. After the clergyman presents his paper, a graduate student raises her hand and asks: "Does the Lutheran faith have anything to say about zombies?"

Through what must have been a clerical error, I was the lone clergyman on a panel of zombie experts at a humanities conference hosted by a Midwestern university. Since my paper was about early Christian funerary art, the conference organizers decided it would be best to place me on a panel with three PhD students working in the field of zombies. I lectured on the dead; they lectured on the undead.

My fellow panel members addressed some vexing zombie issues: Why are Haitian zombies confused with filmmaker George Romero's zombies? In a full-fledged zombie apocalypse, is it better to hunker down in a basement or ascend to the tops of buildings? Can one ever fully recover from zombification? These questions—ostensibly jokes, yet debated with the utmost seriousness—filled the allotted presentation time and bled into the discussion period.

As the conversation lingered over the bacterial nuances of Haitian zombies, I drifted off into my own zombified state of boredom. When the discussion had reached undead levels of monotony, a question was finally hurled in my direction: "Does the Lutheran faith have anything to say about zombies?"

At first, I was tempted to say that Lutheranism has as much to say about zombies as it does about snipe hunts, unicorns, and leprechauns. I resisted. As I thought about the question, it became apparent that one thing does unite the zombiologists and me: we both

love a good mystery. For zombiologists, love of mystery drives them to speculate tirelessly about an impending zombie apocalypse. For me, and others in the Lutheran tribe, our love of mystery allows us to hold a cornucopia of seemingly paradoxical beliefs.

Although both Lutherans and zombiologists love mystery, each group handles mystery very differently; the very thing that unites these groups also divides them. Mystery, for the zombiologists on my panel, is an invitation to probe deeper into ontological questions of being. For them, a mystery is a problem begging for a solution. Mystery, for me, is a chance to marvel at the miracle of creation. Life's mysteries call for reflection, not dissection.

Zombies, or the notion of embodied unconsciousness, can only exist in a world that mishandles mysteries. Reductive science, with its canine appetite for perfunctory answers, has reduced the mystery of creaturely life down to a series of mechanical components. If human life is but a series of mechanical components, then zombie life is what happens when these components go awry.

Take neuroscience as an example: researchers have fileted every nook and cranny of the brain, with a haughty lot of them declaring that creaturely life is merely the result of complex operations within the brain. This expectation of mastery over mystery is precisely what makes zombiologists.

Zombiology is an epiphenomenon of reductive science, a fascination that results from imbibing too much Cartesian dualism. If the recipe for a human is one part body and one part soul, then the recipe for a zombie is merely one part body and then substitute flesh-eating bacteria for the soul. Zombie lovers, like ghost



hunters, are the bastard children of traditional Cartesian dualists; while ghost hunters are fixated on the possibility of the bodiless soul, zombie lovers are fixated on the possibility of the soulless body.

The desire to master the mystery of life is not limited to zombie panels at humanities conferences. The attempt to dissect life down to unrecognizable pieces goes beyond human subjects. Our food and animals have been subjected to a thorough zombification. Salmon have been genetically altered to grow at alarming rates.

## While the zombie-loving community may be experts on the undead, Christ has made us experts on the abundantly-lived life.

These aptly named “Frankenfish” are almost fish. GMO plants can produce sterile seeds so that it is almost a soybean. Meat from cattle has been infused with some sort of pink slime so that it is almost beef. This leads us to wonder: We have zombie food, what is to say that we cannot have zombie people as well?

Into the midst of this zombie chaos our faith makes some mysterious assertions about miraculous things. These declarations sometimes appear impotent. They are dismissed on account of the questions they leave unanswered. Take for instance the assertion that God formed creatures from the dust of the earth. Is this dust made of electrons, atoms, or quarks? And what exactly is the divine glue used to hold this dust together? Is it covalent bonds, quantum physics,

or laminin proteins? Our mysterious claim leaves these questions unanswered. It simply says one thing: Life is from God.

Another mysterious assertion is that life is from the breath of God. This leaves us wondering: What of the liminal state between breath and breathlessness? What do we make of the body’s electrical signals long after clinical death? What of the heart’s spontaneous reperfusion after being stopped for a time? To these questions we have only one mysterious claim: Life comes from the breath of God. Life is removed when the breath of God is removed.

The mysterious claims of our faith do not account for all of the subtleties of reductive science. In fact, the mysteries of our faith add a great deal of opacity to the conversation. Yet, in these simple gems we find something of substance to offer the zombie-loving community. While they may be experts on the undead, Christ has made us experts on the abundantly-lived life.

Our faith refuses to reduce life down to anything less than a miracle. Mysteries are not problems. Mysteries are not promptings for further inquiry. Instead, mystery is simply a part of the creaturely experience. Into a world of chaos we carry a handful of mysterious assertions. Our claims answer few questions about zombies. Yet, somehow the mysteries of our faith answer the questions that are worth asking. ✝

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# Theologies of Academic Freedom

Lake Lambert

A COMMON NARRATIVE ABOUT HIGHER education in the United States juxtaposes academic freedom and sectarian religious identity. As the story is often told, academic freedom increases when religious identity diminishes, and vice-versa. Indeed, the same story is told by those who advocate for greater academic freedom and by those who advocate for enhanced religious identity. In *The Soul of the American University* (1994), George Marsden bemoaned the fact that many church-related colleges and universities carelessly abandoned distinctive denominational identities for a non-sectarian vision that valued a particular version of academic freedom and cultural progress.

Much happened at the dawn of the twentieth century to establish this narrative. As controversies raged over historical critical methods of biblical study and biological evolution, John Dewey and the organization he helped establish—the American Association of University Professors (AAUP)—asserted that strong religious or denominational identity and academic freedom were antithetical. Denominational identity, claimed the AAUP, set the religious authority of the church over against the scientific authority of the professor. Moreover, the sophisticated level of expertise inherent in scientifically-grounded professorial authority required that any evaluation of the teaching and publications of professors be made exclusively by peers rather than by denominational officials. The canonical form of the narrative was eventually established in the AAUP's multiple policy documents and the "Red Book" that collects them.

The trouble with a canon, as with all orthodoxies, is how it marginalizes alternatives. In "The Freedom of Teaching" (1883), the American philosopher Josiah Royce offered a different philosophical foundation for academic freedom, arguing

that the freedom of the educator was necessary due to the "disputed problems" higher education addressed. While Dewey found the basis of academic freedom in the expertise and authority of the educator, Royce found it in the necessity of doubt and continuous investigation in the task of learning. According to Royce, all college- or university-level teaching engages "disputed questions of principle, of method, of scope, and of result," and as a consequence, the professor "must himself be, as far as in him lies, an investigator" who encourages students to be investigators themselves (237). The necessary condition to make this possible is academic freedom. As Royce states it, "The very air of investigation is freedom" (238).

Royce was no friend of doctrinaire denominational colleges that made the professor into a "mouthpiece" for someone else's ideas. However, Royce, by grounding academic freedom in questions and doubt as opposed to independent expertise, was much more in line with educational methods previously embraced by Western Christianity. For example, Thomas Aquinas asserted that doubt was necessary in the pursuit of truth, and he structured the *Summa* in the scholastic method of disputed questions that required readers to engage in alternative arguments before truth could be discovered. Likewise, the Protestant reformers embraced humanism's search for truth by questioning established doctrine and returning to original sources. The problem, as George Marsden argued, was that American higher education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries embraced a liberal Protestantism that endorsed tolerance and non-sectarianism as theological virtues but did not provide a bulwark against arguments like Dewey's that valued expertise while marginalizing faith.

Many serious theologians and denominational loyalists do not see the choices so starkly



as academic freedom versus religious orthodoxy. Protestant and Catholic academics can begin with different premises but end up in the same place as equally forceful advocates for academic freedom precisely in colleges and universities that take their denominational identities seriously. These faculty and administrators have crafted theological arguments that defend academic freedom against denominational leaders outside the university

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while answering secular critics for whom academic freedom is necessary for respectability. In his book *Academic Freedom and Christian Scholarship* (2000), Anthony Diekema, former president of Calvin College, contends that the arguments for academic freedom are too often based on an epistemology of “objectivity and pure rationality” that has been largely rejected by the academy itself. Instead, all arguments for academic freedom are grounded in some type of worldview, and worldviews may differ by institutional mission. Some may continue to find their basis in objectivity and expertise, but there is not and should not be a single universal grounding for academic freedom.

At my own Mercer University, twenty-five years ago academic freedom was tested by charges put forward by a Baptist layman in a letter sent to “all Georgia Baptists.” Among the many charges made by Mr. Lee Roberts of Atlanta were that the teachings and writings of Mercer’s president, Dr. Kirby Godsey, were heretical and that Mercer University Press published works contrary to the teaching of the Georgia Baptist Convention. Although the charge of heresy was directed at him personally as much as it was at the university as a whole, it fell to

Godsey to defend both, and he did so with arguments that were distinctively Baptist. Writing in the student newspaper soon after Roberts’s letter became public, Godsey sought to define Mercer’s identity as a Baptist university with an uncompromising support for academic freedom. Godsey also made specific connections to Baptist theology and especially to the tradition’s long commitment to religious freedom. While he never explicitly used the phrase, Godsey repeatedly alluded to what Baptists recognize as “soul competency” or “soul freedom,” the theological idea that “each person’s journey of faith must be tenaciously respected.” Theologically, the concept of soul competency is the Baptist basis for expecting personal conversion and limiting baptism exclusively to individuals who confess belief. It values the individual and freedom of thought, insisting that ideas be engaged without threats of coercion and only by the power of the Holy Spirit on the human soul. According to Godsey,

this was the foundation for Mercer’s theology of academic freedom as well.

At the University of Notre Dame, issues of academic freedom emerged in 2006 at the beginning of Father John Jenkins’s presidency. The impetus was three planned events on campus: a Queer Film Festival, a performance of *The Vagina Monologues*, and a series of presentations and papers by female students on abortion, contraception, and other issues in human sexuality that were united under the title of “Her Loyal Daughters.” Over several months, Father Jenkins and the university as a whole articulated a pragmatic yet theological understanding of academic freedom in the Catholic context. Academic freedom, said Jenkins in an address to the faculty on January 23, 2006, is a “sacred value” but one with boundaries nonetheless. He explained that his concerns over the three events were “not with censorship but with sponsorship.” The issue at hand was not the academic freedom of the faculty or even of individual students but instead the appropriateness of academic units and university organizations sponsoring certain kinds of events. In perfect conformity to AAUP documents, Jenkins clearly defended the academic freedom of faculty



to teach and conduct research subject only to peer review as well as their freedom in extramural utterances. While Jenkins noted that Notre Dame should be open to speakers or events that conflict with Catholic values, he cautioned that sponsorship of such events by units of the university might create the appearance that the university is endorsing those views rather than ensuring that a variety of views are engaged.

Four months after Jenkins identified this distinction between censorship and sponsorship, he and department chairs within the College of Arts and Sciences issued their "Common Proposal" for how potential issues should be resolved, specifically invoking the Catholic principle of "subsidiarity" as their guide. The principle of subsidiarity has a long history in Catholic social thought; it claims that decisions should be made at the lowest level possible in societies and even in organizations. In this case, Father Jenkins and the chairs proposed that within the university "departments are best situated to decide what events should and should not be sponsored and to explain the nature of the sponsorship" and that "the President should rarely be involved in such day-to-day matters." The statement repeatedly mentions the need for Catholic teachings and perspectives to be part of the ongoing dialogue at the university as well as the final authority of the president in all matters. Through its invocation of subsidiarity, Notre Dame was able to align itself with the AAUP standard of disciplinary experts being the primary decision-makers over what ideas should and should not be publicly presented at the university, while at the same time invoking a long-respected principle of Catholic teaching.

Unlike Mercer and Notre Dame, California Lutheran University (CLU) did not articulate its understanding of academic freedom in response to an issue or concern but took a more proactive approach through the work of a presidentially-appointed committee seeking to define the institution's denominational identity. In a committee document with a title borrowed from the university's motto—"Love of Christ, Truth and Freedom: The Lutheran Character of California Lutheran University"—the committee asserted that "Love of Truth" requires a vigorous defense of academic freedom as well as a commitment to promote

both theological literacy and to provide occasions for an encounter with the Christian Gospel. After describing Martin Luther's identity as a university professor, the statement adds that "neither Luther nor the tradition he inspired fear challenge, debate, or diversity of views. These simply magnify the complexity of the Creation and further glorify the Creator." There is also remarkable consistency in the university's documents relating to academic freedom, including a guide for new faculty and staff stating that "the university supports academic inquiry and a scholarly quest for truth in all disciplines, believing that scientific inquiry and insights of faith are complementary ways of pursuing the wholeness of truth." Even the university's faculty handbook begins with Lutheran theology before moving into a direct quotation from the 1940 AAUP statement on academic freedom and tenure.

Theologies of academic freedom tell us something about the identities of faith-based colleges and universities as they seek to uphold the values of both academy and the church. For the academy, institutional support for academic values creates legitimacy and aids faculty recruitment and retention, and for the church, institutional support for theological ideals also creates legitimacy and may aid ongoing church support in funding and enrollment. Attacks against academic freedom from inside denominational circles require responses from shared denominational sources of authority. Colleges and universities that seek to renew their denominational identities must provide a theological accounting for how a denomination's theology is compatible with academic values like academic freedom. Finally, academic freedom can have diverse sources, theological as well as secular, allowing many faith-based institutions to preserve their identities while upholding one of the most important and widely shared scholarly values.

Church-related higher education would benefit from more theologies of academic freedom. These theologies would mine the depths of denominational traditions as well as the traditions within traditions that established and maintained colleges and universities for over a century. Hauge Lutherans may have something different to say than Loehe Lutherans or "happy Dane" Lutherans. Likewise, Holy Cross Catholics may have something different



to say than Franciscans or Dominicans. Even Baptists at Mercer call themselves “Mercer Baptists” to distinguish themselves from others and to tie ourselves back to our namesake Jesse Mercer who was a passionate advocate for religious freedom and who even wrote the religious freedom clause of the Georgia Constitution. Most importantly, theologies of academic freedom will allow church-related colleges and universities to embrace this highest of academic values because of their denominational

traditions rather than in spite of them, making the traditions alive and more meaningful to the academic vocations of teachers and students. ✚

Lake Lambert is Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Mercer University.

## THIN PLACES

*“Thin places are...where the veil  
momentarily lifts, and we behold God.”*

Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*

In the slim space between the body  
of the *i* and its dot, between any  
letter and a comma, between the two  
*ts* in *little*, between the *e* and *a* in *beauty*  
itself, is almost God, almost Word—not  
quite, but some place sheer enough  
to spell us for a while until the merest  
places close down on sin to suggest  
a single sentence, simple prose,  
spare and lucid as “Let there be light.”

Mary M. Brown



# Insecurity

Thomas C. Willadsen

I KNEW AT 11:30 THIS MORNING THAT I WOULD not get anything done today. This is the earliest I have ever made such a designation. Usually it dawns on me at about 4:00 in the afternoon that my day has been completely unproductive. After more than twenty years in ministry, I know when I need to give myself a “fallow day,” put my responsibility addiction on hold, lower my expectations, and muddle through.

My day started at 3:45 AM. The Voice from the church’s insecurity system phoned me about an intruder at church. The police had been called. “How soon can you get there, and what will you be driving?”

“Ten minutes. A red Prius.”

We’ve had the insecurity system for twelve years. For some reason our insurance company required that we get it when we installed the elevator. So far it has never alerted us to a fire or burglary. It has alerted us to malfunctioning smoke detectors and staff members who have left the building after the system has armed itself for the night. Once I was phoned at 1 AM because a smoke detector was sending an error message. I thanked the Voice for waking me and went back to sleep. The Voice phoned again. “The Oshkosh Fire Department has been called because the northeast stairwell fire detector has gone off.”

“What am I missing?” I asked. I assumed the sensor was broken, but if it was not, and there really was a fire, I figured I could drive past the smoldering ruins at first light.

“They asked that you be there.”

At this point I’m wondering, “Do they need me to say, ‘I’m Pastor Willadsen and I approve your fighting this fire’?”

I pulled on my sweatpants and met the fire fighters, and we confirmed that the smoke detector was on the fritz. I returned home. Monday we

called the smoke detector people. I asked, “Could you make these things malfunction at 10 AM on a weekday?”

“You pay extra for that.”

Last Wednesday, our choir director stayed late after rehearsal to file some music. She left the building after the system armed, and the Voice called to inform me, “There has been a breach at the East Door.” This did not sound serious, but it did sound rather personal. I walked through the building, and turned off four lights that different groups had left on. I went to the East Door and found two of Oshkosh’s finest there. Luckily, they did not open fire when I walked out. And they took me at my word when I said unto them, “I’m the pastor.” I was home in fifteen minutes and rested comfortably the rest of the evening.

The police department used to tug on the church doors to see whether they were locked as part of their regular duties. Once one of them pulled a little too hard and made the system think the door had been opened. The Voice called me about a possible intruder. I met the officer. His build reflected his occupation’s legendary fondness for donuts. He insisted that I walk through the building with him looking for the intruder. We walked through the basement. We walked through the main floor. We walked through the second floor. When we were nearly done, I said, “You know where I’d hide if I were an intruder? *The bell tower!* Let’s go up there!” The bell tower is at the top of a steep twenty-step spiral staircase. “No one up here? Go figure! Thanks for checking this out with me!” Officer Cruller was winded and wet with sweat after ascending the staircase. He never tugged on the doors again.

This morning was different. There were three police cars on the street when I arrived. The glass back door of the church had been shattered. The door was ajar; it could not close because of all the broken glass in the jamb. While they were deciding whether to enter the building to look for an intruder, another officer radioed that he had found some bloody sweatpants on the front yard of the church. I walked down one side of the building and found an officer on the corner holding a rifle. I retreated to another corner of the property when the officer suggested I wait in my



car. My church was a crime scene around which they formed a perimeter. I watched from the car as the torches of four officers flashed throughout the building.

About that time, I spotted a young woman sitting on the curb across the street. At first she was screaming; then she turned docile. A few minutes later, an officer downgraded her condition to "remorseful." I do not know whether they took her to the hospital or the pokey. One of the perimeter officers informed me that I could enter the building. I reset the insecurity system. I went to my office and got the cellphone number of our property guy. I swept enough glass off the jamb so the door could latch. I returned home at about 5 AM, but didn't exactly sleep.

At 7 AM I called the property guy. Then I called the secretary, the preschool teacher, and the custodian. By 8 AM a new door had been ordered, and the glass had been cleaned up. By 3 in the afternoon we had a new door. Insurance will cover it, and the church will probably even get its deductible back as restitution, the police suggested.

At 8:30 PM I was sitting in a restaurant twenty miles from home, meeting a colleague for breakfast as I do each month. I drank too much coffee. We talked about all the things that seminary never prepared us for. Things like insecurity systems, SWAT teams, random acts of vandalism, and the reality that some days you are simply not going to get anything done, besides musing on the plight of not getting anything done. I ate supper with our after-school group. I talked to one of the classes about communion. I headed home at the usual time for a Wednesday, more than fifteen hours after my day began.

And so to bed. ✝

The Rev. Thomas C. Willadsen is pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Oshkosh, Wisconsin.



# The Election Issue That Wasn't But Should Have Been

Geoffrey C. Bowden

**T**HAT THERE WAS NO SERIOUS DISCUSSION of our well-known, but secret, drone war in the Middle East and Africa during the Presidential election of 2012 was both mysterious and depressing. If the United States is indeed actively engaged in the practice of flying unmanned aerial drones over countries toward which we are not openly hostile and launching missiles at unsuspecting people on the ground, then this seems like something we should talk about, especially when we are in the process of attempting to decide who to give the power to do such a thing.

This is how the drone war appears to operate: The president and a team of advisors regularly meet to discuss the “kill list” (on “Terror Tuesday”) which is the climax of a process that seems to begin with a “disposition matrix,” a futuristic term used to describe an assessment tool that determines the extent to which a person is a terrorist threat and how best to deal with that person (Miller 2012). If someone is unfortunate enough to land on the kill list, normally the CIA will use its local “assets” in proximity to the person to “tag” a car or dwelling used by the “target” with a GPS device, at which point a drone will locate the GPS signal, fly within range, and fire a missile at whatever the GPS device is tagged to (Smith 2012).

It seems like a misnomer to call this a “war,” since it more closely resembles an assassination. However, when these actions are done at the frequency we are doing it, the term “war” becomes apt. And the term “assassination” implies a surgical strike that limits damage to the intended target, but reports indicate that this is hardly the case with drone attacks. Hundreds of civilians have been killed in Pakistan alone, including 176 children (Ponnuru 2012). Alarmingly, the

President’s justification for these civilian deaths is that he “in effect counts all military-age males in a strike zone as combatants... unless there is explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent” (cited in Ponnuru). So if you are of a certain age that we normally associate with Islamic terrorists and happen to be in the drone’s “strike zone,” you are an enemy-combatant of the United States regardless of whether you intended to do the United States harm or not. Guilty until we can prove you innocent, after we have killed you. The moral of the story: be very careful with whom you hang out in the Middle East.

Why didn’t the drone war ever emerge as a political issue in the presidential election of 2012? Surely this was a vulnerability for President Obama, who made serious political hay in 2008 by criticizing the Bush administration’s prosecution of the War in Iraq as immoral and potentially illegal. For Obama then to prosecute his own war, though one of a vastly different variety, with little or no constitutional/legal framework for doing so would seem to make him open to criticism on both moral and legal grounds, not to mention grounds of hypocrisy. The first and most obvious answer is that President Obama and Governor Romney did not differ much on the use of drones. When Romney was asked about the use of drones in one of the debates, he responded “I support that entirely and feel the president was right to up the usage of that technology and believe that we should continue to use it to continue to go after the people who represent a threat to this nation and to our friends” (quoted in Ponnuru). Neither candidate desires to appear passive in the age of global terrorism, and what better way to destroy that appearance than to fire missiles at “threats” every so often? Second, presidents and potential presidents desire one thing: power. It



never fails. No matter how much they campaign on restraining the power of the executive, on waging a “humble foreign policy” (Bush in 2000), or on curbing past executive excesses (Obama in 2008 on closing Gitmo), presidents and potential presidents who understand the nature of the job always keep open possible methods of increasing the power of the office. To make the drone war an issue in the election is to put a spotlight on it, drawing public, moral, and legal scrutiny that can only lead to restrictions. Apparently the Obama

thy objective in sight, but this war-weariness pertains only to real conflicts, to actual “boots-on-the-ground” wars where we invest money and man-power in this tragic and ancient practice. Our weariness does not extend to the idea of war. In fact, it is not a stretch at all to suggest that American society and culture, guided by a political culture with plenty of incentives to wage war, has made peace with the idea of war, the idea of killing others to achieve our goals on a global scale. We will wage war if it is in our national interest to do

so, and maybe only if it is in our national interest to do so. So-called “humanitarian wars” or wars waged to spread democracy to oppressed peoples do not sit quite as well with Americans, especially if we are going to see our own die in the process. But the idea of war, well, we can generally see the merits of that.

There is a difference between Americans being comfortable with war as a hypothetical



administration has been making moves toward erecting a moral and legal framework around the drone war to restrict the power of future executives, but only time will tell if this framework will have real teeth (Stableford 2012).

Perhaps a deeper answer is in order, however. The fact that the drone war *and* the War in Afghanistan were essentially non-issues in this election reveals a nation that is war-weary and has little patience for complicated and emotionally-draining debates over the ethics of war. There is a deep fissure in America’s collective mindset about war. Yes, we have been at war for over a decade now, with a heavy ground presence in two countries, and many American men and women have died, not to mention many non-Americans. War-weariness results from seeing people lose their lives in a conflict that seems to be going nowhere, with no achievable and wor-

and Americans being at peace with this or that particular war where their sons and daughters are doing the fighting. But if we can come to grips with the ethics of “war-in-general,” we should do so only through the particular wars that we fight. Pragmatic necessity spurs philosophic inquiry. Over time, when we perceive the necessity of fighting this or that war and agree that it is acceptable to ask our young people to fight those wars, then we ascend to a notion that war can be morally acceptable and even obligatory at times: we develop a “theory of war.” The experiences of particular wars trigger a process of moral deliberation through which we forge a position on the morality of war in general. But herein lies the difference with the drone war: Americans never experience it. We have no skin in the game, as it were. What forces us to consider the ethics of a particular war is that we have to make the



enormous decision about whether we should sacrifice some of our own people or money for this cause. With the drone war, that decision never enters the equation. The drones are un-manned, controlled remotely from sites in the United States. And a drone attack is relatively inexpensive, especially when compared to a large ground invasion. So, why would Americans ever expend the mental energy to think about whether drone attacks are morally acceptable or legal? Drone wars do not trigger moral thinking about war; we have no reason to think about “particular instances” in the drone war, because we do not experience the loss of human-capital or money.

It is possible that at some point in the future Americans will engage in a vigorous public debate about the ethics of using un-manned aerial drones to assassinate enemies or potential enemies, but we clearly have not reached

that point yet. The normal trigger that forces us to think philosophically about the morality of war has been eliminated from the moral equation with the drone war. Until then, the use of drones will no doubt increase, achieving some of the goals of the CIA, while also generating an ever-mounting civilian casualty count and a host of moral and legal questions. ✦

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## SLIVERS

I recognize us running freely effortlessly  
my brother and I alone, one chasing  
the other in the overgrown empty lot  
next to our childhood Michigan home.

I can see hastening feet blur as we bolt  
between skeletal deprived bushes the height  
and breadth of children our age—at the time  
imagined foes. Unable to discern faces

I instead recollect shared laughter, the dry  
salty taste of open-mouthed breathing, breath short  
because we were too young to breathe any  
deeper. Separated by just under a year, we

hadn't yet the capacity to fully remember—  
images flash only long enough for slivers  
of light to appear in the time of idle darkness,  
jagged fragments illuminating the measured space

surrounding the frame of a cracked bedroom  
door. And, in this dim room, we still sleep.

Jennifer Hurley



# The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism Revisited or Pride Goeth Before a Fall

H. David Baer

**T**WENTY-ONE YEARS AGO THE SOVIET UNION collapsed, marking the end of an era. After forty-five years of the Cold War, liberal democracy had emerged triumphant. Developing nations across the world looked to the United States and Western Europe for models of success. Francis Fukuyama wrote a book titled *The End of History*, in which he argued that Western-style liberal democracy represented the end point of political evolution; Michael Novak republished *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, in which he defended the superiority of free markets to planned economies.

Today, however, the West is in crisis. In the United States, the securitization of mortgages within a highly opaque and poorly regulated financial sector led in 2007 to a massive market failure and the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression. In Europe, structural defects with the common currency coupled to high levels of sovereign debt have pushed some nations into deep recession, threatening Europe's political integration and stability. When developing countries search for models of success, rather than look to the West, they often look to China, with its undemocratic, state-sponsored capitalism. The ability of free markets to outperform all competitors can no longer be taken for granted; the superiority of democratic capitalism is no longer self-evident. What went wrong?

The answer to that question is multifaceted, but underlying every facet of the answer may be a truth first discerned by Solomon, "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." The United States has been the world's unchallenged economic and military superpower for twenty years, and unrivaled supremacy makes for complacency. "See, see but do not perceive," writes the prophet; "make the heart of this people fat." A fat-hearted people, concerned with comfort

and privilege, refuses to notice signs of impending crisis until after it comes. In America, the failures of our domestic politics are only now becoming apparent.

We now know, for example, that the financial sector was not functioning anywhere near as well as the free marketers told us. In her recent book *Bull by the Horns* (Free Press, 2012), Former FDIC chair Sheila Bair describes the way "deregulatory dogma" deluded Washington elites, both Republican and Democrat, into believing that markets and institutions could regulate themselves. As she explains:

The groupthink was that technological innovation, coupled with the Fed's seeming mastery of maintaining an easy monetary policy without inflation, meant an end to the economic cycles of good times and bad that had characterized our financial system in the past. The golden age of banking was here and would last forever. We didn't need regulation anymore. (Bair 17)

Momentous financial crises, like those we experienced in 2007 and 2008, just weren't supposed to happen anymore. Called to testify before Congress in 2008, former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, whose commitment to the idea of the self-correcting free market was frequently described as ideological, could only express his "shocked disbelief" that financial institutions had failed to monitor themselves, and then reluctantly acknowledged a "flaw" in his system of thought.

However, to attribute the cause of our present discontents to the financial sector alone would be too easy; "Does a bird fall in a snare when there is no trap for it?" Over the course of the



last two decades, Americans have fallen prey to a bowdlerized version of free-market philosophy, according to which markets produce prosperity automatically, and no one ever has to sacrifice or attend to the health of civil society. Perhaps nowhere is this self-deception more striking than in our tax code, riddled through and through with exemptions, deductions, credits, and loopholes. Although the inefficiency of the tax code is universally acknowledged, its inequity is some-

Over the course of the last two decades, Americans have fallen prey to a bowdlerized version of free-market philosophy, according to which markets produce prosperity automatically, and no one ever has to sacrifice or attend to the health of civil society.

times overlooked. Every tax exemption is a form of government subsidy. The popular mortgage-interest deduction, for example, costs the federal government four times as much in lost revenue as the amount it spends directly on public housing for America's poorest quintile (see *The Economist*, "America's Tax System," October 13, 2012). But because this subsidy is hidden in the tax code, its middle- and upper-class beneficiaries can extol the virtues of the free market without ever noticing their own hypocrisy. For a moment, such hypocritical self-deception was rudely exposed by Mitt Romney's infamous reference to the 47 percent, not only—as was quickly pointed out in the press—because a large percentage of the 47 percent are Republicans, but also—as was not much noted—because the wealthy donors whom Romney addressed, deducting their mortgage interest and health insurance premiums from their taxes paid on investment income at a lower

rate than wage earners, are themselves enormous beneficiaries of government largesse. What is this, if not "to falsify the balances with deceit"?

Self-serving appeals to a free-market philosophy preached but never practiced have also blinded Americans to the problem of growing income inequality. In the mid-twentieth century, economists used to argue that while inequality increases in the early stages of industrialization, it decreases as economies develop. Today, we know that this is not necessarily the case. Since 1980, the share of national income in the United States going to the top 1 percent has doubled from 10 percent to 20 percent; the share going to the richest .01 percent has jumped from 1 percent to 5 percent. Judged by a standard measure called the Gini coefficient, the level of inequality in the United States is starting to move uncomfortably close to that of a South American country like Brazil. Although economists used to believe that a growing economy benefits everyone, the evidence now suggests that those on the bottom and middle end of the income distribution are falling behind in absolute, not just relative terms. Wage income is stagnating (see *The Economist*, "World Economy, For Richer, for Poorer," October 13, 2012). Whatever the moral issues, economists are telling us in increasing number that large disparities in wealth pose an economic problem. Joseph Stiglitz, former chief economist of the World Bank and winner of the Nobel Prize, argues in *The Price of Inequality* (W. W. Norton, 2012), that large inequalities render an economy inefficient and unstable. Summarizing his views, Stiglitz writes:

Inequality weakens aggregate demand, because those at the middle and bottom have to spend all or almost all of what that they get, while those at the top don't. The concentration of wealth in recent decades led to bubbles and instability, as the Fed tried to offset the effects of weak demand arising from our inequality by low interest rates and lax regulation.... Mainstream economic institutions like the International Monetary Fund now recognize the connection between inequality



and a weak economy. (*New York Times*, October 26, 2012)

Moreover, growing income inequality in America appears to be a symptom of diminishing equality of opportunity. Economists seeking to measure the extent to which the income of parents influences the income and educational attainment of children have developed something called the "inter-generational elasticity of income" coefficient. According to this measure, parental income explains half of the differences in children's outcomes in the US, which is worse than in virtually every country in Europe, including much maligned socialist Sweden (see, *The Economist*, "Economic Opportunity," October 13, 2012). Nor can one attribute inequality in America simply to the workings of the market. American inequality is exacerbated by a skewed but invisible welfare state, one that distributes wealth upward by means of a Byzantine tax code and redistributes wealth from the young to the old through a system of entitlements.

Severe inequality, if left uncorrected, can lead to political crises. To be sure, some inequality is unavoidable, but if too much of a nation's wealth ends up in the hands of the few, a country becomes divided into factions with conflicting and irreconcilable interests. Such societies cannot discern a common good and may cease to cohere. Ancient Rome was wracked by civil wars caused by plebian resentment of aristocratic privileges, which gave

rise to dictators and the end of the Republic. The twentieth century was tormented by left and right-wing totalitarianisms originating in reactions to social failures caused by earlier forms of capitalism. US history also knows its social upheavals and dangerous forms of populism.

These are truths we have forgotten, lulled into a sense of security by our self-congratulatory faith in the inevitability of history. History, however, records failure as well as success. It tells the tale of nations that declined and fell after failing to meet the challenges which confronted them. Only a stiff-necked people would believe its own history is destined to be different. Democracy doesn't happen; it is built and tended to. Its success depends on effort and honesty and qualities of character which, surveying the political landscape, would appear in short supply. If the heart of the people is fat, no government of the people, by the people, and for the people can hope long to prosper. For democracy in America, a new birth of freedom may depend upon a change of heart. ♣

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## DURING EXODUS

A goldfinch hit the window  
During that part in Exodus  
(Your child was reading it to us)  
About the years of manna.

I looked for where it came from,  
The thump, not knowing what it was,  
And there it was on the grass,  
Plump at my foot, ruffling some,

And there I saw its story.  
Beside it, another, cold,  
A tail tipped yellow, not gold,  
White frost circling its eye,

Hoary as manna I imagine:  
Brother, worth keeping;  
Feather, not ruffling;  
An eye without light's leaven.

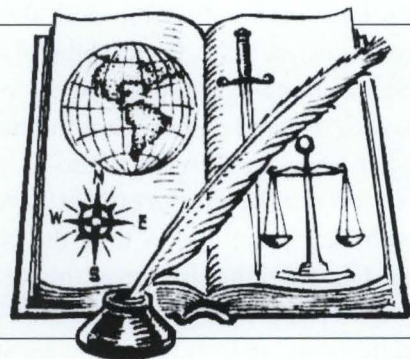
I bent down to see if the other,  
The one that made the thump, was hurt.  
It flew before my touch, alert  
Not for salt; something brighter, colder.

Steven Walters



## Reviewed in this issue...

### Elaine Pagels's *Revelations*



**R**EVELATIONS: *VISIONS, PROPHECY, AND Politics in the Book of Revelation* offers a new look at the Book of Revelation from the perspective of Elaine Pagels, best known for her work with the Nag Hammadi Library—the collection of so-called “Gnostic Gospels.” The Gnostic Gospels are a series of codices (little books) found in Egypt in 1945, dated from the third and fourth centuries. These texts are called “Gnostic” partially for their hidden spiritual meaning, or *gnosis*, but also after the sect that gave birth to them, the Gnostics. Several earlier Christian leaders including Irenaeus and Tertullian attacked the Gnostic movement, branding it heretical because its adherents expressed views at odds with the acceptable doctrines of the Christian Church.

If you do not own a translation of the Gnostic Gospels and have always been curious about them, *Revelations* is an easy way to gain some exposure. The book takes a polemical tone describing how religious authorities have used the Book of Revelation as a tool to thwart the Gnostic movement since it first emerged. Pagels, in fact, questions whether the book ever should have been included in the Bible at all and states that it was not the product of an Apostle.

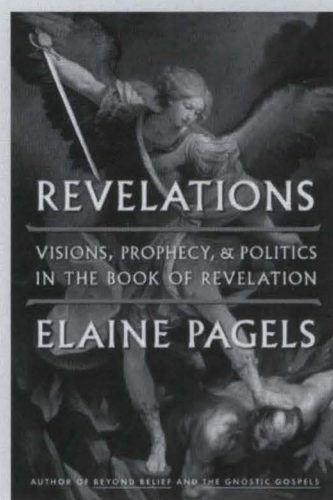
She posits that the defenders of early Christian orthodoxy invented the idea that John, the beloved disciple of Jesus and witness to the crucifixion and resurrection, wrote the Apocalypse. She holds that the real author was another John, a frustrated Jewish prophet/writer of no reputation who, shortly after the Roman war, was bent on lashing out at the Romans and Gentile converts of Paul of Tarsus.

If you are a little rusty on your church history, *Revelations* will either confuse or delight, depending on your orientation to and appreciation for traditional Christian thought. The Church considers the Gnostic Gospels apocryphal (of doubtful authenticity) since they are pseudepigraphical

#### REVELATIONS: VISIONS, PROPHECY AND POLITICS IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Elaine Pagels  
Viking Press, 2012  
256 pages  
\$27.95

Reviewed by  
Don W. Davis



(ascribed to authors who did not actually write them). Pagels asserts that defenders of orthodoxy had political reasons for stomping out the Gnostic cause, but fails to mention the real reasons why they did so. The early Church rejected Gnostic views not so much because the early Church Fathers were rigid about establishing orthodoxy (although they certainly were), but because the Gnostics did not believe in Jesus' divinity or physical resurrection. Gnostic writings of the third and fourth centuries were frowned upon because they did not meet the minimum requirement of apostolic



authority and authorship and also because they contradicted other works (biblical ones) that did. Bear in mind as you read Pagels's book, when she says *Revelation(s)*, she means the Gnostic ones and when she says *Revelation* (no *s*), she means the biblical one. In an effort to put Revelations on par with Revelation and to level the playing field for the Gnostics, she challenges the Revelation in two ways: 1) She calls into doubt the book's apostolic authorship, and; 2) She criticizes its inclusion in the New Testament canon.

Most scholars, including Pagels, believe that the Book of Revelation was written around 95 AD near the time of the Roman Emperor Domitian's death. She tells a story of how *her* John turns up in Ephesus to distribute his book of propaganda after a brief exile on the Isle of Patmos. Once back on the mainland, John of Patmos goes to work sending his prophecy to the seven churches in Asia Minor, namely Ephesus, Smyrna, Thyatira, Laodicea, Pergamon, Sardis, and Philadelphia.

This story is not unlike the traditional version featuring John the Apostle. He too was exiled to Patmos and at the death of Domitian returned to Ephesus, where the Christian Church had re-established itself after being driven from Jerusalem. The seven churches were all in a circular route from Ephesus, relatively near one another. Christians believe John the Apostle started these churches himself and was regarded with reverence and affection by their bishops. They believe this because the Book of Revelation was read in those churches immediately after it was circulated, and there exists testimony from some of the bishops of those churches as early as the beginning of the second century. It is difficult to imagine Pagels's John of Patmos, furious with Rome and Gentile converts, gaining traction in the seven churches. Since they knew nothing of him and his prophecies, it is more likely he would have offended their congregations than delighted them. A sweep of all seven is hard to fathom. It is not so hard, on the other hand, to imagine the Apostle gaining immediate traction in those churches led by bishops he had put into place before his exile.

At four different places, the Book of Revelation claims to be written by "John." The

author speaks with authority in chapters two and three to the bishops of the seven churches, starting with Ephesus. The author has thorough knowledge of what is going on in each of these churches as he comments on their strengths and weaknesses in minute detail. That this John was the famous Apostle comes from an early, reliable source—Irenaeus, who was a native of Asia Minor living near Smyrna where Polycarp, one of the three principal Apostolic Fathers, was bishop. Polycarp converted to Christianity by means of direct interaction with the apostles of Christ. He personally knew and communicated with many who had seen and heard Jesus. Polycarp knew John the Apostle, according to Irenaeus who called Polycarp a disciple of the Apostle. Irenaeus did not know the Apostle, but did know Polycarp. Irenaeus quotes from the Revelation again and again in his works as the product of the Apostle.

An Ephesian contemporary of Polycarp, Papias, attests to the book's inspiration, which implies that he knew it was apostolic. In one of the fragments of his works, Papias seems to refer to two distinct and separate Johns in Ephesus at the time:

I would inquire for the sayings of the Presbyters, what Andrew said, or what Peter said, or what Philip or what Thomas or James or what John or Matthew or any other of the Lord's disciples, and for the things which other of the Lord's disciples, and for the things which Aristion and the Presbyter John, the disciples of the Lord, were saying.

The possible reference to a second John in this fragment is where the conspiracy theories of another John originate, theories that Pagels takes to a whole new level. The fact that there are two separate tombs in Ephesus bearing the name of John adds fuel to the fire, but a careful reading of the fragment is not definitive. Papias could have been referring to the same John in two different ways and, regardless of the rendering, he did not attribute authorship to either. No one made much of this until the fourth century when writers were looking for ways to soften the Christian message



after the Romans legalized the religion under Constantine.

Pagels contends that the earliest testimonies of apostolic authorship were manufactured. She accuses Irenaeus and Justin Martyr of making the whole thing up: "when critics charged that a heretic had written it, its earliest defenders sought to lend it legitimacy by insisting that Jesus' own disciple John wrote its prophecies" (2). It is particularly distasteful that she would accuse the early Church Fathers of making up apostolic authorship when she herself offers no evidence whatsoever that any such John of Patmos ever lived.

Pagels also tells us that the early Christians panned the book and few ever paid attention to it. She writes: "Ever since it was written, Christians have argued for and against it especially from the second century to the fourth, when it barely squeezed into the canon to become the final book of the New Testament" (2). Again, the facts seem to point in the opposite direction. There were very few, mostly anonymous, detractors of the book until 247 AD, when Dionysius of Alexandria built a case that the Apostle could not have written it. Dionysius noted what he believed were stylistic differences between the Book of Revelation and the Gospel of John and John's Epistles. He felt it odd that John mentioned his own name in the Revelation, whereas he never did so in the other works of his hand. Scholars since have debated the stylistic differences, which do seem to exist, but the most obvious answer for this is that John wrote down the vision exactly as it unfolded on Patmos. Pagels believes, rather, that John of Patmos contrived the book for political reasons and that the style he used ("wartime literature" she calls it) was a method intended to put forward certain coded, political messages (7). Dionysius himself believed the work to be inspired, as Pagels notes, but not authored by the Apostle.

Perhaps Dionysius did not give enough weight to the fact that the author was exiled to the Roman mines under guard and saw these visions in a cave, probably without much scribal help to record them. In Ephesus, where the Christian church hierarchy had transferred many resources

from Jerusalem after the war, there was a cadre of Greek writers and scribes that could have worked with the text once it was in their care, but exiled on Patmos John was on his own with at most one scribe to assist him. Since he was told in the vision to write down exactly what he saw (Rev. 1:19, 22:18,19), he may have insisted that changes not be made to the raw text upon his return to Ephesus. Perhaps Dionysius should have excused the fact that John's Greek was not smoothed out

**The objections raised in regard to the apostolic authorship of the Book of Revelation are thin, late, and subjective. They were made long after the fact and far removed from the region where the author lived and the work was disseminated.**

for that reason and acknowledged that he chose to drop the self-deprecating practice of omitting his name from his own work because this was not his own work, but rather Jesus' own revelation. John likely identified himself because the emperor had banished him from the land of the living and was unsure as to whether he would survive. His job—as he probably saw it—was to get the vision out to the seven churches at all cost. In the case of his untimely demise, it would be more readily accepted if it bore the Apostle's name. He calls himself John because he is the Apostle writing to his own flock. He does not need to identify himself further.

Another source for Pagels is Eusebius, who in the fourth century picked up on the reference to two Johns of Papias to put forward a theory that Presbyter John may have actually penned the Book of Revelation, rather than the famous Apostle. Even Eusebius wavers and at times implies that the book is apostolic. It is conceivable that Eusebius, in his efforts to



present the history of Christianity at the onset of the Imperial Church in the best light, was simply walking back the harshness of the Apocalypse in its apparent allusions to Rome.

A reasonable conclusion to the objections raised in regard to the apostolic authorship of the Book of Revelation by the time of Dionysius and Eusebius must be that they are thin, late, and subjective. They were made long after the fact and far removed from the region where the author lived and the work was disseminated. The evidence for the Apostle having written it on the other hand, is strong, objective, and found in sources dated at or near the time of the writing, and in the region where it was written and distributed.

Turning to Pagels's second challenge, the canonization of the Book of Revelation, she states that it was left off of many lists of canonical books until the time of Constantine (161), which is not quite accurate. The book did not make it into the New Testament, as she would have us believe, by hook or by crook, but rather by the overwhelming consensus of the majority of councils, list makers, and influential writers, including those who knew the Apostle and accepted the Revelation as his work. The book was in the early canons from 170 to 400 AD including the Muratorian, Apostolic, Athanasian, and Augustinian canons, and was accepted by councils in 325, 393, 397, and 419 AD. The first council to reject it was the sixteenth council, the Laodicean Council, in the middle-fourth century. Laodicea was spoken of very negatively in the Revelation, as neither cold nor hot (Rev. 3:15), which may account for its

exclusion by them. It was restored by the very next council.

If one can step outside the polemic, Pagels's *Revelations* produces some real gems, such as the analysis of the battle in heaven described in Revelation as a recurring motif originating in Babylon (26). There are several such diamonds in the rough, with tasty bits from the Gnostic Gospels themselves, making this book worth reading. Finally, the book ends on a sweet note worthy of concluding with: "Whether one sees in John's visions the destruction of the whole world or the dark tunnel that propels each of us toward our own death, his final vision suggests that even after the worst we can imagine has happened, we may find the astonishing gift of new life. Whether one shares that conviction, few readers miss seeing how these visions offer consolation and that most necessary of divine gifts—hope" (175). ✦

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Bass, Dorothy, ed. *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

Wright, Basil. "Filming in Ceylon." *Cinema Quarterly* 2/4 (1943): 231–32.

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