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THE CRESSET

A review of literature, the arts, and public affairs

Lent 2009



Lisa Deam on The Decentered World of Alexander the Great

Thomas Albert Howard on Charles Taylor's A Secular Age

Fredrick Barton's Reflections on Recent American Film

*Mark D. Tranvick on the Role of the Christian Faith in the
Colleges and Universities of the Church*





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in luce tua

Two Prayers, Two Faiths

A MILLION AMERICANS BRAVED A COLD AND windy day in the nation's capital to watch Barack Obama take the oath of office as the forty-fourth President of the United States. Those gathered on the National Mall were joined by millions more around the nation and the world who watched on television or over the Internet. The transfer of power in the world's most powerful nation has become predictable, almost routine. But this year, the inauguration meant more than a shift in control of the executive branch from one political party to another. This inauguration has brought many Americans to a renewed faith in their country and its future.

Most nations have a civil religion, a set of symbols and rituals that imbue the nation and its political institutions with an aura of sacred authority. The American people have an unusual kind of civil religion. Americans believe that their nation has a particular calling—a calling to embody the ideal of the inherent equality of every human being and the proposition that no one can be justly denied the rights that others enjoy. This American belief is more like a civil faith than a civil religion; it often serves as a promise of things to come rather than as a deification of the powers that be. Americans know that their nation has not always fulfilled its calling. The history of slavery marks only one of its many failings. But the election of an African American—a member of the very race that this nation has successively enslaved, terrorized, impoverished, and disenfranchised—has led many Americans to believe that their country's promise of justice for all someday might be fulfilled.

During the inaugural ceremony, two preachers—Pastor Rick Warren and the Rev. Joseph Lowery—offered prayers. These two preachers are both Protestants, and they both evoked the nation's civil faith in their prayers. That much at

least they have in common, but the two are different in many ways.

Rick Warren is the pastor of Saddleback Church, a mega-church located in a wealthy city in southern California. Warren's books are purchased and read by millions around the world. With a message that combines conservative family values with a broad, progressive social agenda, Warren has become the best known spokesperson for America's evangelical Protestants.

Joseph Lowery started out as a United Methodist minister in Mobile, Alabama in 1952. When the civil rights movement began, he emerged as one of its most important leaders. In 1957, he and Martin Luther King Jr. founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which Lowery served as president from 1977–1997. There are few men or women in America who have played a more important role in African Americans' struggle for equality, and few pastors whose work have done more good for this country.

Warren offered the invocation. He began by praising the omnipotent creator God of Genesis, the God who created *"everything we see and everything we can't see,"* and he quoted the *Shema Yisrael* (*"Hear, oh Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one."*), a Jewish prayer based on Deuteronomy. Warren began his prayer for America with the Old Testament, with the Israelites and their covenant with God. Like ancient Israel, America is a nation set apart, a people with a special role to play in history. *"Help us, oh God, to remember that we are Americans. United not by race or religion or by blood, but to our commitment to freedom and justice for all.... When we presume that our greatness and our prosperity is ours alone, forgive us."* America is a nation with a mission, and because of the nation's commitment to that mission, it has become great and prosperous.

Warren's prayer recognized that America has not always been true to its calling. The solution that he proposes is a rebirth in our faith. "*May we have a new birth of clarity in our aims, responsibility in our actions, humility in our approaches and civility in our attitudes...*" His language was much like that of the revivalist preacher (minus the fire and brimstone). He called for rebirth in the heart of each individual, for each and every one of us to take responsibility, to be humble and civil. But the end result will be communal, even covenantal; the rewards of individual renewal will be found in common blessings. "*May we never forget that one day, all nations, all people will stand accountable before You.*"

Rick Warren's America is a nation that has responded to God's call, and that, because it has done so, enjoys God's blessings. His hope is not for a just and healthy America, but for "*a more just, a more healthy*" America. This is the prayer of a people with a deep and firm belief in the basic goodness and righteousness of their nation.

Lowery's benediction was a very different prayer, one rooted in the African American church. The God in this prayer is not a judge who dispenses power and wealth to the righteous; this is a God who offers comfort and mercy to the weak. "*God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, thou who has brought us thus far along the way, thou who has by the might led us into the light, keep us forever in the path we pray, lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met thee, lest our heart.*" These words are from a poem written by James Weldon Johnson, a poem that has come to be known as the "Negro National Anthem." Baldwin's words also take us back to the Old Testament, but the Israel it evokes is the Israel of Exodus—the Jews in flight from their enslavers.

The rest of Lowery's prayer called for atonement and healing in our nation. The Lord will work through our new leadership, "*to restore stability, mend our brokenness, heal our wounds, and deliver us from the exploitation of the poor or the least of these and from favoritism of the rich, the elite of these.*" The imagery of Lowery's benediction was darker and harsher than Warren's cautiously optimistic invocation. Warren celebrated a "*hinge point of history... in a land of unequaled possibility.*"

Lowery found us in "*a low moment in the national and, indeed, the global fiscal climate.*" Warren spoke of the American commitment to freedom and justice; Lowery described a people that have "*sown the seeds of greed—the wind of greed and corruption.*"

As dark as Lowery's benediction was in some moments, it was also a statement of civil faith, a proclamation of a strong and abiding hope. "*And as we leave this mountaintop, help us to hold on to the spirit of fellowship and the oneness of family. Let us take that power back to our homes, our workplaces, our churches, our temples, our mosques, or wherever we seek your will.*" This is not the prayer of a people who believe in the righteousness of America, the nation that exists today; it is the prayer of a people who have faith that this nation someday might—and perhaps finally has begun—to fulfill its sacred calling.

These two men who share so much—two Americans, Christians, Protestants, preachers, leaders—hold to faiths in their country that are so different. But they stood together on that stage, together, for the nation and the world to see. Throughout his campaign, Senator Obama told us that he was a uniter, that he "brings people together." At least he did it with these two men. It might have been superficial, an artificial moment staged for the cameras. When they prayed, they almost sounded like they were praying for different countries with different histories and different peoples, but when they prayed they bowed their heads together.

As long as the people of this country adhere to different civil faiths, the nation will remain divided. This division is not about red and blue, and it is about more than just black and white. This is a division between those who believe in America as a land of unequaled possibility and of freedom and justice for all and those who believe in America as a hope unfulfilled, a promise broken. The divisions aren't gone yet. They are deeper and wider than any one candidate or political campaign can bridge. But the end of this election offers hope for a new beginning; a chance for Americans to be reborn and reunited as believers in their nation's civil faith. †

Life on the Edge: The Decentered World of Alexander the Great

Lisa Deam

STORIES ABOUND IN RECENT TIMES OF SUCCESS gone awry. From congressmen to corporate heads, civil servants to CEOs, our world seems full of superstars who rise to the top, only to fall when they cannot help themselves to a little bit more. Consider, for example, the fortieth governor of Illinois, Rod Blagojevich. Only the second Serbian-American to be elected governor of any state, he recently was removed from office following federal corruption charges. Former Alaskan Senator Ted Stevens, for his part, had one of the longest Senate runs in American history before his felony conviction for making false financial disclosure statements. In the corporate world, we have, of course, Enron's Jeff Skilling. After a heady climb to the top of one of the nation's most innovative companies, he currently is serving year three of a lengthy sentence for insider trading and fraud.

When we read stories like these—and new ones seem to break almost daily—most of us shake our heads in disbelief. Before their fall, these political and corporate stars ruled small empires, amassing more money and power than most of us will see in a lifetime. It might even be claimed that they did some good in their lofty positions. They had the world at their fingertips—then lost it all in apparent acts of hubris.

These would-be conquerors of our world would do well to heed the lessons of another empire-builder, Alexander the Great—specifically, the character of Alexander as constructed in medieval lore. This Alexander rose to greater heights than a thousand Enrons combined. He conquered the known world, and medieval audiences—especially rulers who wished to enlarge their own kingdoms—loved him for it. In the end, however, Alexander overstepped his bounds. He fell, and fell hard. He became not only a hero but

also, to some storytellers, a cautionary tale of a man who gained the world but lost his soul.

The medieval character of Alexander appears in numerous eponymous tales and world histories, some in visual form. The story of his rise and fall is nowhere more eloquently told than on the Hereford Map, a map of the world that was made in England around 1300. This map portrays the world as a circle—flat rather than spherical—in which the three inhabited continents of Europe, Africa, and Asia nestle closely together. The River Ocean surrounds these land masses, creating a single, continuous coastline that girds the world. Unlike contemporary renderings of the world, the map's orientation is to the east rather than the north, so that Asia, the largest continent, sits at the top. And in the precise center of this circular world lies Jerusalem, the city of Christ's life and death.

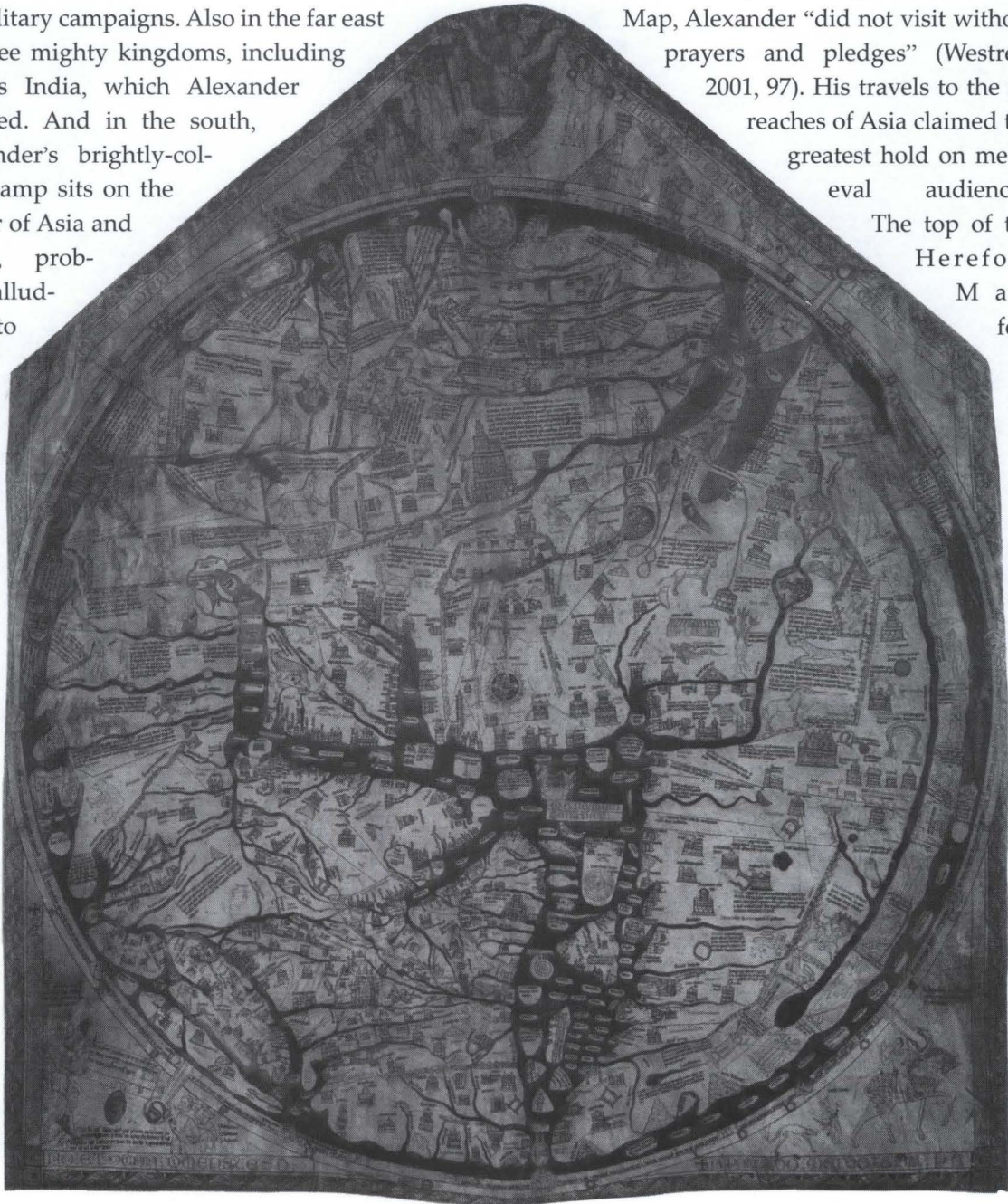
The Hereford Map not only features geography; it also turns the global landscape into a theater of world history. Its three continents display over two thousand pictures and inscriptions, many of which relate stories from the seven ages of the world. Some of these stories are sacred, others secular or pagan. As a repository of human history, embellished though it sometimes may be, the map still has lessons to teach us: geography may have changed since the Middle Ages, but people surprisingly have remained the same. Thus Alexander the Great, featured prominently on the map, continues to haunt those of us who travel the world today.

Alexander, in fact, might be called the hero of the Hereford Map. With nine explicit mentions, he appears more than any other historical figure, including Christ himself. Through these inscriptions, the map narrates Alexander's story in geographical terms. Our hero's rise and fall is cast

as a global conflict, sometimes violent, between the circumference and the center of the circular world. The circumference at first seems to hold the advantage. Indeed, all nine of the map's Alexander inscriptions lie on or near the round edges of the earth. If we traced them with our finger, we would draw an imaginary arc around roughly half the world. Of these inscriptions, the ones describing Alexander's military conquests receive particular emphasis. To the map's north and east, for example, stand the altars Alexander erected to mark the outermost boundaries of his military campaigns. Also in the far east lie three mighty kingdoms, including Porus's India, which Alexander defeated. And in the south, Alexander's brightly-colored camp sits on the border of Asia and Africa, probably alluding to

Alexander's subjugation of the African continent.

The Hereford Map also highlights some of Alexander's noteworthy travels along the edges of the world. To an even greater extent than his military exploits, Alexander's journeys to exotic locales are constructions of the medieval imagination, tales crafted to explain and to tame the wilder parts of the world. Adjacent to the altars Alexander erected on the world's northern rim, for example, lies the Marvelous Island, a mysterious site which, according to the Hereford Map, Alexander "did not visit without prayers and pledges" (Westrem 2001, 97). His travels to the far reaches of Asia claimed the greatest hold on medieval audiences. The top of the Hereford Map a p fea-

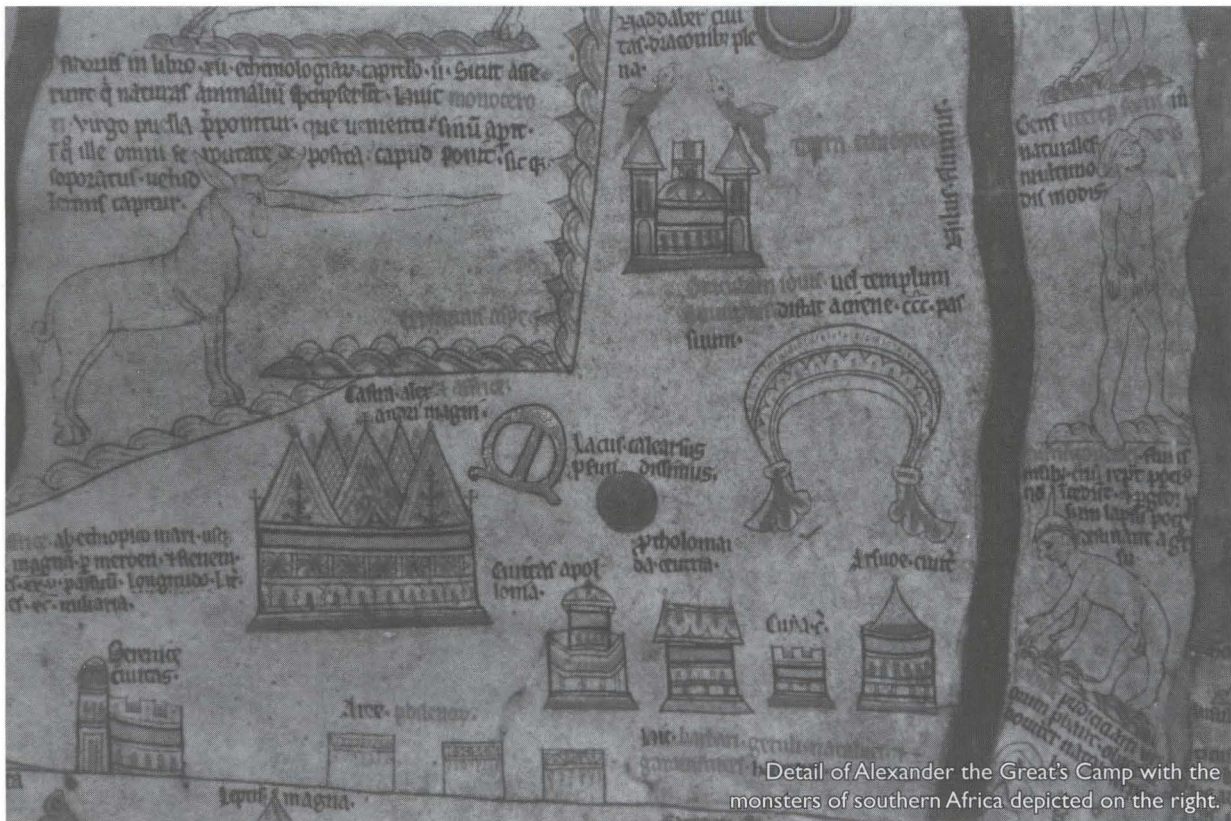


Hereford Mappa Mundi

tures one of the eastern sites Alexander visited, the Balsam Tree. This tree plays a role in the legend of Alexander's visit to the Trees of the Sun and Moon, oracular *arbores* able to forecast the future.

The Hereford Alexander thus roams the circumference of the earth, conquering and exploring. His preference for the world's rim contrasts with other medieval tales, which send Alexander hither and yon in the terrestrial landscape. In the eleventh-century redaction of the *Alexander Romance*, for example, the conqueror frequently interrupts his

Africa, for example, was home to the monstrous races, creatures "deformed against kind both of man or of beast or of anything else," according to the supposedly eyewitness account of fourteenth-century traveler Sir John Mandeville (Mandeville 1964, 32). The Hereford Map shows twenty of these monsters, cut off from the rest of civilization by a narrow branch of the Nile River. To the far right of Alexander's camp, for example, can be seen a Himantopode, a creature that glides on all fours on long, strap-like feet.



Detail of Alexander the Great's Camp with the monsters of southern Africa depicted on the right.

Asian campaigns with trips to more central locations. The Hereford Map, however, seems bent on keeping Alexander on the edge.

In one sense, Alexander's edginess makes him even more of a hero. Indeed, his outlying adventures underscore his bravery, since they show him willing to face what were, in the Middle Ages, the most dangerous places on earth. Although some locales along the edge hosted marvels, such as the talking Trees of the Sun and Moon, the earth's circumference also housed creatures almost too strange and terrifying to believe. The southern coast of medieval

Just above this figure lurks a Hermaphrodite, sporting a man's breast on the left and a woman's on the right. Some monstrous creatures also inhabited the continent of Asia, especially the eastern extremes where Alexander traveled. In the vicinity of the Hereford Map's Alexander sites, for example, appear armed Pygmies, Cynocephali—creatures with human bodies and canine heads—and a large Monoculus, a humanoid figure shown lying on its back with its one giant foot extended over its head for shade.

With its monsters and other fantastic creatures, the circumference of the medieval world,

at first, seems a place with few redeeming qualities. Not many of us would be willing to follow Alexander there. Yet the edge not only allowed Alexander to show his bravery; it also became the means by which he discovered new lands and peoples (even if he ended up conquering most of them). In other words, by traveling the circumference, the medieval Alexander helped to enlarge the boundaries of the world. Along with travelers like Mandeville, he demonstrates a mindset that, in its willingness to test the limits of what is known, paved the way for the medieval world eventually to become the modern world.

The edges of the world even allowed Alexander to transcend his own self-obsessive quest and become an agent of the greater good. The Hereford Map shows that on the northern rim of Asia, between the Caspian Sea and Cape Boreum, Alexander locked up a terrifying race of people that threatened world security. The map's inscription reads:

[Here are] all kinds of horrors, more than can be imagined: intolerable cold, a constant blasting wind from the mountains, which the inhabitants call "bizo." Here are exceedingly savage people who eat human flesh and drink blood, the accursed sons of Cain. The Lord used Alexander the Great to close them off, for within sight of the king an earthquake occurred, and mountains tumbled upon mountains all around them. Where there were no mountains, Alexander hemmed them in with an indestructible wall. (Westrem 2001, 69)

This inscription mixes several legends. The "accursed sons of Cain" refer to the monstrous races discussed above; these races frequently were thought to be descendants of Cain and therefore capable of all kinds of decadent behavior. But these cannibals also signify the descendants of Gog and Magog, a race that, according to the Book of Revelation, one day will gather the world's nations into an army to destroy the people of God (Revelation 20:7-10).

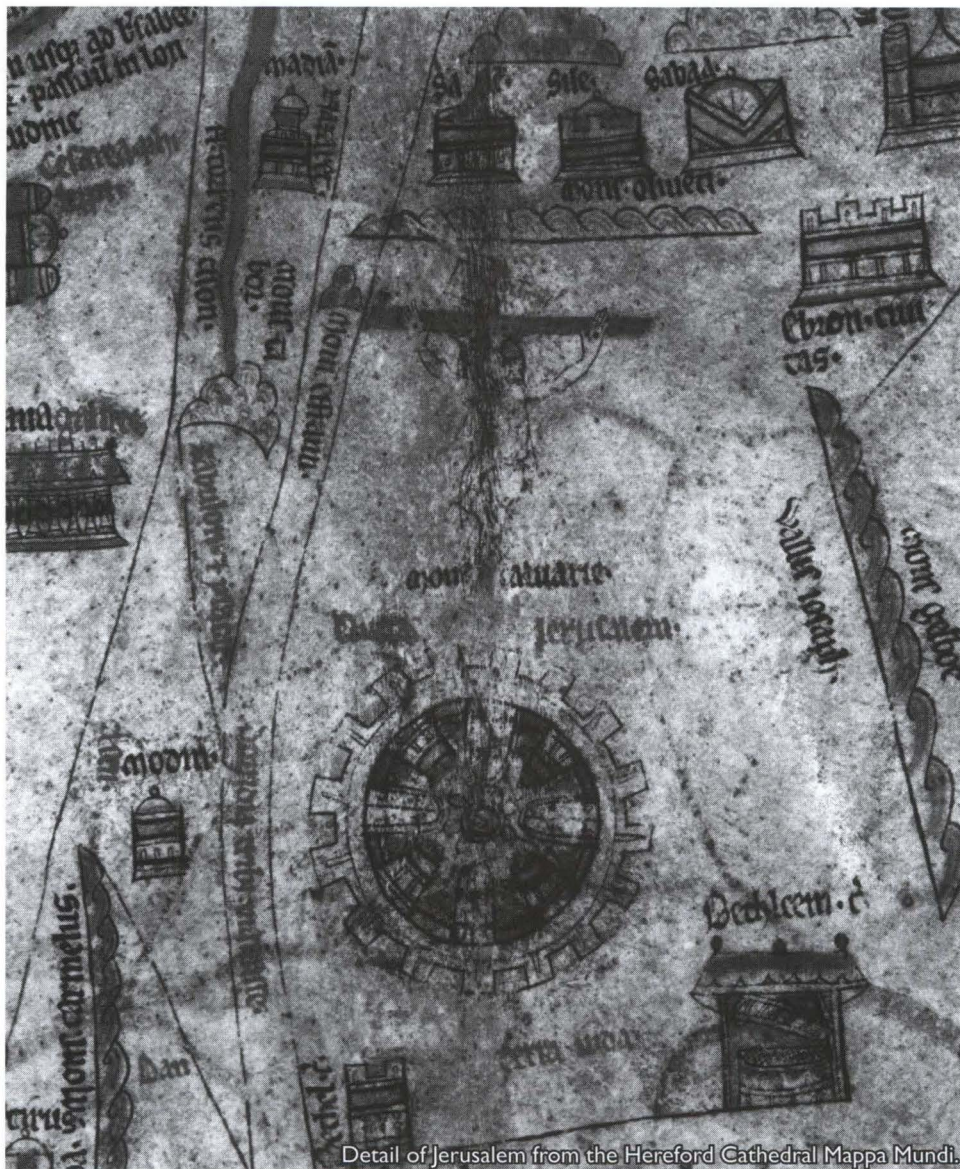
The Gog-Magog inscription lies within the cannibals' island prison, enclosed on its southern end by the crenelated wall Alexander built. It is the Hereford Map's lengthiest mention of Alexander, and it alerts us to his high status in the medieval world. Through this episode, the conqueror is allowed to play a key role in Christian history. Despite his pagan pedigree, he becomes no less than an agent of God. Alexander could not have enjoyed this role had he not been willing to brave the earth's dangerous rim.

In the end, however, the Hereford Alexander became overly partial to the edge. According to the map, he never traveled inland, and thus he missed the most important site the circular world has to offer: its center. On the Hereford Map, the center belongs indisputably to Jerusalem. Defying geographical logic, this city lies in the middle, or navel, of the world, at the precise place where the three continents meet. It is portrayed as a circular, walled city from which rises a ghostly image of the Crucifixion. The map thus centers not merely on the city itself, but on God's eternal revelation that took place both inside and outside its walls.

In the medieval worldview, Jerusalem provided a source of stability for a dangerous world, especially its edges. Sir John Mandeville, the fourteenth-century traveler who reportedly journeyed to the edge himself, made Jerusalem the focus of his lengthy itinerary. In his travel guide, he discusses the city's geographical and spiritual primacy:

For he that will publish anything to make it openly known, he will make it to be cried and pronounced in the middle place of a town; so that the thing that is proclaimed and pronounced, may evenly stretch to all parts: right so, he that was former of all the world, would suffer for us at Jerusalem, that is the midst of the world. (Mandeville 1964, 4)

Jerusalem reminded Mandeville—and others—that whatever marvels might be encountered on the earth's rim, or whatever deeds accomplished there, Christ holds the world's central position.



Detail of Jerusalem from the Hereford Cathedral Mappa Mundi.

All journeys and quests should thus pass through the world's sacred center. Otherwise, the danger of becoming lost on the edge, or in one's achievements on the edge, could become too great.

As a traveler of the world shown on the Hereford Map, Alexander, too, theoretically can benefit from the safety net of Jerusalem. The center belongs to him as much as to Mandeville or to any other medieval figure. Yet the Hereford Alexander eschews the center: the map consistently shows him as far from Jerusalem as he possibly could be. He is thus the opposite of Mandeville—he traveled the Christian world but did not understand the need for a spiritual anchor to ground his quests. Lacking this center,

he was laid open to the dangers of the edge—laid open, in fact, to death itself.

In most medieval Alexander legends, the conqueror dies by assassination. In at least one story, however, his death also is linked with his preoccupation with the edge. In the *Alexandreis*, a twelfth-century epic poem by Walter of Châtillon, Alexander had just defeated Porus of India when he made plans to undertake a quest unlike any he yet had attempted: he aimed to sail the Nile straight to the Garden of Eden, known in the Middle Ages as Earthly Paradise. The Hereford Map does not illustrate this episode. Earthly Paradise, however, appears at the top, or easternmost point, of the map as a circular,

walled garden in which Adam and Eve take the forbidden fruit. Below the garden, just outside its closed gate, a sword-wielding angel drives the first parents into the larger world. Medieval viewers of the map may well have envisioned Alexander's quest when they looked upon the map's equally dramatic story of Adam and Eve.

In planning to journey to the Garden of Eden—another site on the edge—Alexander transgressed a boundary that should never be crossed, he set his sights on the one place forbidden to all humans since the gate was closed. Those around Alexander saw the folly of his misplaced ambition, but the conqueror himself did not. In the *Alexandreis*, he brushes aside the reservations of his men with an arrogant proclamation: "Not to provoke the ill will of the gods, the world's too narrow, and the breadth of earth is insufficient for its only lord. But when I've passed beyond this conquered universe, I'll undertake to open to my followers another world"—by which he means Paradise itself (Walter 1996, 166). Although an agent of God in the Gog-Magog episode, here Alexander believes himself akin to God as he prepares to lead his subjects to heaven on earth.

Not surprisingly, the deities of the *Alexandreis* do not take kindly to Alexander's transgression. The goddess Nature (a stand-in for God in the poem) calls Alexander's planned visit to Earthly Paradise a "siege," clearly believing that the mighty king means to initiate no mere tour of the garden but an act of war. Not willing to let Alexander succeed, Nature turns to Satan for assistance. "What praise is yours, serpent, what glory, that you cast the first man out, if such a garden should yield its honors up to Alexander?" she taunts the lord of the underworld (Walter 1996, 172). Satan springs into action, enlisting one of his minions to devise a plan immediately to cut short Alexander's life. Earthly Paradise remains intact—at least until the next Alexander comes along.

Alexander's brief life has elements of tragedy: Alexander conquered the world, but his untimely death prevented him from ruling the lands he held or enjoying the discoveries he made. By illustrating Earthly Paradise, the Hereford Map hints at the details of the conqueror's unfortunate

demise. It also gives his fall a distinct spiritual and geographical twist. In this cartographic narrative, Alexander is not merely an epic hero who perished before his time; he is a man who chose the edge over the center. Between these two geographical sites lies a vast space of could-have-beens. Had the map's Alexander traveled, however briefly, to Jerusalem, he could have unearthed a store of humility to guide his steps. He could have abandoned his God complex in the presence of the true God. And, consequently, he could have avoided the fatal mistake of thinking that he had the power and authority to open the gates of Eden. But the Hereford Alexander did not go to Jerusalem. He gained no humility, no eternal perspective on his existence—and therefore he fell. He is a parable of a man who gains the world but loses his center—not to mention his very life.

ALEXANDER'S DESCENDANTS ROAM OUR WORLD today. We love to revile them, those media-hungry superstars who, having climbed to the top, take dramatic missteps that topple them from the edge of the earth. But Alexander's story speaks even to those of us not destined to be global figures. We ordinary folk may not have futures as world conquerors or national power brokers, but we are all travelers in the world. Whether professors or pastors, students or scholars, we understand the drive to attain new heights of excellence in our chosen work, and we also understand, surely, the temptation to cross forbidden lines as we pursue our goals. To avoid Alexander's fate, we must all find a center to tether us as we wander.

Even a stay-at-home mother like myself needs to find her center. An heir to the Christian tradition represented by the Hereford Map, I seek Jerusalem in my midst. My day-to-day challenges may seem trivial compared to ruling the world or running a company—or even a classroom—but they require the same attention to sacred geography. Sometimes, I meet life's challenges like a conqueror. Scurrying around the edges of the earth, I change diapers, convince an unwilling toddler to take a nap, keep a house, and even, on the really good days, carve out a few hours

for my second job, writing. Accomplishing all or any of these tasks, I feel as though I have braved a monster or two. But if I do not keep the center of my world in sight—perhaps make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem as did so many medieval people—I will fashion myself a second Alexander the Great. Even mothers can storm the Garden of Eden. In their quest to give their children every good gift, they easily can forget that paradise is the one gift not theirs to bestow. When my own supermom status threatens to turn into a God complex, I know of only one course of action: I get out my rope, and I tether myself once again to the world's sacred center.

But I do not hole up there. If I did, who would change all those diapers? God calls me to take strength from the center, but also to travel the larger world. He may even ask me someday to be his agent on the edge, as he did Alexander the Great. Indeed, the character of Alexander shows me, and all who travel the world with me, that we need both center and circumference. We need the margins to challenge us and the middle to ground us; we need ambition, and we need humility. We need, finally, to know who we are and who God is. The apparent dissonance between center and circumference is thus more of a dialogue—even if, at times, a tense one. We often seem to be caught in the middle, and this is, in fact, an accurate description of our experience of the world. We live and work and make our way in the promising yet perilous space between center and circumference.

From his perch atop the Hereford Map, the character of Alexander bids us be careful as we go. He failed in his quest to negotiate the world, but we need not. We can conquer new lands, and,

with a little knowledge of sacred geography, we can live to enjoy them. The Hereford Map can help us. For superstars and ordinary travelers alike, this map models a world kept in perfect equilibrium. It gives us center and circumference, both of which we need to find our path. The map asks us to keep one eye on Alexander the Great, who teaches us to take risks on the edges of the earth, and both eyes on Christ, who centers our precarious existence. †

Lisa Deam is a writer and art historian who lives in Valparaiso, Indiana.

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The Modern Comedy

Still Pondering Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*

Thomas Albert Howard

AUGUSTINE'S *CITY OF GOD* HOLDS THE distinction of being one of the few, perhaps only, books that contain a theory of just war and, if one is persuaded by the theory, is weighty enough to serve as a deadly projectile during combat. Only the latter could be said of Taylor's *Secular Age*, as perhaps the only thing it lacks is a theory of just war. So perhaps another quip is in order. If you ever find yourself stranded on a desert island, Taylor's book is an easy choice for the one book to have along. For not only would you likely be rescued long before completing it, but if you felt adventuresome, the book itself is large enough (878 pages) to be hollowed out and used as an escape-vessel. It is a big book!

And an extremely significant one. By my lights, it easily ranks among the most penetrating books written in recent decades on what we might call the "emergence of the secular"—the multifaceted transition in Western society over the past half millennium from a religiously-saturated society circa 1500 to—well, here already is the rub—one that is in large parts secular, yet still religious, teemingly pluralistic, agnostic, nostalgic, progressive, atheist, confused, searching, spiritual, reactionary, and more. Taylor uses the metaphor of a "nova" or even "super nova" to capture the centrifugal forces of pluralism afoot in Western societies in the modern era. "[T]he positing of a viable humanist alternative [to Christianity]," he writes, "set in train a dynamic, something like a nova effect, spawning an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options, across the span of the thinkable and perhaps even beyond" (299).

The subject of the book is nothing less than the story of how "we" arrived at this situation—a sweeping, ruminative narrative of the conditions of plausibility, the "deep structures" of belief/unbelief in the "modern West," the "North Atlantic" world.

He calls it a large-scale *Entstehungsgeschichte*—a narrative of origins and development.

Since the book defies easy summary and already has received considerable analysis, let me offer in what follows two points of commentary (in a rather positive register) underscoring and summarizing the general value of Taylor's outlook for the student of modern religious and intellectual history. But then, adopting a more quizzical stance, let me puzzle over the meaning of the royal "we" that recurs throughout the book and thereby see if I can open up a modest line of questioning about a book that richly deserves the overused adjective "magisterial."

First, Taylor offers a very helpful understanding of what—lacking for other terms—I'll call simply the "secularization" idea. His approach seeks to undermine what he calls "subtraction stories" of modern secularization: i.e., stories that assume from the outset that religion represents a deformation of human nature. But thanks to "Modern Science," "the Enlightenment," "Darwin," etc., the Modern trampled down Tradition, Reason upended Faith, and human beings, at long last, were able to breathe the clean sea breezes of their true this-worldly potential. Feuerbach, Comte, and Marx, among many lesser lights, have offered immensely influential "subtraction stories," and while Taylor recognizes their appeal, at least in light of their own first principles, he also believes that they have massively distorted the problems, the achievements, and the fragility of secular modernity, making erroneous assumptions about human nature and reducing religion to the epiphenomenal and exercisable in human affairs. He believes (rightly, I think) that the legacy of this mode of thinking about religion continues to hamper some "mainstream" secularization theorists in the discipline of sociology.

By contrast, Taylor's story emphasizes complexity and continuity, even if the end point—the emergence of a post-theological “exclusive humanism” and a post-sacred understanding of time—bespeaks a significant rupture in modern Western intellectual life, but also—and here the plot thickens—a “remarkable achievement” in Taylor's eyes. As it turns out, “the modern” is congenitally stamped with the residual energies of a (Judeo) Christian ethic transposed (and often amplified) into various secular idioms of immanent flourishing, solidarity, and altruism. “[M]odern culture,” as he expressed it in an earlier essay, “in breaking with the structures and beliefs of Christendom, also carried certain facets of Christian life further than they ever were taken or could have been taken within Christendom” (1999, 16). In this respect, Taylor is perhaps not too far from the French neo-Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain, whose landmark *humanisme intégral* (1937) contended that the whole moral fabric of modern political life—with its language of freedom, equality, human dignity, and rights—found incubation and predication in longstanding biblical notions of the *imago dei* and the Gospel injunction to love thy neighbor. (I find it curious that Taylor makes scant mention of Maritain, a seminal figure in promoting the ethos that led to Vatican II—an oversight that might be accounted for more by the anxiety of influence than deliberate neglect?)

Second, if Taylor, a philosopher by training, sometimes offers too simplified a view of “trickle-down” intellectual history (i.e., as elites go, so goes society at large), he nonetheless offers both the academic historian and the historically-minded layperson numerous valuable analytic tools and choice articulations of complex phenomena pertaining to religion/modernity. Recognizing that he sometimes borrows and adapts from others, and often refers back to his own previous works, here nonetheless are a few examples:

For Taylor, a **social imaginary** is the background framework or environment to the thought of a large group of people—transmitted in images, stories, customs—that conditions how new facts and realities are interpreted and makes possible common social practices, habits of thought, and a shared sense of legitimacy; an unarticulated “map”

of social space, a mental horizon. “It is in fact that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world *show up for us* in the sense they have” (173). He draws significantly from the philosopher Wittgenstein on this score, especially his notion of the “pictures of the world that hold us captive,” that facilitate some thoughts and keeps some “unthoughts” unthought (549).

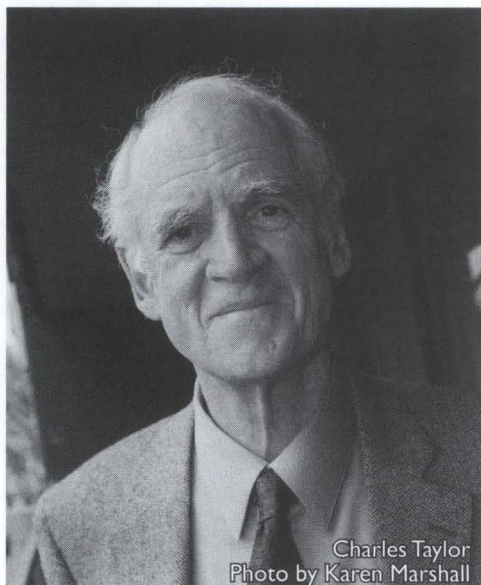
The urban/educated and higher academic echelons adhere to **the immanent frame**, a presuppositional environment that presumes a closed immanent frame of reference and views deviations from this toward strong belief in the religious/transcendent as, following Max Weber, an *Opfer des Intellekts*, a “sacrifice of the intellect,” a naïve credulity in violation of the adamant first principles of right-minded inquiry, of *Wissenschaft*. We might say that the “immanent frame” is the “social imaginary” of Western(ized) knowledge classes or at least dominant sectors thereof.

For Taylor, people in traditional religious settings possessed a **porous self**, a self freely recognizing divine or “enchanted” causality within themselves and within the world at large. Hence, c. 1500, the high levels of religious belief in general but also belief in witches, amulets, the demonic, the angelic, and so on. By contrast, the modern **buffered self**—the product of “the decline in magic,” “the decline in Hell,” “the civilizing process,” neo-Stoicism, Deism, modern natural law, the Enlightenment, etc.—exhibits an incredulity or imperviousness toward the divine, an assured “unflappability,” typified for Taylor by the historian Edward Gibbon, someone willing to consign much of human history to the “superstitious” and “fanatical,” while exhibiting imperturbable contentedness with the epistemic stances that he himself had adopted. But actually Gibbon is a rare type, because of another category that Taylor introduces:

Mutual fragilization is the term Taylor gives to the general state of belief/unbelief in a condition of “supernova” pluralism, opened up by exclusive humanism. No longer is one's religious stance secure, untroubled, reinforced by a homogenous situation, where those around you hold similar views. Rather, on the morning commute, one must

regularly encounter a dizzying variety of beliefs and moral systems. Belief does not enjoy stability, then, but finds itself “fragilized” by the presence of other voices, other outlooks, other practices. According to Taylor, this induces a condition of frequent migration within the religious domain, and across the secular/religious divide. It also fosters processes of “recomposition,” an ongoing assessment, a “re-composing,” an updating, tinkering, refurbishing, altering of one’s own outlook in light of the heterogeneity of one’s social matrix.

Within the general climate of mutual fragilization, two particularly strong currents exist for individuals, especially for academic types like Taylor. The **cross-pressured self** is pulled by one current to accept the regnant immanent frame; the other



Charles Taylor
Photo by Karen Marshall

pulls in the direction of faith precisely because the immanent frame—the flat stretches of “homogeneous, empty time”—fills one with a sense of dread, what Durkheim called *anomie*. Taylor illustrates this divided “self” well in his discussions of various Romantic and existentialist writers. The former veer into melancholy and nostalgia, captivated and disquieted by the specter of pure immanence, even as they seek a “subtler language” than traditional orthodoxy to express the spiritual or the sublime. The latter, existentialist writers, even in putatively “heroic” acts of self-weaning from the succor of transcendence, still exhibit a subtle tug of credulity in what Taylor decries as a numinous poetics of absence, often hitched to an embrace of

human dignity that is fervidly insistent but no longer intrinsic to any underlying intellectual project. For Taylor, we in the West, believer and unbeliever alike, are inheritors of the Romantic-existentialist legacies. They contribute massively to the historical sedimentation of our present. Persons of faith are haunted by the possibility of an impersonal universe, *Le Néant* in Sartre’s expression, whereas the person of doubt is haunted by the possibility of credulity, a “rumor of angels” in Peter Berger’s expression. In one very suggestive passage, Taylor wonders if we have all now become Pascal, disquieted by the “eternal silence of these infinite spaces,” even if we are in possession of the intellectual resources and political and social freedoms to form vastly different responses to it (347).

FINALLY, LET ME—A LILLIPIUTIAN IN TAYLOR’S shadow—see if I can at least offer a slight pinprick of doubt about some of the positions that Taylor has staked out, especially in regard to his general stance toward “modernity” and the meaning of the royal “we”—“We in the North Atlantic,” “We moderns”—that recurs throughout the book. But what I have to offer requires putting a couple of sweeping heuristic labels on the table. So permit me to divide Christian thinkers between “Augustinians” and “Thomists,” the former more keen to decry instances of disordered desire and dereliction in things human; the latter more keen to espy the vestigial goodness of the created order in human history. If this distinction is indulged, Taylor is definitely a “Thomist” by broad instinct, even if he would not place himself in the camp of the more “official” Neo-Scholasticism that has shaped much of modern Catholic philosophy since Leo XIII’s encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879). But he is also a Thomist of decidedly “Hegelian” inclinations, who, if not willing to identify “the real [with] the rational and the rational [with] the real,” evinces a notable, if not rosy, optimism about modernity’s track-record and prospects of continuing, and even enhancing, some of the Gospel’s deepest impulses in the fabric of ordinary life and within the social and political conditions and discourses of modernity. These proclivities come to the fore in a number of (sometimes offhand) comments directed against anti-modern or nostalgic

sentiments among some Christian thinkers, and the adjective Augustinian rarely appears in the book without the revealing prefix “hyper” before it. Calvinists, Jansenists, Barthians, clericals in the French Third Republic, populist Protestants of various stripes, and Catholics on the conservative side of the post-Vatican II conflicts, willy-nilly, tend to be diagnosed with various strains of “hyper-Augustinianism” (652ff.).

This is fair enough. Nostalgia toward the past and cultural pessimism about the present have not been in short supply among the groups that he identifies, and this often produces a historical synoptic inclined toward facile declensionist views and a politics of either smug detachment or “cultural warrior” engagement. The problem with the *hyper-Augustinian bristle*, let’s call it, is a hand-on-trigger readiness to identify the progressive with the transgressive, to lament the modern instead of seeking out the lurking positive within it—a process that for the ever-subtle Taylor certainly entails finding both wheat and chaff. So in many respects, Taylor’s critique is dead-on. I applaud.

But if the hyper-Augustinian posture holds possibilities of error in one direction, might Taylor’s own “Thomist-Hegelian” impulse, a tilt toward historical optimism, open itself to another? Put in the terms of literary drama, does his hermeneutic of comedy toward the modern, finally, lack the nimbleness to adequately decry the ironic and the tragic, even the ghoulish and demonic, in some modern forces—how some of humanity’s noblest, most progressive impulses can descend into problems and vexations that few could have foreseen, and which in some respects are unforeseeable? The historical thinker inclined to comedy, writes Hayden White in his masterful book *Metahistory*, attempts to strike a pose of “infinite geniality and

confidence capable of rising superior to... contradiction and experiencing therein no taint of bitterness or misfortune” (White 96). It is surprising in a book of this length on religion and modernity, for example, to encounter only scant commentary on the “political theologies” of the twentieth century (both of the far Left and Right) and equally little commentary on some of the “Gnostic,” even chiliastic, impulses afoot in the modern (bio)technological enterprise. In his teaching on the so-called “vampire hanging on the side of history,” Maritain,

for instance, regularly spoke of the “double antagonistic movement” in history; that is, all progress and any goodness in the here-and-now always will be intermingled with regressive and disordered elements, which often carry immense and often difficult-to-detect upending capacities (1942; 1957, 54ff).

Let me push this point further and attempt, as they say, to be provocative. To reference Reinhold Niebuhr’s classic *The Irony of American History*, does Taylor’s stance toward the modern exhibit at some level a trace of overconfidence, a lack of pruden-

tial circumspection, toward the unfolding epic of “the modern” in a manner similar to how some have thought about the providential mission of the United States? While many see problems with the United States’ sense of God-ordained destiny, they also see these problems as deserving of understanding, since they are fortuitously subject to the curative leaven of sacrosanct first principles. But this nation’s sense of mission perhaps too easily tends to occlude from purview “the ironic tendency of virtues to turn to vices when too complacently relied upon” (2008, 133).

Taylor lacks the slightest whiff of old-fashioned nationalist sentiment, neither for his own Canada nor for the United States. But, at some level, is there a similar move going on here? A transference of a kind of vague Hegelian (Christianized) providentialism

Taylor evinces a notable if not rosy optimism about modernity’s track-record and prospects of continuing, and even enhancing, some of the Gospel’s deepest impulses in the fabric of ordinary life and within the social and political conditions and discourses of modernity.

from the nation-state and its destiny to the general *Geist*, the intellectual configuration of “North Atlantic civilization”—one of Taylor’s preferred terms—and to the highly educated “we” who presumably sit in its cockpit. There is, finally, in Taylor, I submit, a sort of moonstruck reverence (albeit chastely expressed) about the moral trajectory of this civilization. It carries for him a kind of providentialist grandeur, deserving of one’s criticisms, to be sure, but done in a spirit of magnanimity and tied to ambassador-like loyalty and defense.

If this fairly casts light on Taylor’s own historical “social imaginary” (to use his term), a smidgen of Augustinian corrective might be in order. The North Atlantic, after all, is a very powerful civilization, exerting extensive intellectual influence around the globe, despite, and even because of, earlier processes of political de-colonization. But “power,” John Adams once wrote, “always thinks it has a great soul, and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak, and that it is doing God’s service when it [might be] violating all His laws. Our passions [the powerful are assured]... possess so much metaphysical subtlety and so much overpowering eloquence that they insinuate themselves into the understanding and the conscience [of the weak] and convert both to their party” (Quoted in Niebuhr, 21).

In the final analysis, does Taylor’s reverential gaze on the “we” of the North Atlantic, particularly in an age of globalization (and proliferating global Christianities) when historians are speaking of the “provincializing of Europe,” carry a slight deficit of perspicacity and prudence? (See Chakrebarthy 2000 and Jenkins 2007). The hovering Hegelian-providentialist trajectory suffusing his narrative of the modern age, moreover, holds the risk of mistaking the transgressive for the progressive, inflating comedy at the expense of irony or tragedy, and perhaps confusing some of the more recent installments of our age for more enduring first principles of normative thought and action.

Whether this pinprick will have any effect, I don’t know. In truth, I suspect the Owl of Minerva will likely smile on Taylor’s project. And any possible missteps on his part certainly can’t be chalked up to lack of erudition or petty-mindedness but are glimpsed only in the tailwinds of what I’ll call his

flight from the Augustinian: a slight surfeit of sincerity toward the modern, a nobly crafted effort to put the best face on its commanding intellectual/religious achievements and even the complexity of its problems. Were the Owl of Minerva not to smile, Taylor, then, might consider borrowing these closing lines from *Othello*, which I here freely adapt:

Soft you; a word or two before you go.
I have done *modernity* some service, and it know’t.
No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
When you shall this *secular age* relate,
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Of one that loved not wisely but too well. ♣

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Reflections in the Dark

Fredrick Barton

WE FIND OURSELVES IN THE MIDST OF PROTRACTED war in a distant land that was supposed to have been over quickly and in which we Americans were supposed to have been greeted as liberators. When I was the age of most of the soldiers fighting in the Middle East, our country was in the midst of another protracted war that was also, always, supposed to be over quickly. Remarkably, during the long years that my fellow young Americans sacrificed their lives in Vietnam, the American film industry took little notice. The great, direct cinematic treatments of the War in Vietnam would not appear until after the war's sorry denouement with the fall of Saigon in 1975. *Coming Home* and *The Deer Hunter* didn't appear until 1978, *Apocalypse Now* a year later. *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *Casualties of War* weren't released until the mid- and late-1980s, more than a decade after the war ended.

During the fighting and dying of the 1960s and early 1970s, Hollywood looked the other way. Frenchman Pierre Schoendoerffer won a 1967 Oscar for his documentary *The Anderson Platoon* that chronicled the experiences of the American GIs in the bush, but it was barely seen in the US, opening only in a few cities, closing, if it opened, after a single week. The primary film about Vietnam made while the war was being fought was *The Green Berets*, a 1968 pro-war feature co-directed by and starring John Wayne. For what it's worth, and I entirely agree, Roger Ebert called *The Green Berets* "cruel and dishonest and unworthy of the thousands who died in Vietnam."

Vietnam was the elephant in the national living room that our most popular and accessible art form chose not to notice. The only wartime film that addressed Vietnam in any meaningful way and drew a substantial commercial audience in the process was Robert Altman's *M.A.S.H.*

(1970), and it was set in Korea during the 1950s, a pointed, biting, but nonetheless indirect commentary on Vietnam.

The filmmakers of the Iraq/Afghanistan era have not been nearly so circumspect. And though the miasma of the Middle East has permeated American cinema in less direct ways, I take note of how very vocal American filmmakers have been about our foreign policy over the last four years.

In contrast to the cinematic silence of the Vietnam era, American filmmakers have produced at least eight fictional films dealing directly with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These include *In the Valley of Elah*, which dealt with criminal behavior by our American troops, *Rendition*, which addressed the kidnapping and torture of a suspected al Qaeda collaborator, *Redacted*, which revolves around the rape of an Iraqi civilian teenager by American soldiers, and *Lions for Lambs*, which details, among other things, how an idealistic college professor ironically and unintentionally convinces two of his students to volunteer for the army where they lose their lives on a snowy mountain slope in Afghanistan. These films star such big name players as Tommy Lee Jones, Susan Sarandon, Robert Redford, Tom Cruise, and Meryl Streep and have been helmed by such A-list directors as Redford, Brian de Palma, and Paul Haggis.

Meanwhile, American filmmakers have produced at least thirteen documentaries about Iraq and Afghanistan, including such titles as *No End in Sight*; *The War Tapes*; *The Ground Truth*; *Standard Operating Procedure*; *Gunner Palace*; *My Country, My Country*; *Iran in Fragments*; and *WMD*. With the exception of *Voices of Iraq*, a film released on the eve of the 2004 presidential election and purportedly "written and directed by the people of Iraq," all of these films, to greater or lesser degrees, portray

our military activities in Iraq and Afghanistan in disturbingly negative ways. I want to look at one of these non-fiction pictures in greater detail, *Taxi to the Dark Side*, which won last year's Oscar for Best Documentary.

Authority to Torture

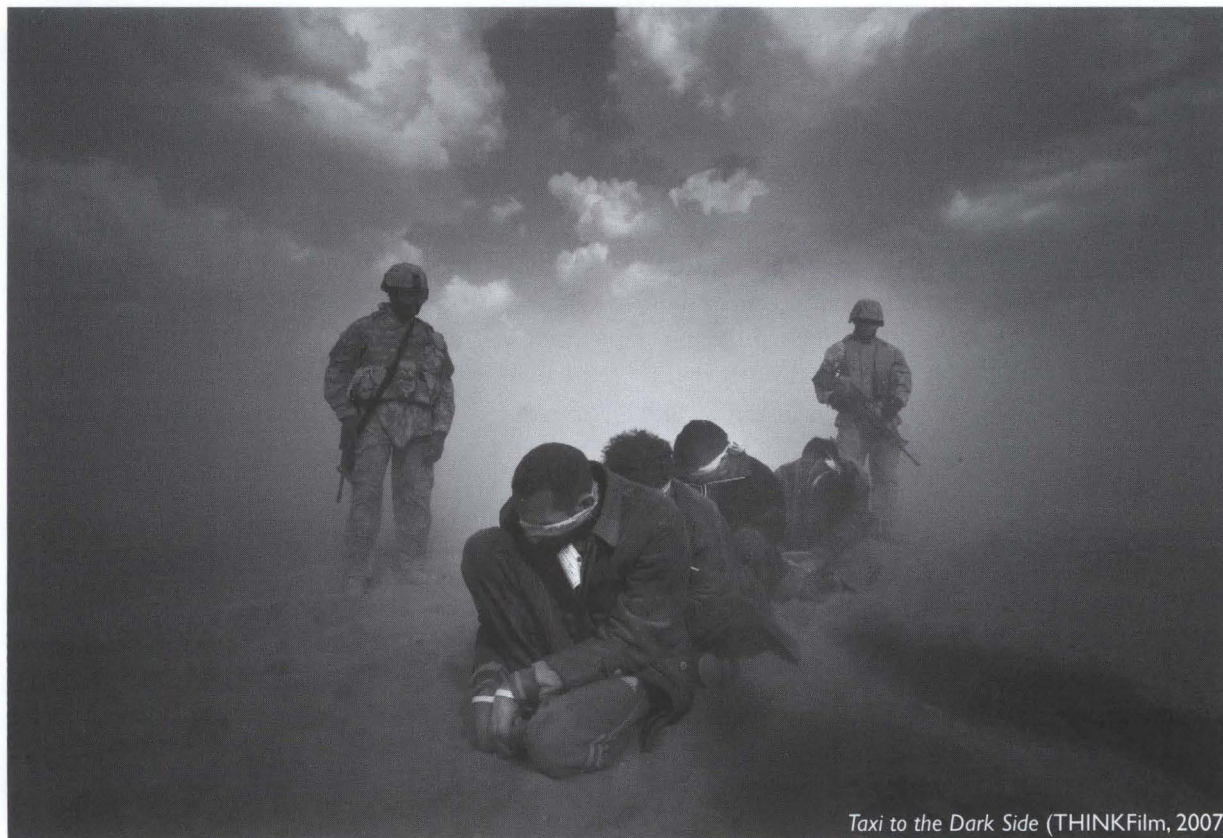
As former President George W. Bush's record low standing in national opinion polls attests, opposition to the Iraq War is no longer a partisan issue. The brave men and women of our military have been asked to sacrifice their lives and their limbs for a war whose justification has been constantly redefined. And they have faced the enduring hostility of the people they have been sent to "liberate." The cost in American blood and treasure has been enormous. An under-noted contributor to our current economic crisis, we have financed the War in Iraq with \$10 billion dollars a month of American taxpayer money, a burden that will be borne by our children and theirs. More than 4,000 of our men and women have died and over 30,000 others have been wounded, many maimed for life.

After 30,000 troops were belatedly sent to Iraq to supplement the minimal forces Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld dispatched at the

war's outset, the loss of American lives sharply diminished. But the sectarian violence the war unleashed among the Iraqi people continues at an appalling rate, and General David Petraeus judged the civil order in the country as, at best, "fragile." Some estimates suggest that as many as 1.2 million civilians have died, and even the Bush administration admitted civilian casualties of more than 30,000, a factor ten times the number slain in the terrorist attacks on 9/11, thus a factor ten times greater than the biblical admonition that justice should be restricted, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, on a one-to-one basis.

Concomitantly, America has soiled its reputation in the international community by condoning practices we have heretofore associated with tyrants and monsters. This later is the subject of writer/director Alex Gibney's searing, Oscar-winning *Taxi to the Dark Side*, an unblinking look at the appalling policies that Vice President Dick Cheney advocated, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld implemented, and President George W. Bush approved and publically defended.

Before the invasion of Iraq was unleashed in March 2003, an Afghan taxi driver named Dilawar was arrested by a paid informant and turned over



Taxi to the Dark Side (THINKFilm, 2007)

to the American army in December 2002. Dilawar was transported to Bagram prison where he was held for five days until he was killed by American military police prison guards using the extreme interrogation techniques authorized by the Bush administration in the aftermath of 9/11. Dilawar was never assigned an attorney, never charged with a crime. But the American army was told he was the getaway driver after a rocket attack on an American base. His guards were instructed to soften Dilawar up so that he would give information about his terrorist connections. Responding to these instructions, the American GIs deprived him of sleep, hung him from the ceiling by his wrists in the cage where he was incarcerated, and kicked him in his thighs and calves until the flesh of his legs was pulped. His legs were so badly damaged they would have had to be amputated, had he lived. Dilawar's death certificate ruled him a homicide victim, but an official army report stated that he died of "natural causes." Dilawar's treatment would have been unacceptable had he been guilty of something, but he was innocent. The man who turned him in was the man who launched the rockets.

Most Americans have heard of the human rights abuses at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and of the controversial detention center at Guantanamo, Cuba. But the officially sanctioned torture of men detained in the War on Terror began at the Bagram prison in Afghanistan, and Dilawar was among the first and most definitively tragic victims. Many Americans were so outraged after 9/11 that they lusted for revenge. An associate of mine swore that we should go after the perpetrators with overwhelming force and not concern ourselves with "collateral damage," an Orwellian euphemism for the innocents who die in the process. Leaders in the Bush administration obviously agreed. Shows like 24 regularly promote the

successful use of torture on our enemies, and *Taxi to the Dark Side* wonders if such fictional representations have deadened our sensibilities. But, in fact, most authorities on the interrogation of prisoners believe that torture seldom works because the prisoner eventually will tell the torturer whatever he thinks the torturer wants to hear. And that fact doesn't even address the too frequent situations that have emerged from Abu Ghraib and elsewhere where the torture victim wasn't a terrorist in the first place and had nothing to reveal.

In addition to things our soldiers did to Dilawar, we did other things in the name of protecting America. We hooded, ear-muffled, and blindfolded men and kept them in isolation cells in order to deprive them of all sensory perception, a practice scientists have proven causes complete mental collapse. We stripped men naked and forced them to wear panties on their heads and to masturbate in front of female soldiers and their fellow inmates. We forced them to commit homosexual acts with each other. We used IV drips

to force fluids into men and denied them toilet facilities until they urinated on themselves. We put them into "stress positions" and bound them so they could not move to relieve the pain. We water boarded them. We beat them and kicked them. We let dogs attack them. We shocked them in their genitals with electric current. And we murdered them, Dilawar and others at Bagram and 107 who died at Abu Ghraib. Even the self-protective army admits that thirty-seven were homicides. To protect ourselves from the implications of these atrocities, President Bush declared that these men did not deserve the rights established under the Geneva Conventions. And to protect himself and those in his administration from future prosecution as war criminals, the president secured pre-pardon legislation from Congress.

Despite our collective reluctance to face the details of what America has been up to, we know it at some level, we are concerned about it, and the issues of our behavior in Iraq are bubbling to the surface in places we don't expect.

In a concluding voiceover, director Dibney summarizes one of his own reactions to this horror, and I will let it speak for mine: "American values are premised on the notion of human dignity and the sanctity of the individual. To allow cruelty to be applied as a matter of official policy is to say that our forefathers were wrong about the founding principles of inalienable human rights." Yet some among us still wonder why Americans, who once, not so long ago, were greeted around the globe as heroes and liberators, are now routinely hated in many places outside our own borders. Let us pray that the departure of the Bush administration and Barack Obama's occupation of the White House may soon begin to change that.

Because my feelings about these issues are so strong, because my love for this country is so great, and because my shame at our nation's recent behavior is so consuming, I would love to tell you that, because these documentary indictments were made by American filmmakers, we will soon be steered back to the right and honorable course. If so, it will not be as a direct impact of these documentaries, because, quite frankly, no one is going to see them. *No End in Sight* grossed only \$1.4 million dollars, less than three-quarters of its production budget. *Taxi to the Dark Side* did far worse, taking in less than \$275,000 total. Errol Morris, who won an Oscar for his profile of Vietnam-era Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, collected less than \$210,000 for *Standard Operating Procedure*, his documentary on the abuses at Abu Ghraib. Yes, more people will see these movies as they play cable stations and are released on DVD, but their paltry theatrical performances suggest that the American people don't really want the details on what their government has been up to in its War on Terror. They don't want the story wrapped in a fictional package either. For despite the presence of our most prominent actors in their casts, the box office performances of the fictional films that have dealt with Iraq have been just as dismal. *In the Valley of Elah*, for instance, cost \$23 million to produce and took in less than \$7 million in the United States.

Of course, no one went to see *The Anderson Platoon* back in 1967, and the Hollywood decision-

makers of the day, perhaps correctly, deemed Vietnam a topic without an audience. Still, despite our collective reluctance to face the details of what America has been up to, we know it at some level, we are concerned about it, and the issues of our behavior in Iraq are bubbling to the surface in places we don't expect. We have all seen the bumper stickers that highlight the letters I and CAN in the word American. We have long been a confident, can do people. But I sense an uneasiness in our mood, a darker view of our future, and I see this concern in our movies.

No Shelter, No Exit

I am reminded of a line Peter O'Toole speaks in Richard Rush's great 1980 movie about movie-making, *The Stunt Man*. Playing the symbolically named Eli Cross, the director of the film within the film, O'Toole counsels that if you have a serious message you want to send your audience, you slip it in while they are otherwise getting off on adventure, action, sex, or violence. I think that's what American filmmakers have been doing, and whether their audiences are getting the message, I can't say. But they have been buying tickets. As a first example of a dark turn in the American spirit, I will look first at last year's Oscar winner for best picture, *No Country for Old Men*.

Joel and Ethan Coen's *No Country for Old Men* establishes its key themes in its opening sequences. In the film's second passage, from a rocky rise over a dusty Southwestern landscape, a sweaty, grizzled hunter carefully lines up a rifle shot on a herd of antelope. The shot rips out, and the herd scatters. Perhaps a buck has been wounded, but the bullet doesn't bring him down. Eventually, the hunter discovers a thin trail of blood, but throughout a long march across the desert hardpan, he never catches sight of his wounded game. *Preparation and persistence may not lead to satisfactory results.* In the picture's first sequence, a deputy takes a man into custody, handcuffs him, places him into a cruiser, and drives him to jail. Shortly later, the deputy is dead, and the arrested man is at large. *Evil is an unfathomable, relentless, merciless, and perhaps unconquerable foe.*

Adapted by the Coen brothers from Cormac McCarthy's spare, bleak novel, *No Country for*



No Country for Old Men (Miramax 2007)

Old Men is a showcase of brilliant, minimalist acting, a visual masterpiece by cinematographer Roger Deakins, and an uncomfortable philosophical challenge. It has filled theaters, but it is not a crowd pleaser. The story involves the death dance between the hunter, Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin), a trailer-park resident and sometime welder, and Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem), a cunning killer of staggering heartlessness, his preferred weapon a compressed-air bolt thruster used to slaughter cattle. Moss and Chigurh get crosswise when the hunter stumbles into a drug deal gone fatally awry. Who started the shooting and why is never revealed, but perhaps ten people are dead, and one is dying. Cautiously poking around the grisly scene, Moss finds a truckload of heroin and ultimately a satchel containing \$2 million in cash. He takes the money, and what happens to the drugs, we never learn. Moss incorrectly assumes that all the players in the drug deal are dead and that the \$2 million is his with which to build a new life for himself and his wife Carla Jean (Kelly Macdonald). Unfortunately, like the original Terminator, Chigurh is on his trail, shedding the blood of innocent bystanders at every gas station and cut-rate motel along the way. Meanwhile, on the trail

of both men is the tired local sheriff, Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones), a spiritually stymied man nearing retirement and wondering what exactly life is all about.

Just as the film sloughs off the usual duty of answering questions attendant to the details of its story, it bothers with plot cohesion only indifferently. We think that Chigurh has been hired at some point by the drug wholesaler (Stephen Root) and that maybe Chigurh has double-crossed him. That would then account for why the wholesaler, who is never given a name, hires Carson Wells (Woody Harrelson) to find Chigurh. But what we aren't told is how Wells manages to find Moss so easily; how, in turn, Chigurh knows that Wells is after him; and throughout, after Moss ditches the tracking device he finds buried in the satchel, how Chigurh nonetheless seems to know almost beforehand every move Moss makes. Moreover, the picture deviates from all conventional narrative strategy by staging its climactic gun battle off-screen. We learn who shoots whom when Bell shows up to investigate, but we don't see the action itself. Like most everything, this movie seems to submit, it just doesn't matter. Men live, men die, now or later. Action only buys time, a short amount or a shorter amount.

Happenstance is far more important than virtue. Justice is a wish rather than a condition.

The odd plotting decisions might have been deemed carelessness on the part of filmmakers less talented than the Coen's. Here, I think, it is their way of commenting on the mysteriousness and capriciousness of human life. We think we have answers for things we don't. The nature of evil eludes us utterly. We regard ourselves more highly than we deserve. We track others by trails of blood, and, like animals, we are tracked by those who would kill us. Tommy Lee Jones's Bell tells a friend of the emptiness he feels. "I thought God would come into my life as I grew older," he says. "But he didn't." To his wife (Tess Harper), Bell relates a dream about his father, who died young. In the dream the father has gone ahead on a cold camping trip, and Bell understands that his father will be waiting for him with food to eat around a warming fire. "And then I woke up," he says, the embrace and security of a father's love but a dream, the implication of comfort in some life to come, a wisp of wishful smoke, poof, gone.

I saw *No Country for Old Men* over a year ago now, and I have been haunted by its withering pessimism ever since.

Dark Knight of the American Soul

If no one is going to see the damning documentaries about the War in Iraq, and if their indictment of America's foreign policies in this new century is going unwitnessed, the spirit of our people is nonetheless being affected, at least if the message of *No Country for Old Men* and others like the equally bleak *There Will Be Blood* are any indication. Americans historically have seen ourselves as equal to any task. We always have believed in a proud present and a brighter future. After another period of national embarrassment during the years of Vietnam and the Watergate scandals, Ronald Reagan won the presidency in 1980 with the slogan "Morning in America." Bill Clinton underscored that he grew up in a town named Hope. His theme song was "Don't Stop Thinking about Tomorrow." Barack Obama rode to the White House promising "Change We Can Believe In." But Obama's whole candidacy spoke directly to what he saw as declining American

self-confidence. We may not like looking at the specifics as presented in *Taxi to the Dark Side*, but polls tell us that four in five Americans believe our nation has careened off course. And our cinema is pointedly wondering when and how we will get our bearings again. As another example, let's look at this year's most popular movie, one of the most financially successful motion pictures in history. Given its themes, it is appropriately titled with a pun "The Dark Knight."

Even before the 9/11 attacks, al Qaeda number two Ayman al-Zawahiri taunted that radical Islam would exploit the very openness of American democracy as a mechanism for orchestrating our downfall. Our greatest strength, in our view, was our greatest weakness in his. In our fury and righteous outrage over the collapse of the Twin Towers, we must be careful not to sacrifice what has made us great just to squelch our enemy's evil glee. And that is exactly why so many of us have been troubled by the Bush administration's domestic spying and sickened by its decision to torture war prisoners. Such issues, in their own constricted way, are central to Christopher Nolan's brooding and, until its compromised end, nigh despairing *The Dark Knight*, the latest in the Batman series.

Written by director Nolan with his brother Jonathan, *The Dark Knight* takes up sometime after Batman's crime-fighting successes in *Batman Begins*. Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) is secure in his camouflage as a wastrel billionaire, freeing him to answer the Batman searchlight sent up by police Lt. James Gordon (Gary Oldman). Pointedly, Batman's accomplishments have produced two negative consequences. On the one hand, the dons of organized crime have grown more desperate; on the other, television talking heads and other hysterics have denounced Batman as a vigilante who ought to be brought to justice for his extra-legal offenses. In response, Bruce and Batman in their separate ways try to promote the career of crusading district attorney Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart) as the white knight who will pursue within the law what Batman has undertaken through personal force of arms.

The crime lords counter with a move that recalls German conservatives backing Hitler

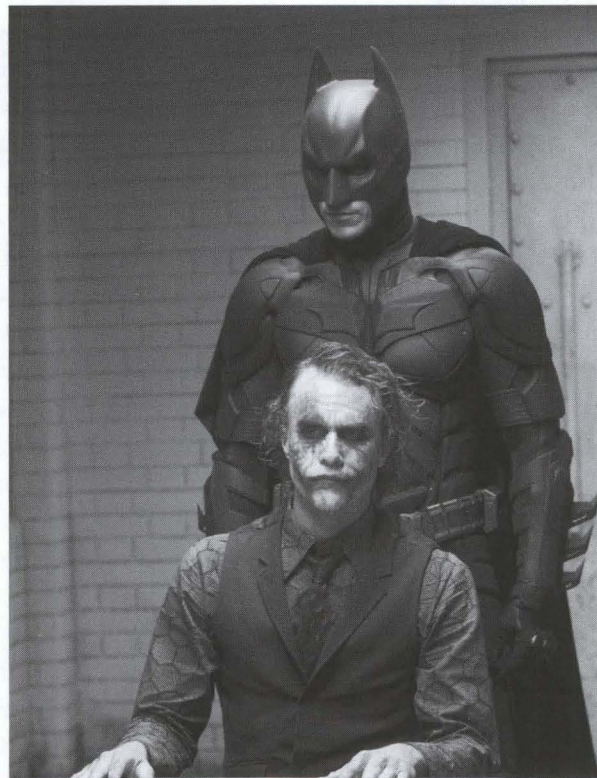
and deeming him a buffoon they could control. Salvatore Maroni (Eric Roberts) and his henchmen hire a clown-faced bank robber known as The Joker (played brilliantly by the late Heath Ledger) to kill Batman. Because The Joker is a thief and a murderer, the mobsters mistake him for an ally. But in the final analysis, The Joker isn't on anybody's side. He's a psychopathic agent of anarchy. He's contemptuous of the mob, but he agrees to go after Batman because he sees the caped crusader as an architect of order. Batman came into being to sustain and reinforce civil society; The Joker exists entirely to destroy.

The 152-minute struggle between these monumental forces of good and evil is played out with all the usual chases, vehicle crashes, fisticuffs, machine-gun fire, and wanton explosions that are the mainstay of superhero movies. Batman even has to ward off attack dogs on a couple of occasions, a development that presumably harbors an allusion that escaped me. As is so often the case in this kind of film, the editing has focused on speed rather than clarity. We frequently can't tell quite what is going on, and we haven't a clue how the opposing forces are able to keep track of each other. The picture is, in addition, considerably over plotted with all the underdevelopment of the interwoven plot threads that flaw almost inevitably produces. We learn *what* happens when Lt. Gordon doesn't listen to Dent's warnings about corrupt cops in his unit, but we aren't told *why* this happens or made to understand why these attendant events are necessary to the larger story. We ought to

be affected by The Joker's murder of the police commissioner and a judge, but since we barely know them, their demise generates no emotional power. Moreover, I grew increasingly annoyed at The Joker's ability to stage logistically complex acts of mayhem with no time to prepare and apparently little in the way of a support force.

Nonetheless, *The Dark Knight* attracted overwhelmingly enthusiastic notices, interestingly, *because* of its somber vision. Can good triumph?

Can good men defeat evil men without compromising their principles? Not surprisingly, many critics have spotted analogies to America's War on Terror, though Nolan has been dodgy about acknowledging that subtext. The connections are there, though I would have admired them more had they been more clearly worked out. We're supposed to see something critical in Batman's character when The Joker forces him to make Sophie's choice between his love, Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal), and his public ally, Dent, a choice between his own personal love interest and the larger public good as represented by



Batman (Christian Bale) and The Joker (Heath Ledger) from *The Dark Knight* (Warner Bros, 2008)

the crusading career of the District Attorney. The film would have been stronger had it clarified Batman's thinking as he decides what to do.

Still, the overwhelming critical judgment noting this film's departure from the usual summer action formula is entirely accurate. The picture offers no happy, tidy denouement. The forces of evil are stymied but by no means defeated. And Batman is left in a quandary of indecision about his own methods and hence his next steps. How much of what he has done in fighting evil, he wonders, has fertilized it rather than crushed

it? Shortly after 9/11, Vice President Cheney told interviewers that to fight the evil of Islamic terrorism America would have to go be willing to go over to the dark side. The policies he advocated, and President Bush approved, have resulted in the direct torture and death of innocent human beings and have unleashed a cancer on America's concept of itself as an historical agent of justice. The extent of the reactive evil these policies have spawned is not easy to assess, but there can be little question that if and until Obama orchestrates a dramatic reevaluation, America's standing in the world is far lower today than it was in September 2001.

Doubt, Anger, and the Sanctuary of Faith

It should be apparent by now, that I think the times warrant the kind of pessimism we have been witnessing in our cinema. But let me conclude with a bit of a twist, with another dark film from this summer past, but one that neither defaults to unearned optimism nor surrenders to the arid meaninglessness of it all. Let me conclude by looking at another example of popular entertainment that dares to ask the big questions.

Let's start with, does God exist? If so, how does He exert his will on Earth? If, as Jews and Christians believe, God is omniscient, omnipotent, and beneficent, how do we account for the suffering of the innocent, for the starvation of impoverished children, for the Holocaust? These are questions that for millennia have challenged and sometimes defeated theologians, troubled believers, and stymied faith. Thus, I am stimulated to discover that they are the central concerns of director Chris Carter's *X-Files: I Want to Believe*.

Written by Carter with Frank Spotnitz, the current *X-Files* reunites former FBI agents Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) and Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) some years after they left government service. Scully is now a resident surgeon at a Catholic hospital. Mulder is at sea, not working at anything, haunted and resentful about being dismissed from his old job. They share a house together in an isolated location, but they have never married. In quick, deftly acted scenes we can see how much they love and

need each other. But there is a melancholy that shrouds their lives. They have lost a child.

The plot of the film summons the different ways that Mulder and Scully approached their work in ten seasons of television episodes and an earlier motion picture. Their cases involved paranormal mysteries and implications of extraterrestrial invasion. Mulder was always the seeker. Never entirely convinced, he nonetheless always wanted and still wants to believe. Scully the scientist is ever the skeptic, and so she remains.

As the picture opens, FBI agent Dakota Whitney (Amanda Peet) beseeches them to assist on an urgent case. FBI agent Monica Bannan (Xantha Radley) has been abducted, and the Bureau's only clues to her whereabouts are coming from a psychic. Both reluctantly agree to participate in the case, but Scully quickly wants to abandon participation when she discovers that the psychic is Father Joseph Crissman (Billy Connolly), a pedophile convicted of sodomizing thirty-seven altar boys. Scully instantly concludes that he is a fraud and one no doubt pursuing his own objectives under the cover of cooperating with the police. Mulder, predictably, wants to see if the disgraced priest can provide anything worthwhile. When Father Joe leads them to a severed arm and then other buried body parts, Mulder begins to believe that his psychic powers may be real. Scully refuses to surrender her conviction that the priest is a con man and begins to argue that he's obviously a participant in new unspeakable crimes. The film's deft script manipulates the revelation of evidence such that we metronome from siding with Scully over to Mulder and then back again.

Scully, meanwhile, is involved in a harrowing case at her hospital. She's been treating a young boy suffering from a rare form of brain cancer. His prospects for survival are slim. Only an experimental and painful process of stem cell injections offers any hope. The hospital administrator, a priest, thinks that the stem cell injections are unwarranted, that they will expose the boy to unnecessary pain without extending his life. Scully herself is torn. She has become very attached to this child who reminds her of her own son. She doesn't want him to suffer, but she fiercely wants him to live. Should she proceed

with the only treatment available, or should she medicate the boy and let him slip away peacefully?

These two plot threads are connected in a rumination on medical ethics, for we discover that Monica Bannon's abduction has been orchestrated by a monstrous team of doctors who are harvesting blood and organs in an attempt to save the life of a rich man dying of cancer. In short, good and evil reside side by side. And sometimes you cannot tell into which category a particular action might fall.

Much of what the film endeavors to say rests on the character of Father Joe. He does not deny the harm he has done, but he claims to have prayed for redemption and maintains that his psychic visions are evidence that God's grace extends even to a man such as himself. Mulder wants to believe him; Scully, who is angry at the very notion of God because of the death of her son, doesn't. But Scully does want to believe, against all reason, in a piece of advice Joe offers her that helps her decide how to proceed with her young patient. She despises the priest, is convinced he's a phony, but chooses to believe him when he tells her that God has said she can make a difference.

However dark the issues are here, and they are dark indeed, I yearn for more movies like this one that determine to shine a light into the inky void. I am ashamed of what I am shown about my

country in *Taxi to the Dark Side*. I am concerned that such shame leads to the despairing resignation we find in *No Country for Old Men*. I don't want movies that ultimately settle for denial like *The Dark Knight*. Instead, I ache for cinema that, while telling us the truth, also offers us a way out, a chance to insist on the principles that we all used to take for granted. I hunger for the miracle of Gandhian, Mandellian healing transformation. Like Mulder, I want to believe. And this *X-Files*, in so many ways a conventional thriller, offers not an answer in a universe where absolute answers aren't available but a generative question. "Do you believe," it wonders, "that forgiveness is possible for someone who has done the unforgivable?" If we believe that, then redemption is possible, even for what we have let happen to our national values. †

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Sinning Boldly on Campus

Rethinking the Role of the Christian Faith in the Colleges and Universities of the Church

Mark D. Tranvik

MOST READERS PROBABLY THINK THERE IS enough bold sinning on our college campuses. But I would like to move away from conventional notions of sin and talk about the tendency of mainline schools of higher learning to “lower the volume” when speaking of their Christian convictions.

As a way of framing the discussion, I would like to go back to Germany in the tumultuous year of 1521. It is August. Martin Luther has been excommunicated, and he is holed up in the Wartburg Castle. Meanwhile, back at Wittenberg, the home base of the Lutheran movement, changes were rapidly taking place. Luther’s junior colleague, Philip Melanchthon, was nominally in charge. The situation was chaotic. Monks and nuns were leaving their monasteries and cloisters. Priests were rejecting their vows of celibacy and seeking permission to marry.

Melanchthon is not faring well in the role of the beleaguered administrator. Deeply unsettled, perhaps even in some panic, he writes to Luther asking for advice. Luther responds by commending Philip for some of the changes that have been made and gives him advice about how to proceed in other areas. But, toward the end of the letter, Luther gives Melanchthon some counsel that might be worth pondering today. Sensing his friend’s hesitant and cautious manner (and we should keep in mind that Melanchthon is only twenty-four years old), he admonishes him with the following words:

If you are a preacher of grace, then preach a true and not a fictitious grace; if grace is true, you must bear a true and not fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and

rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death and the world. (Luther’s Works, 48: 282)

“Be a sinner and sin boldly...” How these words of Luther have been used—mainly against him—down through the centuries. But there might be something in his response that is relevant to those of us charged with figuring out the role of the church in our colleges and universities. While I am reluctant to draw too many parallels between sixteenth century Wittenberg and our situation today, we do share the experience of rapid and bewildering change. Old assumptions are now questioned while new voices clamor for attention. The way forward is not always clear, but most know that defense of the status quo is not an option.

I will begin by outlining our context—the state of things in mainline higher education (our “Wittenberg” if you will) and then suggest how we might “sin boldly” and lead our schools in a manner that is at once faithful to the Christian tradition and sensitive to the needs of our world.

So what does “Wittenberg” look like? Let’s begin with our students. Some think the heartland is different from either of the coasts, but I am no longer so sure about this assumption. My evidence is anecdotal but perhaps telling. I recently taught a religion course at my Midwestern Lutheran college (Augsburg in Minneapolis) that had twenty students. Two identified themselves as Lutherans, four were Roman Catholics, two were Jewish, and one was a Muslim. The other eleven simply weren’t sure.

Religious differences aside, most of them have absorbed the ethos of a culture that, as Robert Bellah (*Habits of the Heart*) stated over twenty years ago, celebrates individualism at

the expense of the common good. As many have noted, when that ethos is translated into the world of work, employment is seen primarily as a means of private advancement rather than public contribution.

For our students, this results in an “instrumental” understanding of education. The joy of learning is secondary. Rather, education is a means to another end. The focus, reinforced by parental pressure (and everyone else), is on getting a job. And not just any job, but one that pays well. For being well-compensated allows one access to the goods and services that the market is eager to have us consume. Teachers and administrators need to be careful about being too critical of this model. It is fashionable for academics to sneer at the middle class, but we sure are quick to take their money. After all, the ranks of our student bodies are swollen with suburbanites, many of them quite affluent.

The overall issue is not that we should be disappointed because our students use their degrees to become gainfully employed. Preparation for the world of work should be a focus for our colleges and universities. The issue is the way this instrumental view of education tends to limit horizons. A good education opens up a whole new way of thinking about yourself and your world. It involves an expansion of the questions you are likely to ask as you pursue a degree. Beyond the focus on self (How much can I earn? Where can I gain power and status quickly?)—a larger picture and much bigger questions come into view: Who am I? Why am I here? What are the needs of my world? How does God fit into how I see myself and my world?

Predictably enough, our institutions tend to be very responsive to the instrumental view of education. In some cases, students are labeled as “consumers,” and curriculums and degree programs are arranged accordingly. Instead of being driven by a sense of mission grounded in the heritage of the school, market forces and the desires of the student-customer dictate the allocation of resources for teaching and learning. Our colleges and universities are vulnerable to this way of thinking because of their fragmentation and lack of focus. This story has been told elsewhere

and with much more skill and detail than is possible here. Over fifty years ago, University of California chancellor Clark Kerr (1963) described the rise of the “multiversity” and its myriad of programs designed to be attractive to the student-consumer and grant-awarding institutions and foundations. The “multiversity” stands in contrast to the “university” and its suggestion that there are “universals” or over-arching principles guiding the purpose of the school. When such universals are jettisoned (and few would deny the marked secularization of the academy in the past two centuries), pragmatic concerns overwhelm the agenda. Proponents of the liberal arts kick and scream, but they are regularly reminded that their majors do not keep the lights on or pay the salaries.

One great irony should be noted as well. While students do tend to see their education in an instrumental way, they are more receptive than ever to the big questions. Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) makes a persuasive case that the student of today cares deeply about “ultimate concerns.” This is often not expressed in terms of traditional religious concepts, though the growth of conservative and evangelical schools should not be ignored. In a way quite different from often recent generations, today’s students are asking questions about the meaning and purpose of life. When I was in college, I tended toward a state of reaction against my religious upbringing. In a sense, my religion defined me, albeit it a negative way. But many of our students today have no religious background, and they are searching for something to fill the void. They are receptive to religious claims and arguments, though they tend to be skeptical of institutional religion. The result can be described in a metaphor drawn from that classic American institution, the auto industry. As administrators and teachers, we find ourselves on the showroom floor of higher education, proudly displaying the latest models. The customer is listening politely to our pitch and saying to us: “I like what you have... but isn’t there something more?”

This “snapshot” of our Wittenberg is, at best, a synopsis of the situation that probably does not do full justice to some of the complexities

facing administrations and faculties in our individual schools. But I don't think it is a straw man either. My thirteen years experience teaching in a Lutheran college, coupled with a review of the extensive literature produced in the past twenty years, tells me that I am at least within sight of the truth. So what might it mean in our time to "sin boldly"? It is to that question we now turn.

First of all, when it comes to our religious heritage we must stop letting ourselves be defined by what we are not. As many recognize, the national media is clumsy, at best, in its attempts to cover religion. Coverage of Christianity tends toward stereotypes and is dominated by American Evangelicalism and the American Roman Catholic Church. Conservative Protestantism, which is a quite complex phenomenon, is often pictured as closely aligned with Republican politics and as a rather rigid, well-defined moral code. Catholics, on the other hand, tend to be seen as either perpetually entangled in scandal or struggling with Rome for breathing space. The result is that large segments of the American public associates religion with the alien imposition of authority. It is assumed that a "religious" school is dominated by a host of narrow-minded prohibitions which inevitably results in the curtailment of free and open discussion.

Higher education in many mainline colleges and universities has tended to respond accordingly by soft-pedaling its religious heritage. Distinctiveness is downplayed; generic values are lifted up. We embrace questions. We welcome a wide range of spiritual expressions. We will help you develop your talents and abilities so that you can find meaningful work. We aspire to be a place of "spiritual discernment." All of this is laudable. How could you be against any of it?

But it is so banal, boring, and, above all, careful. It might have been lifted from the documents of many of our institutions or... the mission statement of any public community college. Because we want the world to know that we are not Oral Roberts or Brigham Young or Liberty University, we unwittingly have allowed these institutions to define the parameters of the discussion.

Second, we need to find creative ways within our institutions to express positively what it means to affirm the Christian faith. Leadership in this area has typically been assumed by presidents, deans, and religion departments. But in the last generation the roles of each have become increasingly complicated. Few administrators or academics in our colleges are interested in simply abandoning the Christianity. Many profess a profound belief in the Christian faith. But the need to respond to a plethora of voices pleading for "equal time" as well as the demands of a pluralistic culture often lead to a blunting of distinctive Christian claims.

It is better to be wide than deep, some would say. Ironically, this may have the unintended consequence of obscuring the generosity and hospitality that flow from a deep engagement with the Christian tradition. Maybe it would be better to say that the deeper one goes in the Christian faith the wider it becomes. But it is difficult to reverse the direction. The simple reality is that distinctive Christian voices are increasingly hard to hear in mainline colleges and universities.

But there might be a different way of proceeding. Within our institutions, many of us have voices from our pasts that reflect a profound and generous view of the Christian faith. Our task is to revisit the legacies of some of these saints and mine their words for insights on how to proceed

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today. And then we must create forums within our institutions to ensure that these voices can be heard in fresh and new ways.

As an example, I would like to lift up a “saint” from my school who is not well known outside of this community. Bernhard M. Christensen served as president of Augsburg College from 1938–1962. He was one of the “hinge” figures in the history of the school as it moved from being a parochial college of a small Lutheran denomination (the Lutheran Free Church) to an accredited institution of higher learning. Christensen did not leave an extensive list of publications. But he did write several books, the best known of which is perhaps *The Inward Pilgrimage: Spiritual Classics From Augustine to Bonhoeffer* (1976), and he also preached extensively during his tenure as president. Moreover, there are many alive who remember him well (he died in 1984). A number of us at the college have been working to recover Christensen’s heritage so that it can help the school chart a course for the future. (Phil Quanbeck I, Phil Quanbeck II, and David Tiede have been especially helpful in shaping the Christensen tradition for the twenty-first century.) This work has resulted in five themes that will animate a recently established Augsburg Center for Faith and Learning, the creation of which was greatly aided by two Lilly Endowment grants intended to encourage the integration of a theological understanding of vocation into the life of the college.

All five of these animating themes exhibit concerns that were central for Christensen. While they reflect his Lutheran commitments, the themes are broadly ecumenical. The themes should be understood symphonically; they overlap and mutually reinforce each other. Later themes are foreshadowed in early ones, and ideas discussed first may also support claims discussed later on.

1. The Christian Faith Liberates Minds and Lives

At the heart of our theological proposal is the notion that we are made right with God by grace through faith. Our good works or efforts do not merit God’s love or favor. Human activity is for the sake of the neighbor and this world. These are the only constraints—the well-being of the neighbor

and the stewardship of creation. God’s love in Christ liberates us to use our minds in service to God’s world. Our expression of this freedom can take an endless variety of forms. It might entail exploring new theories in the physics or chemistry lab. It might mean writing an edgy play that challenges deeply held cultural norms. Or perhaps it will uphold norms now considered “old-fashioned” or “quaint” by a culture that is reluctant to place any restrictions on the desires of the self. It may entail a critical study of the Scriptures that attempts to locate a particular text within its social world and thereby enable a fresh interpretation. It rejects the notion of Christianity as a confining and limiting faith, something that is inherently conservative and forever guarding its flanks.

2. Diversity Is a Community Calling

In exploring this theme, I am relying on the work of Richard Hughes’s *The Vocation of Christian Scholar* (2005). This book is a thoughtful exposition on the relationship between faith and learning. The flip side of saying that we are saved by grace is the claim that we cannot save ourselves. While we are made in the image of God, we are also extraordinarily limited. As Hughes notes, our viewpoints are constrained by language, location, and history. Moreover, greed and self-interest infect all of our attempts to comprehend the world. Given our limited perceptions, Hughes asks: “Who are we to assume that other human beings from other cultures, from other periods in human history, from other political persuasions and religions may not have perceptions and understandings as fully valid as our own?” (122). He then makes this engaging and controversial claim: “This is precisely why I argue that church-related education is most deeply Christian when it reflects a radical commitment to diversity, pluralism, and genuine academic freedom and grounds that commitment in a Christian view of reality” (123).

3. Inter-faith Friendships Enrich Learning

When it comes to inter-faith relationships, the present models are not very helpful. Some

Christians assume that they possess the truth and sharing their faith simply means “delivering” this truth to those who do not embrace it. The danger of condescension is great. Others tend to regard the differences between religions as insignificant. Matters of truth are really not at stake, since we agree there is a God and everyone is free to worship God in their own way.

However, there might be another way of proceeding that avoids the pitfalls of arrogance and indifference. Bernhard Christensen had a deep respect for other religions, especially their spiritual traditions. Living in a time when the lines tended to be drawn more firmly, he displayed a breath-taking ability to make friends with people from a wide variety of religious backgrounds.

The operative word is “friendship.” Missiologist Roland Miller contends that the best way to understand another religion is not by simply knowing its history, theology, and practices but through actual friendships. He acknowledges the need to honor the “facts” of another religion. But to move beyond stereotypes we need to cultivate friendships (13–21). In other words, what if our campuses were places where we brought together people of different faiths not just for “dialogue” (a term that is overly intellectual and somewhat safe) but in order to cultivate friendship?

4. The Love of Christ Draws Us to God

There are many things implied by this theme. Christensen’s sermons evidence a strong rejection of all achievement-based religion. One of the dangers in an educational community is to think that our knowledge brings us closer to God. Members of academic communities are tempted to think that their degrees, grades, books, and papers are of ultimate significance. This theme reminds us that our identities are fundamentally not derived from what we know. We do not create who we are; we are created in the image of our Creator.

Furthermore, American forms of Christianity often have been highly experiential. In other words, they emphasize the emotional and subjective side of faith, often to the point where people

believe they are saved by their feelings or inner experiences. This theme avoids denigrating the importance of experiencing the Christian faith, but it does seek to ground that experience in the prior love of God in Christ.

5. Our Vocations Move Us into God’s World

Christensen was deeply grounded in the Lutheran tradition and spoke regularly of seeing education within the context of vocation. We need to invite our students to move beyond the one-dimensional kind of thinking that sees education as job-training and employment as a means to personal fulfillment. Our goal is to invite them into a three-dimensional realm where they see themselves called by God and sent into the world to serve the neighbor and be stewards of creation. In a one-dimensional sphere, the self and its desires set the agenda. But in this three-dimensional realm, the self is now centered by two key relationships. First, it recognizes that it has certain gifts and abilities given by the Creator. And second, it now asks about the needs of the neighbor and the world to help determine how those gifts should best be used.

SOME MAY BE WONDERING HOW THE AUGSBURG Center for Faith and Learning (ACFL) would operate within the college as a whole. A few examples might be helpful. Reflecting the concerns of the Christensen heritage, the ACFL might fund faculty research that deepens our understanding of Christian love or reveals new dimensions of the Muslim immigrant experience in America. Or perhaps it will sponsor a school-wide forum on the meaning of academic freedom in a college of the church. The ACFL might support student projects that investigate what it means to be an environmentalist and a Christian. Or it may host a faculty-staff book study on a controversial topic that has proven to be religiously divisive. It could also invite the local congressional candidates to a symposium to talk about how their faith informs their political views. The possibilities are endless, but the goal is to remind the academic community continually that matters of faith and vocation belong at the heart of

the school's agenda. These cannot be merely "private" concerns relegated to the interior life. Nor are they merely the concerns of campus ministry or the religion department.

I began by having you travel back to sixteenth century Wittenberg. Luther was absent, locked up in the Wartburg Castle. The leader of the fledgling Lutheran movement in the city, the brilliant but inexperienced Philip Melanchthon, anguished about how the Reformation ought to proceed. Luther counseled him to "sin boldly" but if you recall, he did not only say that. He also told Philip "to believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world" (LW 48:282).

I suggest that this is good advice for those charting the course of higher education in the colleges and universities of the church in the twenty-first century. Move boldly and with courage. Put a brake on the "institutional backpedaling" that seems to consume so much energy in our places of higher learning. Moreover, begin to see the tradition as a resource that can liberate and empower lives to make a difference in the world. Lift up one of your saints and construct some type of platform so that his or her voice can be heard in our time. Of course, there will be mistakes and missteps. But don't let that lead you to play it safe. For you are grounded in a deeper hope and you are guided by the One who showed mercy to sinners and radiated a love that refused to be limited by cultural conventions and boundaries. †

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film

The Social Imaginary of Arcibel's Game

Crystal Downing

MY DISGUST OVER THE NEWLY INSTITUTED \$15 luggage fee was intensified when an airline agent informed me that my suitcase, packed for the Christmas holidays, weighed three pounds over the fifty-pound limit. Fortunately, the problem was easily solved: I opened my bag and extracted Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (Harvard 2007). A bit disgruntled that I now had to tote the three pound, 880-page tome through six flights and four layovers, I decided that if I had to lift it I was going to read it. So, ignoring slimmer books I had slipped into my purse, I perused the unruly mass. There I discovered, amidst annoying redundancy and idiosyncratic punctuation, intriguing analysis that might be brought to bear on a profoundly-insightful, beautifully-constructed Argentine film: *Arcibel's Game* [*El Juego de Arcibel*, Dir. Alberto Lecchi, 2003].

Set in a fictional South American country called Miranda, *Arcibel's Game* focuses on an unassuming, nondescript man, Arcibel Alegria, who writes a column on chess for a major newspaper in the state capital. When one of his columns, about pawns overpowering the king, is published next to an article about Miranda's dictator, Arcibel is thrown into prison as a political agitator—even though it was his editor who situated the column and added a statement about the “feeling of hope” that “followed in Miranda.”

After twenty years in prison, Arcibel is given a cellmate: an illiterate drug-addict called Pablo. Frustrated in his attempts to teach Pablo how to read and play chess, Arcibel invents a game to aid in the process. He draws a map of Miranda on their cell floor and writes war “situation” cards, to be picked from a pile during each player's turn. The cards illustrate potential problems that pawns/peons must surmount as they attempt to

capture the king/dictator. Although Arcibel's goal is merely to train a suitable chess opponent, Pablo escapes from prison and applies the moves he learned from Arcibel's game to instigate an actual revolution that overthrows Miranda's dictator. Ironically then, Arcibel, incarcerated for unintentional revolutionary messages embedded within a chess column, unintentionally ends up instigating a revolution through chess.

But it would do disservice to this fascinating film to leave it at that. In Charles Taylor's terms, *Arcibel's Game* is about changing the “social imaginary.” In *A Secular Age*, Taylor outlines how European culture changed from a medieval world view, in which a universe without God's intervention was unthinkable, to a secular one in which God's direct intervention is unthinkable. He relates this difference to the social imaginary, which he defines as “the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings”: “[O]ften not expressed in theoretical terms, it is carried in images, stories, legends, etc.”

Taylor's “etc.” might include the word “games.” Indeed, *Arcibel's Game* establishes a direct correlation between the game Arcibel teaches Pablo and the social imaginary behind the revolution. In the film's opening shot, we see a brown mosaic of six-sided tiles over which is drawn some kind of outline. Only later—much later—do we discover that those hexagonal brown tiles cover the floor of Arcibel's cell, where he has mapped out Miranda and its major cities in order to teach Pablo the theory behind chess. By the end of the film, of course, we see that Arcibel has taught Pablo how to *imagine* a Miranda without a dictator, a Miranda in which pawns can corner a king.

More importantly, the film establishes that Arcibel's game has affected more than Pablo; it

has shaped a new *social* imaginary—a shared way of thinking about political surroundings. This becomes clear as revolutionaries start spray-painting hexagons on walls and streets as part of their protest. Note the relevance of Taylor’s comments:

What exactly is involved, when a theory penetrates and transforms the social imaginary? Well for the most part, people take up, improvise, or are inducted into new practices. These are made sense of by the new outlook, the one first articulated in the theory; this outlook is the context that gives sense to the practices. And the new understanding... begins to define the contours of their world, and can eventually come to count as the taken-for-granted shape of things.... (175–76)

Like the taken-for-granted shape of the hexagon, *Arcibel’s Game* reinforces the idea of a social imaginary by refusing to pander to the Hollywood cliché in which an autonomous hero, “who doesn’t play by the rules,” saves the day, either by leading a revolution through outrageously courageous exploits, or, more often than not, by overthrowing the enemy all by himself. In contrast, *Arcibel’s Game* is not about individualized heroics. Pablo plays by the rules of the game that Arcibel taught him. In fact, after he escapes from prison, we never see Pablo lead anything; we only hear of his moves—and of his death—from a government official who interrogates Arcibel in prison.

The interrogation occurs because Arcibel’s name is repeatedly invoked by the revolutionaries—who have no idea that the actual Arcibel is merely a feeble old man. Indeed, when they overrun the prison where Arcibel has lived for thirty years, the revolutionaries—chanting “Arcibel! Arcibel!”—fail to notice the white-haired chess-player that walks out among them. As though in illustration of Charles Taylor’s point, the film establishes that Arcibel’s game, as part of the social imaginary, instigates more change than can Arcibel or Pablo as autonomous human beings.

Arcibel’s Game, in fact, challenges the entire notion of human autonomy. It does so in a subplot

that would fascinate even those who dislike political intrigue. Early in the film, viewers are introduced to Arcibel as a feckless young man who has just finished a chess column titled “A Cornered Black King.” After his editor appropriates and changes the column, Arcibel walks city streets alone and attends a movie alone, his solitude exacerbated by a vicious ex-wife who refuses to let him see their daughter, Rosalinda. Entering his apartment alone, he dreams of a luminous teenage girl to whom he gave popcorn intended for Rosalinda. But even in the dream, Arcibel does not achieve human connection, turning his face away when the girl tries to kiss him. The dream is interrupted by police who beat, then interrogate Arcibel, finally sending him off to prison despite his protests that he is not at all “political.” We see that he connects neither with humans nor with causes.

In prison, Arcibel meets numerous men that *are* political: revolutionaries who failed to change the social imaginary. But he keeps himself emotionally walled off from them, symbolized throughout the film with a wall motif. When Arcibel first enters jail, an inmate in an adjacent cell, Dr. Palacios, attempts to tap out messages on their shared wall, but Arcibel makes no effort to understand. Later, on the way to the latrine, Palacios tells Arcibel how they can play chess by tapping codes on the wall, but Arcibel gives up during his first attempt.

Reinforcing Arcibel’s self-imposed emotional isolation is a scene soon to follow. Called to the prison’s visiting room, Arcibel waits behind a wall of glass, somewhat baffled as to who might want to see him. When a stranger takes the visitor seat, we learn that guards had confused Arcibel with a prisoner who has the same last name. The scene immediately cuts from the clear glass of the visiting booth to an image of the prison yard shot through blurry and cracked glass, as though to comment on Arcibel’s view of reality. We discover that the camera is looking through the cracked glasses of an emotionally-unstable inmate who tells Arcibel, “You are like me: nobody visits you. That means you haven’t been a good person out there.” The unstable inmate has been dubbed Judas because he betrayed his fellow revolutionaries, putting his own self-interest above both friendship and

politics. To cement the parallel, the film has Judas say "I don't believe in God," echoing an earlier scene when Arcibel answers someone's question "Do you believe in God?" with an apathetic "No." Arcibel, like Judas, has walled himself off from vertical as well as horizontal relationships.

Following this scene is a baffling interpolation: in a brief take we see Arcibel's beautiful five-year-old daughter bathed in sunlight as she watches an outdoor basketball game. The shot then cuts back to a view of Arcibel through Judas's blurry and cracked lens—as though to suggest that something beautiful is trying to invade and subvert Arcibel's blurry and cracked vision of reality. Indeed, in the next scene, Arcibel starts making connections, if even obliquely: he agrees to a wall-tapping chess match with Dr. Palacios, and he brings excitement to scores of inmates when he initiates a game of roulette in the prison laundry room, writing numbers on the rolling agitator of an industrial washing machine.

These human connections—mediated through games—are followed by another interpolation, once again filled with fresh air and sunlight: Arcibel dreams of the luminous teenage girl, but this time, rather than turning away, he plays chess with her. When the camera returns us to the jail yard filled with political prisoners, the shot briefly cuts to an image of little Rosalinda watching basketball, followed by a shot of activities in the yard through Judas's broken glasses. This montage of radically different images suggests that different views of reality are competing for mastery within Arcibel's psyche.

The real change begins when Arcibel reads a book from the prison library called *Zen Buddhism: The Art of Meditation in Front of the Wall*. Upon finishing the book, Arcibel faces his cell wall, both literally and figuratively, dissolving its barrier in his mind. We are given an extreme close-up on his eyes facing the wall, and as the shot slowly pulls back, we discover that Arcibel is much older: a clever way to communicate not only the lapse of many years but also that Arcibel has maintained his practice of meditation into his middle age.

After the extreme close-up on Arcibel's meditating eyes, we never again view the prison through the cracked and blurry lens of the Judas

glasses. Instead we soon see—through glass as clear as a camera lens—something beautiful. Arcibel is called to the visiting chamber, the first time since he was incorrectly called sixteen years before. Through the wall of glass, he views a lovely young woman: his daughter, now grown. Rosalinda tells Arcibel that she had been told her father died with the national basketball team in a plane crash, and we slowly realize that the earlier dreamlike interpolations of the young Rosalinda watching basketball reflect a significant cinematic technique: crosscutting, in which a film juxtaposes shots of simultaneous actions in different locations. Thus, while Arcibel was serving his time in prison and not connecting with anyone, except through games, his young daughter was attending basketball games in an attempt to connect with him. Only as an adult, when she starts working for Arcibel's former newspaper as a crossword and horoscope writer, does Rosalinda discover the actual fate of her father.

She continues to visit him in prison, and at one point we see Arcibel raise his hand in an attempt to touch Rosalind's fingers resting on the glass between them. As he leaves the visiting booth, Arcibel asks the guard, "When did they put in that glass?" We are as baffled by the question as the guard, who explains that the glass has "always" been there. But with a bit of reflection, we realize that Arcibel has just made a tremendous breakthrough: he finally feels connected enough to someone that he notices, and cares about, the physical barrier between them. He has come a long way from the blurry, cracked vision of the Judas glasses.

The connection Arcibel makes with Rosalinda ties together the two thematic strands of the film: the emotional—Arcibel's breaking down of emotional walls—and the political, revolutionaries literally breaking down the walls of Arcibel's prison. For Rosalinda is key to both. In her crossword clues and horoscope prophecies she inserts messages of love to her father, who has access to the newspaper in prison. Later, when the Arcibel-educated Pablo escapes from prison and leads a revolt, she uses the same means to communicate hidden messages to the revolutionaries—something revealed only at the end of the film.

But the film inserts several clues—like the clues Rosalinda inserts in her crosswords—that point to her political involvement. Immediately after we see a follower of Che Guevara punch a government official who has called him a “former revolutionary,” we see Rosalinda punch a government official who refuses to pardon her innocent father. In other words, she acts like a revolutionary. Later, we get repeated close-ups of Rosalinda’s photo on Arcibel’s cell wall, indicating that she will be key to the wall’s dissolving—both emotionally and politically. Her imaginative use of crosswords and horoscopes, then, ultimately contributes to a change not only in Arcibel’s imagination but also in the social imaginary.

Significantly, the film establishes that Arcibel’s relationship with his daughter evolves at the same time as his slowly-developing relationship with Pablo, who ignites the revolution. In fact, Arcibel’s first conversation with his new cell-mate occurs after we see Pablo’s shadow on the wall next to the photograph of Rosalinda—as though to say that Pablo will join Rosalinda in breaking down the literal and figurative barriers surrounding Arcibel. When Pablo asks Arcibel why

he is in prison, the latter’s answer foreshadows the game that will teach Pablo how to change the social imaginary: “A bad move in a senseless country.” In the next scene, Arcibel teaches Pablo the good moves of the prison roulette game, its political potential symbolized when the prison television soon broadcasts the fall of the Berlin wall. Indeed, when Arcibel helps Pablo break out of prison, he and the Che Guevara disciple cover up the noise by repeatedly slamming the lid of the washing machine that served as their roulette wheel. The game contributes to revolution.

Pablo is able to break out because he has broken through Arcibel’s emotional barrier, having assimilated not only the rules of his games but also the insights of his philosophy. This becomes

evident when we see Pablo and Arcibel sitting side by side in their cell, both cross-legged, facing the wall in meditation. Significantly, the scene is shot in chiaroscuro, a heavy shadow dividing the wall in half. We see the men from behind, such that one figure is framed by a square of black shadow on the wall, the other framed by a square of light from the hall—making them look like two chess pieces on the dark and light squares of a board.

After breaking out of prison, Pablo first visits Rosalinda and tells her “I am everything your father taught me to be.” Significantly, we never

see Pablo again in the film, except when Arcibel once again dreams of the luminous teenage girl. In this dream, Arcibel holds the girl in his arms, but then his dream pans from her to an image of Rosalinda, then of Pablo, then the Che Guevara disciple, then Dr. Palacios, and back to the teenage girl. We see that Arcibel’s personal imagination had to embrace other people before his game could effectively change the social imaginary.

Arcibel’s Game, then, is about love. It implies that revolutions not based on

love—for the common people as well as for justice and equity—are not worth having. Arcibel implies as much when he tells his interrogator at the end of the film, “If those who want to change everything act like those who want nothing changed, they’d better stop playing.” It is as though he has read moral philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev, who states in *Slavery and Freedom* (1944), “The horror which is associated with revolution certainly does not belong to the ends which it usually pursues; these ends are commonly freedom, justice, equality, brotherhood, and the like exalted values. The horror is associated with the means it employs.”

Fortunately, thanks to Arcibel, Pablo employs means quite different from those of Miranda’s oppressors; he follows different rules of the game.

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As Arcibel's interrogator reveals, "Pablo started something like clubs in the shanty towns... gathered the street kids, taught them to sit like you are [facing the wall] and play the game.... They didn't call it Zen, but... the intelligence reports talked about a religious sect." Pablo, in other words, worked at a grassroots level to change the social imaginary, helping the common people to lovingly imagine—through Arcibel's game—a Miranda without corruption and abuse. The process was slow, but as a dying revolutionary put it, "Arcibel made us good men because he taught us to face life with dignity." Good men, the film implies, are driven to revolution by love.

Like the best of films, then, *Arcibel's Game* delivers in visually-stimulating images what the most astute cultural theorists often deliver in mentally-exhausting prose. Less exhausting than many, Charles Taylor teaches us how "a set of practices in the course of their slow development

and ramification gradually changed their meaning for people, and hence helped to constitute a new social imaginary." In the case of *Arcibel's Game*, the new social imaginary "all started with a newspaper article," as the final interrogator puts it. Significantly, the filmmakers named the newspaper for which Arcibel wrote his chess article *El Mundo* [*The World*]. For, as Taylor notes, the result of a new social imaginary can be "transformation . . . of the world." ♣

Crystal Downing is the author of two books on the relationship between faith and culture: *Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Palgrave 2004) and *How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith* (IVP 2006). Her essays on film have won both national and international awards.

THE HARMONICA PLAYER

He blows on a silver bird,
walking around,
thinking in circles,
not in lines like most of us.
I hear him play in the long southern night
and wonder if he is a young
and dreaming boy, or an old, tired man
shaking the house inside himself
the only way he can.

Marion Schoeberlein

fiction

The Gospel According to Biff

Robert D. Vega

Christopher Moore. *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal*. New York: HarperCollins, 2002.

ATTEMPTS WITHIN POPULAR CULTURE TO humanize Jesus Christ have been as varied as the many artworks depicting a laughing Jesus; South Park creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker's animated short featuring Jesus wrestling Santa Claus over the true meaning of Christmas; the hippie revolutionary of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar*; Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ*; and, of course, the horrifically tortured Messiah of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*.

All of these popular works capture some aspects of Christ's humanity, whether it is his sense of humor, the ambivalence with regard to his mission on Earth, or the very real physical torments he suffered. Few of them, however, have managed to portray as complete, as realistic, as *human* a portrait of Jesus Christ as does Christopher Moore's comic novel *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal*.

While the exploration of Christ's humanity is the primary focus of the novel, a second theme, also vividly and compellingly pursued, is the strength of the women in Christ's life. This review will focus on these two themes in particular.

The novel's narrator is Jesus' childhood best friend, whose given name of Levi is usually supplanted by the nickname Biff, the "slang word for a smack upside the head, something that my mother said I required at least daily from an early age" (9). Biff has been resurrected in the present day to write a new gospel that will fill in missing details about Jesus' life. The relationship between Biff and the angel Raziel (a recurring character in Moore's fiction) is a source of much humor.

Biff first met Jesus when the fellow six-year-old was entertaining his younger brother by resurrecting a dead lizard. James crushed the lizard with a rock, Jesus then popped the lizard in his mouth, brought it out alive, and the process repeated itself. Biff was entranced by the procedure: "I watched the lizard die three more times before I said, 'I want to do that too.' The Savior removed the lizard from his mouth and said, 'Which part?'" (8)

We soon learn that the resurrected Biff is unaware of what happened at the end of Jesus' time on earth. We do not know the circumstances, but we do know that he somehow dies prior to the crucifixion. The angel Raziel spends much of his time keeping Biff from learning anything about Christianity or modern religion in general, so as not to taint Biff's new gospel. Raziel essentially keeps him a prisoner in their hotel room, where the angel says Biff is to stay until his gospel is complete.

Eventually, however, Biff discovers the Gideon Bible in a dresser drawer. He is only able to sneak glances at it from time to time in the bathroom. But, over the course of the novel, he is appalled to learn that all mention of him has been erased from the story; so too is he baffled by the Evangelists' near-complete disregard for Jesus' life prior to his thirtieth year. Biff sees his role as twofold: fill in the blanks of Jesus' life, and fill in his own role altogether.

Moore, through Biff, quickly establishes the motif of the humanization of Jesus. Biff tells the reader that Jesus' "name was Joshua. Jesus is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *Yeshua*, which is Joshua. Christ is not a last name. It's the Greek for *messiah*, a Hebrew word meaning anointed" (8). Biff usually refers to him as "Josh." Furthermore, in a particularly poignant scene when Joshua callously

tells his father Joseph (depicted throughout the novel as a greatly respected man) not to count on living to an old age, the carpenter tells Biff, "You go with Joshua. He needs a friend to teach him to be human. Then I can teach him to be a man" (17).

In many ways, Joshua and Biff's relationship is similar to that of a famous duo in literature. Biff often acts as Sancho Panza to Joshua's Don Quixote. Although he is often the source of comic relief, Biff is forever looking out for Joshua, who frequently ignores everyday realities as well as the dangerous consequences of miraculous events that happen around him. When Joshua's face appears on the flatbread baked throughout Nazarene in preparation for Passover (a violation of the prohibition of graven images), it is Biff who suggests that Mary cut her son's hair to disguise him while Biff and Joshua's brothers run through the town yelling that Moses' face has appeared as a Passover miracle (19–20). When a giant cobra follows the ten-year-old Joshua home—his mother Mary calmly accepting the event as part of prophecy—it is Biff who tries to make Joshua aware of the dangers of keeping a poisonous snake as a pet (21–22).

The incident of the snake leads to the novel's second striking theme: the presence of so many strong women. The first section of the book includes the enormously vibrant and appealing character Mary of Magdala, known as Maggie. We first encounter Maggie as Joshua and Biff are leading the snake back to the fields where they found it. Joshua accidentally knocks over Jakan, the son of a Pharisee. Jakan, a bully and lout, accuses Joshua of consorting with demons and has his friends grab hold of Joshua so Jakan can rub dung on his face. Maggie steps out of her house and mocks Jakan, walking up to the cobra and petting it. She asks Jakan if he really wants to appear the fool by going to the elders and claiming that a simple snake is a demon. Embarrassed, Jakan withdraws (25).

Biff, who soon falls in love with Maggie, knows that while she holds him in deep affection, she herself has fallen in love with Joshua. In describing Biff's love for Maggie and her love for Joshua, Moore writes movingly:

I don't know if now, having lived and died the life of a man, I can write about

little-boy love, but remembering it now, it seems the cleanest pain I've known... At night I would lie awake, listening to my brothers' breathing against the silence of the house, and in my mind's eye I could see her eyes like blue fires in the dark. Exquisite torture. I wonder now if Joshua didn't make her whole life like that. Maggie, she was the strongest of us all. (26)

The friendship between the three children grows, and Maggie joins with Biff in protecting Joshua as best they can as he strives to find meaning for his life.

Joshua's struggle to find his calling in the world illuminates both his human and divine aspects. Joshua seeks always and in all ways to learn what his role is on earth. From questioning the Pharisees to discussions with Biff on topics as varied as mercy and lust, Joshua displays the keenest sense of curiosity. He is driven by a fundamental question: Is he the Messiah and, if so, what does that really *mean*? Eventually, Joshua meets with an ancient rabbi in Jerusalem who suggests he seek out the three Magi who visited him as a newborn. Joshua's mother tells him that one of the Magi lived north of Antioch. So, in their thirteenth year, Joshua and Biff head for the East.

Scholars and theologians have commented on the similarities between Christ's teachings and a variety of Eastern philosophical tenets. Moore takes this idea and runs with it. Joshua and Biff's time with all three of the Magi is similar in form: Joshua studies deep philosophical topics, while Biff learns a variety of useful, often humorous skills (poisons, disguises, the *Kama Sutra*). Joshua learns much of what it means to be human, as well as what forms divinity can take. For example, Joshua's time with the first magus, Balthasar, is spent studying Taoism—in particular the three jewels of compassion, moderation, and humility (153). Meanwhile Biff, ever practical, learns as much as possible to keep the pair safe and healthy on their travels.

The time spent with Balthasar also introduces a group of remarkably strong female characters. Balthasar lives with eight Chinese concubines.

These women, in addition to keeping Balthasar's house and taking turns sharing his bed, are highly educated and eminently independent women. They instruct Joshua and (especially) Biff in all manner of topics. It is difficult to describe the women in detail without giving away too much of the story. As is the case with most of the female characters in the novel, the Chinese concubines are admirable, likeable characters. In no way passive or victimized, these women are powerful operators with their own desires and agendas.

The last section of the novel covers Joshua and Biff's return to Galilee and Joshua's ministry. The gathering of the Apostles, the spread of Joshua's message, and his trial all are illuminated by Moore's moving yet funny prose. Maggie comes into her own in this section. She works closely with Biff to do anything in her power to save Joshua from the Pharisees, despite being married to one herself. While most readers will know how this novel must end, Moore creates a surprising yet satisfying climax.

A book review that gives away too much of the story is a cardinal sin. And, for brevity's sake, it is impossible to discuss more than a small fraction of the novel's multitude of outstanding scenes and dialog. Fans of Christopher Moore, if asked to recommend one of his books, almost invariably recommend *Lamb* first, for good reason. Moore's fictional exploration of Jesus Christ's life prior to his ministry is a humorous, moving, and thought-provoking novel. †

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music

Déjà Vu Bop Shoo-Wop

J. D. Buhl

*He commanded [us] to teach [our] children...
that they should set their hope in God,
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments;
and that they should not be like their ancestors,
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
a generation whose heart was not steadfast,
whose spirit was not faithful to God.*

Psalm 78: 5-8

ON SATURDAY, 2 AUGUST 2008, TWO firebombs exploded in Santa Cruz, California. These bombs were intended to kill faculty members involved in research on the University of California campus there. One bomb set aflame the home of a neuroscientist; the other blew up a car in a researcher's driveway. Authorities immediately classified the acts as domestic terrorism. The first incident constitutes attempted homicide because the family was home when the bomb detonated.

Earlier in the week, a flier had appeared in a downtown coffeehouse identifying thirteen UCSC scientists as "animal abusers." It provided their home addresses, telephone numbers, and photos. "We know where you live; we know where you work; we will never back down until you end your abuse," the tract read.

It's sick and sad that we still have angry students emulating the Weather Underground. One can expect a Dick Cheney to put power and control before any supposed value of human life, but presumably hip young people copping the same attitude is just asinine. And infuriating. Haven't these kids read any history—or even back issues of *Rolling Stone*? "These unconscionable acts put the researchers, their families—including their children—and their neighbors in grave

danger," declared Chancellor George Blumenthal. "These are odious assaults on individuals and on the principles of free inquiry by which we live."

Unconscionable acts. Odious assaults. Innocents in grave danger. Does anyone else hear John Lennon singing "When you talk about destruction, don't you know that you can count me out"?

The summer of 2008 marked the fortieth anniversary of "Revolution," a beloved Nike commercial recorded by the Beatles twice, once in a hilariously inappropriate 1950s-style arrangement for the "White Album," and as the better-known screaming B-side of "Hey Jude." Lennon's desire to be counted out of the unconscionable aspects of the anticipated revolution was met with derision by those who imagined themselves its leaders. While "Revolution" is rightly regarded as John's coming to terms with his political responsibilities as an artist—and beginning to do something about them—it is a song of refusal and not one of instigation. "You say you want a revolution," it begins dialectically. What might this revolution consist of? If it's for the benefit of people with "minds that hate," if it's modeled after such tyrants as Chairman Mao, if it doesn't have at least an idea of how to care for those it wishes to liberate, then he didn't want anything to do with it.

Let us remember that John was not yet the most compassionate of Beatles. It was George whose guitar gently wept as he considered the sad state of humanity—one can imagine Lennon's axe snickering. The irony, humor, skepticism, and quick-to-judge sarcasm that made Lennon such a hero were the very characteristics that did not feel so good when directed at the Left itself. In 1968, John was asking necessary questions for which he did not yet have answers. He wondered if the revolutionaries did. His query was regarded as a

“betrayal,” “a lamentable petty bourgeois cry of fear,” and a song that Hubert Humphrey could have sung. Lennon researcher Jon Wiener thinks that, more than anything, what aroused radicals’ anger was that Lennon “took these genuine problems of revolutionary morality and strategy as an excuse for abandoning politics altogether and substituting in its place a quest for personal liberation: ‘free your mind instead.’”

What Lennon really meant was, “the only way to ensure a lasting peace of any kind is to change people’s minds.” The “sick heads” who have ruined every previous social movement would surely come to the fore again. “As far as overthrowing something... I want to know what you’re going to do *after* you’ve knocked it down. They don’t look further than their noses.” Yet he adds a clearly audible “in” to the “count me out” declaration on the shoo-wop version. “I put in both because I wasn’t sure.” Lennon’s subsequent identification with the radical Left would result in the “horrendous protest epics” on his 1972 album *Some Time in New York City*: a clumsy *mea culpa* for his earlier ambivalence. “The politics were witless and the live jams mindless,” wrote John Swenson. “After John’s ideological flip-flops of the previous years (from the Maharishi to ‘peace’ to primal therapy, each embraced as an absolute Answer), it was hard to take his new political commitments seriously.”

That hint of distrust is key.

ALSO IN THE SUMMER OF 2008, THE FILM *CSNY/Déjà Vu* opened in select theaters. This documentary by Neil Young and television journalist Mike Cerre pivots on the issue of distrust and whether musicians and other artists have any right to ask questions of anyone in power—or even of their audience. Far from a typical concert film, Cerre returns from Iraq and imbeds himself in Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young’s 2006 “Freedom of Speech Tour.” Inspired by Young’s current record *Living with War* and occasioned by the war we’re still living with, the tour took off intending to give voice to those who wish to count themselves out of mindless, planless, hateful destruction. It is clear from the stage visuals featured on screen that the band wanted

to do this while honoring and advocating for the families most affected by such violence. The film shows band members campaigning, connecting with Gold Star Mothers, Vets4Vets, Military Families Against the War, and other organizations and individuals with something at stake. It is CSNY who display the faces of the thousand-fold American dead every night in every city, while the government secretly sends them home in nameless, flag-draped boxes, not even allowing next of kin to view or receive their remains.

The various levels of outrage and acceptance the rockers run into make for great viewing. They get as many middle fingers as they do pats on the back, as many screams of ecstasy as shouts of anger, and nearly as many boos (especially in the South and Midwest) as they do cheers. Neil’s new songs are no more sophisticated than Lennon’s *Some Time* diatribes; in fact, their bluntness is even more offensive. Such attacks as “Shock and Awe” and “Let’s Impeach the President” insist that art cannot always afford to be “artistic”; it must sometimes appear as obvious as that which it opposes. The other members contribute songs thirty or forty years old that continue to express the appropriate dread, hope, and fierce love of truth—and elicit exciting guitar interplay between the four principals.

Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young’s reunion (its third since the dawn of the millennium) has a purpose beyond money or nostalgia. These four distinct personalities believe in their roles as artists. They are to carry the news, air the secrets, ask the questions, and provide the sing-alongs that will edify a community of listeners and send them home feeling less alone in their convictions. Brushing off the simple-mindedness heaped upon rock artists with a conscience, the “Freedom of Speech Tour” was interested in just that—expressing an opinion counter to the official line. Its resulting document upholds this principle of free inquiry far better than the television and radio detractors who appear in it.

If no one says they want a revolution anymore, perhaps that is because they don’t know what one would look like. Before the recent firebombings, “masked demonstrators” attempted a home invasion at the residence of another UCSC scientist.

Masked demonstrators?! Play “Revolution”—loud. You can almost hear the song’s refusal to give revolutionary cred to anyone hiding behind a mask. “If you want peace,” Lennon said in 1968, “you won’t get it with violence. Please tell me one militant revolution that worked.”

We cannot. Each violent revolution in history has sought to replace one corrupt, self-serving government with another. Lennon’s acuity was echoed by Richard Foster in 1985’s *The Challenge of the Disciplined Life: Christian Reflections on Money, Sex & Power*. Regarding the “powers and principalities” of this world, those forces that are themselves corruption and self-service, Foster wrote that they are the enemy. “The failure is to understand that the real battle has more to do with the powers of greed, vested interest, and egomania than with actual persons and structures of government.” “You tell me it’s the institution,” Lennon sings, “well, you know . . .” Foster completes his thought with, “we must focus our attention on both the institution *and* the spirituality of the institution.” Lennon saw that the spirituality of

the institution and the incipient revolution both stunk. Such insight was unwelcome at the time and is apparently nonexistent in our own.

So “Old hippies” endure ridicule so that a new generation of idealists can fail at the same idiotic equation: violence equals peace, or the taking of life demonstrates that the taking of life is wrong. Whether it’s Iraq or Vietnam, capital punishment or legalized torture, the SLA or some new rodent liberation front, that equation has yet to produce any compelling results. John Lennon imagined it never would, and he and Yoko took to bed to make love and not war. Neil and his compatriots know it never will, and they took to the road to make music. ♣

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FOUR SONNETS ON MEMORY

1.

My eyes, my ears, recall a frozen bit
and try to animate its stolid dumb
rigidity. Events return imperfect. Some
are merely happenings of love or wit,
united opposition, or the split
of intent and design which made the sum
of our two integers seem overcome
by strains diverse integrities transmit.

There is more of her personality
in sentences she underlined in books
than in my fixed remembrance of her.
I know the past but miss reality;
then were the words, the gestures, and the looks;
gallant and shy they were, alive they were.

2.

“For me to live is Christ” — for her as well,
and my remembering must not forget
the purpose of her actions. She would let
her personal world stall — fade — repel
the most intense demands of earth or hell
if some small claim of truth or love upset
the traffic of events. Her font was wet
by tears which baptized time in which they fell.

My memory is not a fit embrace
to hold a living soul or even my
experiences of her, yet I know
her pulse and nature better than her face,
explaining who she was and how and why:
for her to live was Christ, and she lived so.

3.

When I remember her, it is the same
as when I loved her while she was away.
The isolate emotion finds no play,
no love response to calling her by name,
no unanticipated move, no game
of skill, no lively fear of my dismay
at her response, no hope for disarray
in plans, no amplifying of my claims.

Desire becomes a suffocating bier
without anticipation—and an ash;
remembering becomes an interlude
begun by present thinking in the here
and done for present reasons as I thrash,
beating for forgotten certitude.

4.

Ending when the world comes to its end,
our solitary ends become discrete
additions to God's living, and complete
the pattern which his cosmic acts intend.

The lengths of action past and now extend
in endless future, yet the brooding feet
which crushed yesterday's snow and felt the street
real and hard are gone and footsteps end.

We live eternal in the mind of God
who came, was born on earth and died in time
and is remembered as a mystery.
Yet faith accepts through time and on earth's sod
the stones of earth, the sand of earth and lime
which fit together as a history.

Terence Y. Mullins

From Libertarianism to Authoritarianism

Robert Benne

BARACK OBAMA WAS CALIFORNIA'S PRESIDENTIAL favorite this fall by a long shot. But surprisingly, Proposition 8, which banned gay marriage, passed by 52–48 in this socially liberal state. The same sort of ban passed in Florida and Arizona.

On one hand, it seems like social conservatives are winning the culture war. But Proposition 8's passage led to a campaign of vituperation and calumny that was one of the most intimidating reactions to a lost election that I have witnessed. There were mean-spirited attacks on the Mormon Church, which supported Proposition 8, and a tremendous campaign to dislodge Rick Warren, who also supported the Proposition, from offering a prayer at the Obama inauguration. No doubt, proponents of Proposition 8 will be labeled "extremists," (regardless of the fact that they were defending a social pattern that has been with us for thousands of years), and, of course, the courts will weigh in again to reverse the will of the people

This continued agitation for the right of "free choice" in marital matters strikes a seemingly libertarian social posture. That will be followed by the courts finding the "right" to marry whomever one wishes in the Constitution, or, more likely, in their own legal philosophies. Then an interesting move will take place. The courts, followed or led by state or federal legislatures, will decide that recognition of homosexual marriage is mandatory for other social institutions. Actions that were once justified by appealing to libertarian notions will then be protected by authoritarian means. For example, the Massachusetts Supreme Court acted in exactly this way with regard to the recognition of homosexual unions. Following that decision, the state required all social service agencies that provided adoption services

to offer those services to homosexual couples, even when the agencies' moral codes prohibited that. Catholic adoption services were forced to close down because they would not abide by the Court's coercive rules. No right of free choice there—rather, authoritarian suppression of those rights. One could elaborate many more examples of this process. For example, the close call the Boy Scouts of America had when their right to set standards for their own leadership was under fire legally.

"Choice" is further diminished by widespread "shaming" of those who disagree with such "protection." Californians who speak out publicly on these matters are often intimidated by loud denunciation. Dissenters to the newly protected behaviors are called "bigots" and "homophobes." They are charged with being "anti-gay," when in reality they are "pro-traditional marriage" and may support gay rights in other sectors of social life.

Though we aren't there yet in the United States, even speaking against homosexual conduct has been deemed "hate speech" by government agencies in Canada and some Scandinavian countries. A movement that once called for tolerance became intolerant once it got its way legally. In those countries the full weight of the law falls upon social conservatives who believe in traditional marital arrangements. It remains to be seen whether America will honor its commitment to the free exercise of religion in these matters.

Take another hot-button issue—abortion—and notice the same trajectory. First, unfettered choice in "reproductive matters" is demanded, a seemingly libertarian claim (even though abortion snuffs out all the future "choices" of a nascent human being). Social conservatives, believing that choices should be sharply lim-

ited if choice means the killing of nascent life, have been successful in erecting some minimal restraints on abortion—parental notification, waiting periods, banning of “partial birth abortion,” and making it illegal to transport minors across state lines for the procedure. However, we soon will have before Congress the Freedom of Choice Act, which, if enacted in its present form, will sweep away all the restraints that were painstakingly erected over thirty years. But the bill doesn’t stop there. It will require medical doctors and institutions who receive any sort of federal money to honor the newly enacted right by performing abortions for all who request it. No conscience clause. Doctors and hospitals will have to do what is demanded of them by a new law that protects the practice of abortion. Either do what is required or leave your profession or close your doors. Libertarian pleas for choice turn into authoritarian suppression of choice.

A list of other social behaviors favored by the secular liberal elite are good candidates for similar trajectories. Physician-assisted suicide, embryonic stem cell research, the prescription of abortion-inducing contraceptive drugs, and offering fertility treatment for whoever desires it may well make their way from choice to protected behaviors.

Social conservatives have seen many of the laws and cultural patterns that they believe are anchored in God’s will or the natural law swept away in the last fifty years. Some of those laws and patterns were rightfully consigned to oblivion; racist laws, for example, were certainly not anchored in God’s will or the natural law and needed to be swept away. But others now under contention cannot be so easily dismissed and dispensed with. Yet the tables are now being turned. Liberals are justifying their favored behaviors by appealing to choice and then, once established, protecting them in an authoritarian way. Their disfavored behaviors are increasingly put under government control.

Perhaps what we need is a return to the old fashioned liberalism that invited real diversity and was willing—within limits—to tolerate beliefs and behaviors of which it disapproved, as well as to allow real dissent from those behaviors and beliefs it favored. Social conservatives might welcome such a liberalism. ♣

Robert Benne is Director of the Roanoke College Center for Religion and Society.

pop culture

Answering Adama's Question

Zachary Wilson

WE LIVE IN A WORLD OF MANY NARRATIVES. Stories anchor our identities. These narratives compete, intertwine, change, or seek to change each other. As Christians we believe that the biblical story is the chief narrative to which all else is anchored—the norming norm. But there are an enormous number of competing narratives, and if narratives affect each other, we must expect our understanding of the biblical narrative to be affected by these competitors.

Most of the religious thought produced in American culture does not come from the biblical narrative—or any narrative that fits the typical rubrics of religion—but comes from popular culture. Some of America's holiest words are “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Ask American parents what their deepest desire is for their children and nine times out of ten they will say something like: “I just want them to be happy.” That's a religious profession and not a biblical one. Or look at a US dollar bill; see the *e pluribus unum*—out of diversity, unity? What a religious aspiration—an inspiring notion, perhaps more biblical than the pursuit of happiness but one that we frequently fail to meet as a nation. This is a religious text on a religious document. The pursuit of happiness and cash money are also defining religious narratives in American life.

Our government is not the only producer of religious narrative for American culture. Disney/ABC outproduces the government in religious content and influence—and certainly outdoes the Lutheran church. My family and I recently stayed in one of the Hilton Hotels (what pop-culture icon pops into your mind when I mention that one? OK, stop thinking about Paris) while participating in a family wedding. The hotel provided the Disney Channel and within the first half hour of

our stay, the influence of one of its narratives on my daughter's life was a done deal. She watched the *Little Einsteins* while we were unpacking and became completely captivated. In this animated show, four ethnically diverse friends travel around the world performing various missions that seem inane to adults (rescuing all the farm animals from the ocean, for instance) but are the height of childhood logic. The *Little Einsteins* theme song is now part of our family songbook right alongside *Children of the Heavenly Father*. If we're even going to begin to talk about ourselves being “Children of the Heavenly Father,” we have to know what the Disney Channel says about who we are. You don't have to be happy about this reality, but you deny it at your peril.

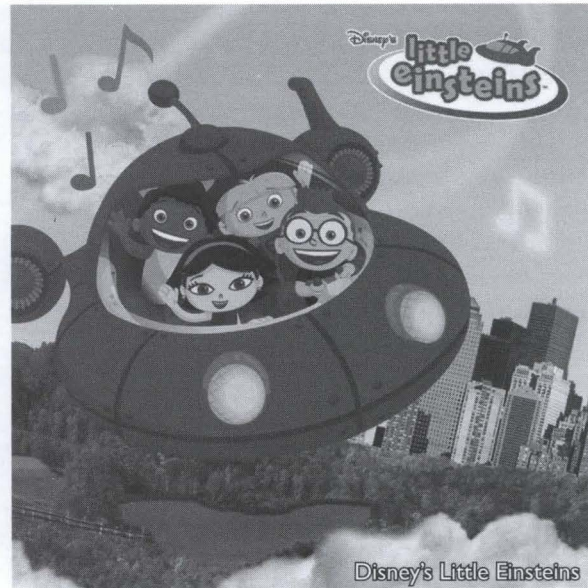
Soon after that trip, we took our daughter to play at a park in Minneapolis. She ended up riding on the tire swing with two other children. One of the children was a Somali immigrant—a little girl in a full-length dress and headscarf. In my effort to make playground equipment a thrill ride I counted down before I pushed: “5, 4, 3, 2, 1...Blast Off!” At which point my daughter and this devout Muslim girl started singing *The Little Einsteins'* theme song; “We're going on a trip in our favorite rocket ship...” Their backgrounds couldn't have been more different, yet they were united in a Disney-created chorus; *e pluribus unum* indeed. I'm not trying to single out Disney. It is just the target that presents itself most readily to the father of a three-year old. But Disney is one of the major players in the US media market. The vast majority of the US media market share is controlled by a very small number of companies. These corporations, therefore, are the largest producers of pop-culture religiosity. Without their backing, most ideas don't stand a chance of making it to a large audience.

My point is not that pop culture = bad, biblical narrative = good. When that argument is made, the general result has been to create a parallel Christian pop culture, complete with movies, music, television, Internet content. Generally, the fruits of this effort at parallel pop culture are pretty dismal. There is a lot of great Christian creativity out there, but if we're going to limit our cultural and narrative intake to what is marketed as Christian, I am going to get very depressed, very quickly. This parallel pop culture also preserves the delusion that we really can, with relative ease, separate the cultural wheat from the chaff. I love *Davey and Goliath* too, but all the *D&G* in the world isn't going to fill the void left by abandoning PBS, let alone Nickelodeon or the Disney Channel.

Pop-cultural narratives mingle with the biblical narrative in the formation of our identities. The biblical narrative is never going to be the only story out there—nor is the biblical narrative going to be the only narrative that defines our lives. Whether or not that ought to be the case is beside the point. The question is, then, how do the religious narratives of pop culture interact with the biblical narrative? What is our method for engaging pop culture faithfully? We need to figure out how we can embrace pop culture as a powerful and potentially positive narrative force that embodies the biblical narrative in novel ways. At the same time, we need to maintain critical distance from it so that we are able to see where the biblical narrative shows us a still more excellent way.

While it is a mistake to pit pop culture against the Bible, it is equally mistaken to think that the religious narratives of pop culture are in harmony with biblical narrative. Pop culture can greatly enhance our understanding and interpretation of Scripture—as long as we continue to understand the biblical narrative as the defining narrative—the norming norm, to use Lutheran theological parlance. If, as Christians, we regard Scripture as the norming norm of our religious thought, of our theologizing, we can use pop culture both as an exegetical tool and as a proper foil to illustrate God's purposes.

Let's use a pop-cultural text to illustrate the methodology I just discussed. The current Sci-Fi Channel series *Battlestar Galactica* draws on a



number of religious narratives. The back story for the show (a “re-imagined” version of a short-lived ABC series from 1978) is that humanity created a race of robots, the Cylons, to serve it. The Cylons rebelled and attacked their human masters, leading to a devastating war that ends in stalemate and a tense peace. At the opening of the miniseries that re-launched the series, Commander William Adama (Edward James Olmos) gives a speech during which he reflects on the war that he fought in as a young man.

When we fought the Cylons, we did it to save ourselves from extinction. But we never answered the question, why? Why are we, as a people, worth saving? We still commit murder because of greed, spite, jealousy. And we still visit all of our sins upon our children. We refuse to accept the responsibility for anything that we've done. Like we did with the Cylons. We decided to play God, create life. When that life turned against us, we comforted ourselves in the knowledge that it really wasn't our fault, not really. You cannot play God then wash your hands of the things that you've created. Sooner or later, the day comes when you can't hide from the things that you've done anymore.

This is not so much a speech as it is a sermon. The questions Adama raises are at the heart of



Promotional image for the Sci-Fi Network's *Battlestar Galactica*

every religious tradition: Why are we here? How do we save ourselves? What do we need saving from? Who is going to save us? Why are we still a bunch of lawless jerks? And ultimately “Why are we, as a people, worth saving?”

Much of Adama's speech resonates with biblical teachings. When he asks why humanity is worth saving, he asks a question that is raised as soon as Cain murders Abel. Even after their peace treaty with the Cylons, humans still behave like louts. The Bible provides terrible details of humanity's continuing failures, even after God's repeated interventions. In this sense, Adama's speech is a powerful proclamation of the Word. The narrative of the humans and the Cylons expresses a biblical truth about humanity that needs to be heard by those familiar with the Bible as well as by those who wouldn't be caught dead reading the Bible: humanity is a grave danger to itself and its best efforts at self-improvement usually lead to failure. We are often left without the immediacy of this insight, and begin to believe and behave as if we can save ourselves or that we don't need saving. If all we have left is Adama's question, “Why are we, as a people, worth saving?” our only honest response can be: “We aren't.”

Adama's insight about human nature is biblical and sound, but it is the Law and the Law alone. And as Paul says “the law brings wrath...” (Romans 4:15). Adama's speech is one of despair, and it is on that note of despair that we have to stop using the speech as an exegetical aid and bring the

biblical narrative's message of hope in the gospel as the corrective response to Adama's despair. Pop culture may interpret Scripture correctly, some of the time, but biblical interpreters must bring a proper response when a pop culture text loses its consonance with the biblical narrative. Adama gets the Law. He understands the Law, but he doesn't understand Gospel. This is a common problem when using pop-cultural texts to interpret or proclaim the Word of God: it's easier to find examples of the Law than the Gospel. Before he gets a chance to find a better answer to his question, the Cylons attack again. And so the television series enters once again into humanity's quest to save itself.

We need to mine pop culture to find narratives that can once again bring the words of eternal life to the church, and to the culture, to those who are not versed in theological jargon and in the finer points of the catechism. But pop culture has its limits. Adama cannot answer his own question. The biblical response to Adama's question is the gospel truth. Humanity is worth saving because “God so loves the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” We are worth saving because God loves us and chooses to save us. That is what Adama is missing. And this is the narrative that we need to bring to our culture. ✠

Zachary Wilson is pastor of Spirit of Life Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

pulpit and pew

The Moderators Conference

Tom Willadsen

DRIVING TO THE MILWAUKEE AIRPORT ON A sunny day in November, I am the happiest I have been for a while. Maybe it's the strong coffee and biscuits and gravy I had for breakfast. But there's probably more to it than that. I love November, a slow-down, cool-down month, which includes my favorite holiday. I am also enjoying one of the perks of serving in the church, a four-day excursion to Louisville to be trained as the moderator of my presbytery. This honor fell to me on fairly short notice; the person whom we elected a year ago is unable to serve. They needed a male clergy person to fill the role, following a female lay person, and I am both male and clergy. As an extreme extrovert I love going to conferences like this where I know I'll meet interesting people from across the nation. The presbytery is even popping for someone to fill my pulpit this Sunday.

We gather the first morning at the denominational headquarters in downtown Louisville. I think of it as "The Vatican," though we're a little under their quota for funny hats. We begin with worship. We use the same heavy blue hymnal that my congregation uses, though this book's cover is much more worn than those at my church. Here it's probably used four or five times a week. The worship space overlooks the Ohio River. I watch cars crossing the bridge to Indiana and back. Where are all those people going?

As worship begins, the candles are unlit. The worship leader invites "anyone here with the spiritual gift that requires regularly lighting things on fire" to come forward. Someone emerges from the congregation—either a smoker or an arsonist. "Here comes the ministration of light!" the worship leader exults.

I introduce myself to the man on my right. He's from Ohio and owns a quarry. I point out that we're in the same business. He looks puzzled. "Look, you're Mr. Sandman, and I put 120 people

to sleep every Sunday." Occasionally, I make a similar quip about anesthesiologists. My favorite one is when bartenders point out that we both deal with Spirits.

For some reason there are lots of references from the psalms about King David. They all remind me of my six-year-old David back home. My David, aka "Little Beaver", likes to cuddle with me and read dinosaur books. I love him so much. And loving him is different, though not less intense, 600 miles away.

I look at the schedule for our three days together. There is not a word about how to pound a gavel. I am stunned! Isn't gavel pounding *the* essential skill to moderating? Is it better to lead with the wrist or elbow? Will they cover the problems lefthanders face? I am curious because a month ago I attended the ceremony at which a friend was inducted as a federal judge. He could be the guy who puts Barry Bonds away for lying. I will get a year during which I can rule an elder from Wabeno out of order.

It is a great gift to attend worship and not be in charge of it. Sitting in the congregation, I find the prayers of the people to be what I called them in middle school, "mind wander prayers." Still, the mind wandering is familiar and comforting; I feel like I am at home.

The moderator of General Assembly speaks next. She asks, "How many Presbytery meetings have you gone to and sat there waiting for it to be over and hoping it'd be over fast?"

All of them. Next question.

She later confesses, "God is more willing to lead me than I am to be led." Her horizons have expanded a lot in her eighteen months as moderator. It's nice to see that our national moderator is humble, teachable, and differentiated.

One of the best things about being Presbyterian is that leadership is shared between clergy and

ordained lay people, whom we call elders. Other traditions regard “ordained lay people” as an oxymoron. It works for us. It’s fascinating to meet foresters, retired educators, traffic engineers, and architects who share leadership in the church. I find these people more interesting generally than ministers. Meeting the pastor of the church closest to Wrigley Field though is a treat.

Discernment is the theme this year. Presbyteries are being equipped to use discernment as they make difficult decisions. We spend hours hearing about discernment, modeling discernment, practicing discernment, learning how discernment and Robert’s Rules of Order can peacefully coexist. This is all about trusting the Spirit and being willing to listen and be changed by other people’s thoughts and feelings. Discernment permits us to be open to a great idea that maybe nobody ever thought of before. I have seen this happen on a local level, when my brilliant idea is improved, tweaked, high-jacked, and amended to the point that it’s not my idea at all, but the outcome is better than I imagined in my fantasy world. It can be a tad slow, however.

Each table of six is given a scenario in which they are asked to use discernment. Our scenario involves two churches. One is a small, eighty-five member, formerly country church to which suburbs have extended. New residents find the building uninviting. The church is not growing though its immediate neighborhood is. The second church, about five miles away, split a few years ago in a bitter dispute. The clergy couple currently serving there is retiring in a few months. Membership is about 120. Our task, as a committee of presbytery, is to use discernment to see whether these churches can cooperate.

We sit in silence for about three seconds. “OK,” I propose, “Presbytery hires an arsonist, [Perhaps the guy who lit the candles at opening worship is available.] torches the open country church, sells the land to a developer and the other church welcomes these suddenly displaced worshippers. The two congregations bond through the trauma, and are large enough to support a solo pastor. Problem solved.” While I technically had not used a single discernment technique, per se, my group realized the brilliance of my idea.

Then we plodded through the exercise, which required that we ourselves discern a process—perhaps involving discernment—for these two congregations that could lead to a process through which, after some more time for the Spirit to lead us in discovering God’s will, could involve the two congregations sharing some aspects of ministry together. Though, as a committee of Presbytery, we would be very careful to only appear to be suggesting certain avenues, or, better yet, recognizing them when they emerge among the congregations’ leaders, that could be mutually explored. It all had a gauzy, early-1970s macramé kind of feel to me. I felt like I was channeling Karen Carpenter.

And the food was pretty good.

As the conference wound down, just before the closing worship service, the moderator stopped at my table. Being this close I felt that I had to introduce myself. “I’m Tom Willadsen, from Winnebago Presbytery, the finest presbytery in this sovereign republic.”

“Of course you are!” she responded as only a Southern woman can. She was completely insincere and utterly charming.

“Winnebago is in northeast Wisconsin.”

“You know, I haven’t visited Wisconsin in my time as moderator. But a Presbytery in Minnesota gave me a bag of fortune cookies with Ole and Lena jokes in them. My husband and I had one each night at supper. They were really funny.”

I know three Ole and Lena jokes. I told the shortest one, slipping into my Minnesota accent, then. “So Lena’s not hearin’ so good, then. So Ole takes her to the doctor. Doctor looks in her ear and says, ‘Lena, here’s yer problem, you got a suppository in yer ear!’ Lena looks at Ole and says, ‘Ya, well that explains where the hearing aid went, then!’”

Thirty seconds later the Reverend Joan Gray was called forward to preside at closing worship.

I would have loved to see how she made the transition from Ole and Lena to Eucharist, but I had a plane to catch, then. ✠

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

being lutheran

I Am a Roman Catholic Lutheran —and So Can You!

Gail McGrew Eifrig

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SAY, “I AM A Lutheran” or “I am a Roman Catholic”? The flatness of such assertions denies the multilayered, shifting, nuanced richness of associations with a religious tradition. Does saying one thing cancel out the other: if you “are” Lutheran, you can’t “be” Catholic? Stephen Colbert’s witty title “I am an American—and so can you!” catches it exactly. The assertion of identification (I am X) is in a way meaningless, because it is both too encompassing (Is that X the whole of you?) and too exclusive (Is there nothing else of you but X?). Switch to the phrase implying action (I do X and so can you), and the attention is where it belongs—on actions rather than mere existence. Too abstract? Not really. How do you tell, in real life, who’s Lutheran or who’s Catholic? I’d say it’s by whether they show up on Sunday morning at Lake Wobegon Lutheran or at Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility. Whether they bring a hot dish to the Advent Supper or buy raffle tickets for the garden statue of St. Odelia. We are not what we say we are so much as we are what we do.

So what I am, speaking in religious terms, is complicated at the outset by the very challenge of description and then by the fact of time itself. At what moment are we taking that vital sample to identify? Many people have experienced being one thing and then, subsequently, being the other. They’ve changed or altered in some way, they’ve “converted,” a term that implies an essential change. But what about them has changed? (Remember the joke, I think it’s #406: the old Lutheran, dying, converts to Catholicism, and when his family expresses concern, he admonishes, “If somebody’s dying, better it’s one of them than one of us!”) Over a lifetime, how many “beings” do we accumulate? Have I ceased being a mother because none of my children are at home

any more? I’m not employed as a teacher, but I’ve been a teacher all my life and probably will be as long as I have a mind and a mouth.

Retiring to southern Arizona, to the definitely exurban grasslands just thirty miles from the Mexican border, I found myself in a region where religious life is concentrated in the crossroads Bible church. (It has since split into three or possibly four different groups, but then that’s Protestant behavior at its most definitive, isn’t it?) Twelve miles away, in the slightly more populous town of Patagonia, there was the choice of the Community Methodist Church and St. Therese Roman Catholic Church. Thirty-five miles to the southeast there is the city of Sierra Vista, with several Lutheran churches and plenty of after-church breakfast spots.

But after forty years of Sunday worship at Valparaiso University’s chapel, I hungered for the Eucharist with all the eagerness that the Easter responses describe: like new born babes desire their milk. Was it just a habit? an addiction? a mindless routine? I have asked myself many times why it was that “what to do on Sunday” was never a question for my husband or for me. We took ourselves to St. Therese Church, and we trooped to the altar with all the good Catholics. From the first Sunday we were here, we acted like Catholics. (Though our checks were bigger than most, I have since learned.)

And everybody assumed that because we were at Mass, we “were” Catholic. Nobody asked, and we didn’t discuss it, except with the priest. Sweet Father Michael, in a conversation in which we said that we were Lutherans who needed the Eucharist and liturgy, made a great statement of ecclesial policy: “I have always thought that the church exists to bring people into the presence of God. Who am I to stand in

the way of that?" Formally, we were in the category of "guest members" of the parish. Which Bill remains, nine years later. What made me go around to the office one day and ask Father Michael about "joining" the church?

I "became" a Roman Catholic, though only after we had addressed the language of conversion. I said I would not consider myself a convert. Fr. Michael, with his innocent grin, said, "You haven't turned around. This is just where you are at this point in your journey." Exactly. We didn't hold a press conference to announce that I'd come home, because I don't know that I belong here. Being here may be more like an extended-stay motel than a home.

The question, "where do I belong?" is a question that I experience over and over again with unquieted anxiety. That I was brought up Lutheran, first by pious parents and then in college by theologians, has been only one part of an answer. In some sense, I'll always belong to Lutherans, or to Lutheran-ism, because of a tendency to answer a religious question with a doctrinal answer. What I believe is, and always will be, what I think, what I know, what I understand. In college, I studied Lutheran theology with Robert Bertram and Ed Schroeder; I studied the Confessions with Robert Schultz. Throughout a long history at Valpo, I studied liturgy with Hans Böhringer and David Truemper. In homiletics, I had years of experience with Norman Nagel, David Kehret, Fred Niedner, and Walt Wangerin. I suppose someone might have predicted trouble all the way back when I suggested in a student newspaper column that a truly meaningful celebration of Reformation Sunday on a Lutheran campus would be a penitential service with petitions for the restoration of one, holy, catholic church on earth. That column earned me a visit to the President's office and a Kretzmann lecture on undergraduate presumption. In some ways—Kretzmann lectures included—I had almost a seminary education, and I think I can say that I know my faith.

Yet no matter what you know, where you belong has to have a place. That messy incarnation business always implies that faith has to get lived out in real stuff: the church is so relentlessly non-virtual. The bread, the wine, true enough, but

also the budgets, committees, potlucks, and fund drives. And in this segment of my journey, raffles and rosaries. Theoretical Christianity is so simple, a set of propositions to which I subscribe. Actual Christianity is so complex. The Book of Concord is a piece of cake compared to it. Today I "am" a Roman Catholic because that is where I do a liturgy through which I receive the means of grace in the Real Presence of the bread and wine, and in the company of the gathered Body of Christ.

Don't I know that there are differences between Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism? I think I do, and I find parts of both inside myself. The linguistic witticism at the outset of this piece is no joke. My being is Lutheran and Roman Catholic. The term "post-denominational" is beginning to be applied to some Christians, mostly those of an evangelistic, free-church variety. But perhaps it will be possible to use it for some Christians who sense that an allegiance to a body or an institution can be profound and meaningful even while it is temporary. Temporary meaning "of the time," not ultimate, not forever. After all, what or who is our allegiance given to? As Will Campbell once famously admonished, "All institutions are after your soul, but your soul belongs to God."

Am I content? No, I am not. In the theoretical church to which I belong, for instance, an ancient tradition introduces common worship with such majestic hymns as "Holy God, We Praise Thy Name." In the actual church to which I belong, a few folks croon "This Little Light of Mine" with a synthesized rhythm section. The theoretical church has St. Peter on his reversed cross; the actual one has Benedict and his Prada footwear. From inside, the Roman church has almost as many fissures as its Protestant counterpart and an equal number of follies and frailties. Though it boasts of its unchanging heritage, it is as subject to the ebbs and flows of enthusiasms as any other body of people. And this particular moment in Roman Catholicism seems to be characterized by the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of the retreating tide of Vatican II spirit, as its great advocates die off and are replaced by the timid and blustering warriors of orthodoxy.

"Christ is here, Christ is here, Christ is here," I murmur to myself, Sunday after Sunday.

And in word and sacrament, in Scripture and preaching, and in the bread and wine offered to me again and again by Joe and Ana and Juan and Sandra, that is so. Because, thank God, it is not my version or vision of the church that matters. The divisions (or call them distinctions) that we have made as we have all attempted to discern God's truth have their place. But when we come to see face to face, finally free of that dark glass that shadows our view, we will not need

the identifying names for the categories we have invented. We will only need—and we will have—the being that God has captured forever when he calls us the only name that matters: my child! †

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LATE PRAYER

It's not that I'm not trying
to love the world and everything
in it, but look, that includes people
who shoot up schools, not just the blue
bird in his coat of sky, his red & white vest,
or the starry asters speckling the field—
It has to include talk show hosts
and all their blather, men with closed
minds and hard hearts, not only this sky,
full of clouds as a field of sheep,
or this wind, pregnant with rain. It's got
to include politicians. Don't I have enough
in my life; what is this wild longing?
Is there more to this world than the shining
surfaces? Will I be strong enough to row
across the ocean of loss when my turn comes
to take the oars?

Barbara Crooker

life together

Sorrowful Mysteries

Joe Hoover, SJ

A FEW OF US GOT TOGETHER ON THE THIRD anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, just before Lent began, and prayed a rosary on the street. We were Jesuit scholastics and priests, and the idea was that we'd all have our clerics on, our black outfits, and hold signs, and it would be a mighty thing for the people of Chicago to see all these religious men in black praying against the war. It's an image, we felt, that people hadn't seen much.

But it was so cold and so windy out that most of us had on jackets that covered up our black shirts and small white collars. There was no impressive black line. Just a bunch of people in winter coats, beige, green, red, and gray.

We stood out there anyway. We prayed. We held signs and prayed the Sorrowful Mysteries, even though it was Monday, which is when you pray the Glorious Mysteries. A few nuns joined us, a few undergrads. About twenty-five of us in all, lifting from Friday the Sorrowful Mysteries, which commemorate the passion and death of Christ, and announcing them on Monday.

What did it accomplish? What did it matter?

A few of us kept doing it, Fridays.

It felt stupid. We recited the Sorrowful Mysteries on the appropriate days, Fridays in Lent, stupidly.

On one of the Fridays when we prayed the rosary, it rained. So the guy in charge of the signs didn't bring them. He thought they would get ruined. Because there were no signs, I didn't want to pray the rosary that day. The people driving by Loyola University would have no clear idea why we were out there praying. We couldn't be doing this to them. We couldn't be out there, giving confusing signals to sleepy morning drivers. We prayed anyway. Four of us in black praying the rosary on the street. *O my Jesus save us from the*

fires of hell, lead all souls to heaven, especially those in most need of thy mercy. What is this? Why are we here? How did we mess up? Who left behind the signs to tell the world what we're doing?

Generally, this is how I pray: I decide I need to. Or I decide I should be one who prays. So I start. I make something up. I say something. I pretend Mary is there because I want to talk to Mary, for reasons I don't exactly know about. Maybe because in statues she is always very pretty. And so, as I stood out there without a sign, with the three other young Jesuits in our blacks, I pictured Mary before me, in the air. And I asked her to heal us all, to pray for us sinners.

I also may have prayed to Mary because of a phone call I received not long before this. My friend Kelly from North Carolina had told me that when she was driving back from Greensboro she sort of lost it because her dad was dying. Kelly was in the process of becoming Catholic, it so happened, and a little thing she remembered in the car was the Virgin Mary and that Mary is praying for her. She started crying again as she told me about Mary and her intercessions. Since then I've tried to remember, too, that Mary is praying for me.

But the other thing involved in my prayer is that when Kelly calls on the phone, and cries, and tells me about Mary, I feel like a jerk. This is because I cannot see my way, it appears, to muster nearly the amount of compassion this phone call requires. My voice doesn't automatically make the small sounds of empathy, the low-level groans, the breathy *yeahs*... I just listen silently. I don't know why this is so. People tell me about their tragic moments, and I take them in with all the warmth of a vending machine, my heart moved remotely, if at all. It's a disturbing sign of some deeper lack, I am convinced. A hollow space where compassion should be. A kind of

unholy detachment, something in me that is cut loose and just doesn't care.

Maybe I showed up on the street all those Fridays then to protest not only war but my own lack of humanity. To prove to the world with rosaries and posters that, in fact, I do care. Look at these beads, look at these signs, see the good occurring here. There is something good here, isn't there?

OUR SIGNS FOR PEACE, WHEN IT WASN'T RAINING out, said to the people of Chicago, *Peace is our duty, our grave duty*. And *War is always a defeat for humanity*. These two quotes are from our departed pope, John Paul II. Lord have mercy on us said another sign. We made these simple signs, and we held them, and we recited the ancient prayers. But, really, who were we to hold signs while saying prayers? Haven't we entered a time when this is so primitive and lonely and hopeless, the sparse row of earnest spiritualists holding signs and praying to end war? It's embarrassing, holding a sign, on a street, with traffic going by. It's presumptuous, that the people out there need to hear our message. It's too righteous by half. It even borders on haughty. And there I am, in my blacks, feeling at turns ghostly, stupid, fraudulent, simplistic, not doing near enough, too little too late, frightened, ready to die at a moment's notice, stupid again.

I guess I just didn't know what else to do.

But Senator Barack Obama came to our campus later that spring, April of 2006, the war three years old and counting, and provided some clarity to the situation in general. It was a town hall meeting in our field house, and someone asked why he voted to continue funding the war, and he said he had to pay for body armor. This is why he voted that way, even though he's opposed to the war, or was, or still is but in a different way. He has to keep the troops in, he told us, in order to prevent the bloodshed of one-hundred-thousand Iraqis. If American troops leave, there will be carnage, a bloodbath. Even peace activists over there tell him this, he said. Peace activists want these troops, it appears, or they want body armor, or they too are for peace but want the troops at least to stay, because they are sensible

and, evidently, we too should be so sensible.

And so our rosary. By saying haughtily we must have peace, by crying out self-righteously, "Lord have mercy on us" it appears we were really, in a coded way, demanding the sending of our troops unequipped into battle. Wishing bullets and shrapnel into their unprotected flesh. And further, calling for the wholesale murder of one hundred thousand Iraqis. And we were begging the Virgin's blessing on such carnage and slaughter. It appears, after the visit by the junior Senator, we should have stopped in the midst of our Hail Marys and gone quietly back to our rooms.

Or, was it that, unlike those who protested the war in a temporal fashion—civic-minded busybodies who dwell on banal political questions about funding the military presence—our little group was seeking peace in a more *spiritual, eternal* way, a way that did not really *oppose* anything that the military or its leaders were doing but simply wished that things were better. Maybe we were not really asking God's blessing for any policy or plan that might concretely lead to an end to the violence. Maybe we were just, basically, praying for the somewhat magical appearance of peace on earth. Maybe we were praying in the way that even people who *believe in* the war pray for peace. Perhaps our rosary was a non-political prayer requesting that all people in any way involved in the Iraqi conflict have a radical and stunning conversion of the heart such that they will put down their weapons.

All at the same time.

In one spontaneous and beautiful moment.

So no one gets the upper hand.

Maybe we Jesuits were praying for that miracle and then going about our business. Taking philosophy classes, saying mass, riding the exercise cycle. Maybe we were engaged in the time-honored work of earnest religious people offering in a general way all our problems to God and then going on doing things the way we've always done them.

Maybe all that was true, and we could get away with being good-hearted and harmless spiritual personalities. We could be in harmony with the beloved Senator Obama. We could go on with our lives.

And yet, while I generally like to remain in a place of sensible agreement with everyone around me, this wasn't the case. For me, anyway, our prayers were an oppositional statement, not a generalized prayer of peace. Our prayers and signs haughtily decried all war. They were a statement for one thing and against another. With rosaries seeking God's blessing on that statement. Marshalling God, or at least our understanding of God, into the camp of troops out now.

A FEW MONTHS BEFORE WE PRAYED THE ROSARY on the street, Dan Berrigan came to our school. He came to give a lecture about, of

like Caravaggio; Caravaggio as a part of the mob, holding a lantern which lights up his own face. The artist is addressing his own guilt, Fr. Berrigan speculated. Because in his actual life, Caravaggio once killed a man, he told us. Murdering another man was somehow like being an accomplice in killing Christ. And so the artist needed to shine a light on himself as one who helped betray the Lord. One who in his own way never did enough to stop the crucifixion; one who would paint himself as standing by stupidly, witness before a horrible wrong, in order to scourge some harsh and unredeemed bone in his body.



Caravaggio's *The Taking of Christ*

all things, a work of art. In the middle of war-time, Fr. Dan Berrigan, Jesuit poet and peace activist, came all the way to Chicago, to Loyola University, to speak about a painting! A Caravaggio painting, to be exact, Christ being betrayed by Judas. He read a paper about what he felt this painting meant, and we all listened respectfully, and wished the paper was about disobedience and war. Wished, perhaps, he would gather us up, Fr. Berrigan, and we would all non-violently burn something. An act that would, in some small but catastrophic way, affect the continuance of the war. But he didn't do that. He talked about this painting of Christ in Gethsemane, soldiers taking him away, and a man in the corner painted by Caravaggio to look

After Fr. Berrigan spoke, I went up and shook his hand. I told him I was a Jesuit. He looked up a little more sprightly when I said that. Maybe he has practiced looking up sprightly when young men shake his hand and tell him they, too, are Jesuits. He wore a green and brown and orange shirt. It looked vaguely like camouflage. I tried to find some significance in this. I wondered for a moment or two whether Fr. Dan Berrigan was wearing a shirt like that with the wily intent of reclaiming camouflage. Of putting it on his own peaceable body and thereby disarming camouflage. And then I thought maybe he just liked the shirt. He had said in this shirt to the whole crowd, after he stopped talking about art and we asked

him about war, that the past four years had been the most difficult of his life. The most difficult of his life! Dan Berrigan! Had he even been to jail at all the past four years? The toughest of his life! After all he'd been through. Burning draft cards at Catonsville, a fugitive from the FBI, months and months in jail, reviled by Catholics everywhere. Rejected even by some of his old admirers for speaking out against abortion or in favor of Palestine. These last four years the hardest of his life!

I was haunted by this. Haunted and remarkably saddened. It's not how one's life should go! Shouldn't you, Dan, be dealing with injustice and violence in a way that makes your life, though *challenging* as all of our lives are *challenging*, at least wear on your body a little more gently? Shouldn't you, while yet disturbed by war, find a slot to put it into that doesn't shake you so deeply as this war appears to have? Why are you so disturbed? Haven't you already stood before these wars, witnessed what humans can do to one another, felt imprinted in your flesh the helplessness of trying to do good in a very, very corrupt world? You are in your eighties! Your eighties shouldn't be like this. Stop it. Quit being so beset. We insist. Cut it out.

I want to be fairly undisturbed when I am an eighty-four-year-old Jesuit. Certainly I want to be, in a quite beautiful way, always on the correct side of issues like war, stupidly dragging God away from generalities and into specific places, but I don't want that fact to make my life too difficult! Mainly, I want to be *free*. They say in Jesus is *freedom*, and if I keep getting closer to Jesus there will be great freedom in me, body, mind, and soul. Even the cross, even that I will take on with greater ease then, without so much pain as maybe even joy. The cross won't hurt as much maybe, when I am so close to Jesus after fifty years of diligent practice. When I am free it will be better.

I pray and hope that things will get better for me. For I am one who can, at the drop of a hat, sink into a persuasive darkness. Who finds ever more innovative ways to be disgusted with his very self. Who raises the lantern to his own face again and again, convinced of his own guilt, mainly for never doing enough or being enough.

For not being compassionate enough in the face of Kelly's dad's cancer and every other small-bore catastrophe out there. Who hauls his body over to the protest just to be let off the hook for one more day. I'd like to get beyond it all.

But in the journey there, just as I start making some steps, I encounter these simple words of Dan Berrigan that these have been the toughest four years of his life. You are my Jesuit brother, Dan. Do I really, however, want that kind of brotherhood? Is the depth of one's caring about something proportional to the amount of misery one lets into their body? To really desire peace does one implicitly invite great pain? Is there a deeper struggle that must be taken on? Opening the soul to a kind of dissatisfaction, an unease that will leave one never quite at home in the world... always taken down into darkness by the violence going on out there? What exactly is the call? Is standing on the corner holding the words of a dead holy Polish actor enough?

THE WAR CONTINUED. A YEAR CAME AND WENT. Some weeks after the war's fourth anniversary, in the spring of 2007, students from Loyola decided to visit Senator Obama's Chicago office. A vote was pending to allocate money for an increase in troops and a general continuation of the war—the surge. These students wanted him to vote against it. A few of us Jesuits joined them. We knew the Senator, who had recently announced his presidential candidacy, wouldn't be there. We just wanted to speak to someone. When we got there, showed our poster, made our case, Obama's polite staff told us they were not sure what the Senator would do about the upcoming vote. It was very complex. One thing was sure, Obama was a uniter. He would try to unite people around this or any other issue. But as for how he would vote, they could not say. We left and gathered in the lobby. We tried to say upbeat things, the kinds of things people who petition the government say to each other. The good of our just having gone there... every little voice... you just never know... little drops of water forming a river. We said these things to each other, and wondered if we really believed them, and then left separately.

It so happened that, not long after this, Fr. Berrigan came back to our college to receive an honorary doctorate. Before the ceremony, he spoke in an informal session with students. This time mainly about war and disobedience and prayer. He was funny and humble and down to earth. We asked him, How do you do it, how do you keep going, how do you struggle for peace? He told us that he reads the Bible. He prays with a community. He is less and less concerned with results. He said that he invites students to protests with him. He will stand by any student who gets arrested with him. He will be there for them, he said matter-of-factly. After answering a number of questions about war and jail and so on, he said something like, "Now that I've completely depressed you all," and everyone laughed.

Fr. Berrigan also had on the same shirt. The same orange, green, brown, nearly but not quite camouflage shirt he'd worn at the Caravaggio talk. I tried again to find some significance in this. I tried to connect it to the last time he was at our school. I wondered if this was the shirt he wore to all talks on peace and war and art. Or had he worn exclusively that shirt for the past four years? Like a superstitious athlete, perhaps he hadn't washed this uniform since March 2003, when the war began. In the year and a half since I'd last seen him in that shirt, I myself had traveled much further down the road to peace. Inner peace, you might say, as granted by God almighty after much prayer and reflection. I guess I just felt a little calmer about things, trusted a bit more in the presence of the Lord. Something like that. How to say it exactly, I don't know. If I tried to explain it in writing, my hands would fall off before I could get there.

What I can say is that I stopped talking so much, if at all, about ending the war as if it were something removed from me. When I asked Mary to pray for us sinners, I started meaning it more. The violence was not only out there, I realized. It was in here, too: how I treated people, friends and strangers, or simply how I thought about them. How I treated even myself, time and again. Invading my own poorly-defended country to spread all kinds of viciousness. The balance, I realized, lay in properly naming myself a sinner, but not in such a way that only led to more sin—namely

the pride and arrogance that can mound up when you feel the tragedies of the world are primarily yours to resolve. A new freedom had come about. The freedom to stand on a corner and pray against the war, and a freedom not to be compelled by deathly spirits to do so.

STILL, THE WAR WENT ON. AND STILL THERE were many religious people like myself doing very little to end it. Maybe we all had become too innerly peaceful. Maybe we all at the same time freed ourselves of unholy compulsions to act against war, such that none of us would do anything about it.

Barack Obama actually did wind up voting against the surge. Did our little drops of water help create the river of his vote? Was his decision a thing caught up in prayer, spirituality, the eternal? Or was it just a candidate trying to get himself on the right side of an issue? Or are those two motivations not so distinct? Who can say exactly? However he got there, he surprised us by making a vote for peace. But others voted for it, and the troop increase was funded anyway. The war continued.

But then, incredibly, so did Obama... a rupture, a cataclysm, Iowa, Philadelphia, Ohio, Grant Park, unthinkable. The man whose office we visited, who spoke to our school, who won our respect with his ballot against the surge, this man actually prevailed. Can such things happen? Is this real? And with his new powers he pledged to pull the troops out. Almost as if the spiritualists were writing the script, he careened into office vowing to take our soldiers from the living nightmare of Iraq.

And put them in Afghanistan.

To intensify what *Time* magazine called the right war.

It appears, in this matter at least, the story is being written in the same way it is always written.

Obama may turn out to do many good things, even in the thorny areas of peace and reconciliation. Still, in the end, our war will go on. The violence of my own heart draped in army fatigues and sent overseas, again and again and again.

To be honest, I am not sure how to end what I am writing, because I don't want to stop talking, because I hope by talking I will find a way out. Maybe selfishly, arrogantly, just to have a clean

conscience. To keep my precious religious self away from unpleasant realities like war. Or maybe God is behind it. I still don't always know. Nonetheless, I hope to stumble upon some spiritual glimmer, a holy insight, a free-association prayer that will unite my inner calm with non-generalized prayers on street corners and intercessions from the Virgin Mary, Jesuit poets, all rosary reciters everywhere and Kelly's dad, now deceased. I'd like to be able to talk my way into a mobilization of forces that will in some remarkable, beautiful, specifically political, or generally miraculous way stop the killing.

But I guess I don't know how to do that.

At the end of our conversation, Dan Berrigan

said that recently he had been on a retreat in New Mexico with Catholic Workers, men and women who try to accomplish the corporal works of mercy and at the same time witness for peace. The theme of the retreat was "Walking with Our Sorrows." They too, apparently, lifted those mysteries from Friday and used them on other days. He told us he liked that theme very much, that we are walking with our sorrows, walking with our sorrows. ✠

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TINNITUS

from a line by Robert Ely

My ears no longer long for sound.
I carry sound in my head—
like FM static when snow storms
bury the translator on Grizzly Peak.
A doctor said no tumor broadcasts
in my brain, so I'm not afraid
and never lonely, but seldom listen
to music. White noise occupies *that* space
the way bees swarm a hive.

There are times when my attention
drifts and it retreats, as those
living near a freeway ignore
the drone of traffic. If I think
of what it might advise, it comes back,
murmuring my name—a great comfort
in the middle of the night,
drowning out the furnace ticking
in the crawl space, the grinding
of arthritic joists above. I relax
on the little ice floe of my bed,
awaiting further reports.

Vincent Wixon

books

William J. Baker. *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport*. Cambridge: Harvard University, 2007.

THE PRAISE ON THE DUST jacket for William Baker's *Playing with God* is impressive. The writers of his blurbs heap glorious adverb upon sublime adjective, noting his fascinating insights and keen sense of humor. To be sure, the old "passing preacher," who quarterbacked at Furman University and now is Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Maine, is a witty writer who knows how to turn a phrase artfully and who has written a commendable history of the complex relationship between sport and religion in American history. But ultimately, for this reader, Baker's synthesis does not live up to such lofty expectations, because it is more conventional than innovative. The author is at his best when discussing the advent of Muscular Christianity in the latter half of the nineteenth century as well as the intersection of religion, sport, and patriotism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He also effectively demonstrates how over time American churches did not merely accept an incursion of sports on the Sabbath, but

embraced it. Yet Baker's book unravels along the way. His chapters on specific religious denominations rely more on the experiences of a few well-known exceptional athletes than on thorough research about the regular members of these denominations. Baker also inexplicably avoids directly engaging the ongoing debate about whether sport is a civic religion. Thus while Baker offers a clear vision for the role of sport and religion in the earlier half of American history, he does not provide as sharp a focus about the role of sport in contemporary society or indicate where sport is heading in the future.

Baker offers many wonderful insights about Muscular Christianity, the socio-religious movement that began to spread across Britain and the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. With the advent of Muscular Christianity, religious Americans for the first time embraced the potential for good inherent in sport. In particular, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant college educated men from New England spearheaded the effort to establish a "sports creed" which reflected "a highly moralized concern for self-improvement and an optimistic commitment to...

spiritual, moral, and physical health" (29–30). Clergy like Henry Ward Beecher and Thomas Wentworth Higginson led the shift from a fear of sport, because of its association with drinking and gambling, to a belief that vigorous sport could—and should—be embraced because together "physical vigor and spiritual sanctity" renewed mind, body, and ultimately soul (40). They wanted the two central buildings in the community to be the church and the gymnasium rather than the church and the tavern.

Elite clergymen started Muscular Christianity, but institutions like the YMCA "democratized" the idea and turned it into a movement (42). This democratization was primarily for men, since women held a marginal place in the movement. On the one hand, Muscular Christianity was in part a product of a fear of the "feminization" of the middle class; on the other hand, competitive sport remained outside women's "proper sphere" (45). Though Baker is clearly a fan of Muscular Christianity, he is not wholly comfortable with the democratization of the movement. The earliest Muscular Christians were "health crusaders" who "considered the

body a sacred temple of God” and stressed exercise—not competition, not enjoyment, not even character building (37). But the YMCA, especially with James Naismith’s invention of basketball, put an end to the argument that competition was suspect. Reverend John Scudder acknowledged a different sort of competition, as the movement sought new adherents: “If Satan provides billiards for forty cents an hour and we charge only twenty, we can undersell and capture much of his trade” (75). Baker remains skeptical of clergy like Scudder who adopted a “common-sense religion” to increase church membership in order to compete with saloons (76).

Baker’s discussion of the interconnection among sport, religion, and patriotism is insightful. He traces the foundation of this triumvirate to the “invented traditions” of the late nineteenth century such as nationalistic holidays, flags, anthems, and pledges of allegiance (108), as well as the ideas from leaders of the Social Gospel such as Walter Rauschenbusch who sought to provide help for “the entire community, not merely for the good of the church itself” (109). This trinity of sorts is perhaps best embodied by the Boy Scouts who embraced a “mixture of athleticism, piety, and patriotism” (113). Writing at his best, Baker presumes that at their meetings the Boy Scouts “sang ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’ with one breath and ‘America the

Beautiful’ with the next, just before breaking into a popular new refrain, ‘Take Me Out to the Ball Game’” (114). In comparison Baker’s analysis of the modern Olympics is a bit disappointing because it does not fully explore the importance of secular humanism, pagan tradition, and notions of civic religion that were at the heart of Pierre de Coubertin’s effort to revive the Olympic spirit. Baker’s examination of World War I, however, clearly explains the efforts to promote “sport on behalf of God and country” (128). During the war, the military employed a YMCA athletic director at every American base, and chaplains used extensive sports programs as an alternative to debauchery. Moreover, as soldiers and factory laborers worked seven days a week, the sanctity of the Sabbath came into question. Increasingly, clergy decided that sports were a good alternative to less wholesome activities. Or, as Baker puts it: “Better to have athletics on Sundays than to discover sexually transmitted disease on Monday” (161).

One of Baker’s greatest challenges is to account for diversity of region and religion. He is better with the former than the latter. In particular, Baker provides illuminating coverage of the South where the social gospel and organized sport were both scoffed at as “Yankee inventions” (87). Southern evangelicals believed fervently in their God, but they were ambivalent

about baseball (fine for boys, not men) and disdained intercollegiate football (“a source of evil,” 101). Not until World War I, with “the one-two punch of patriotism and athleticism,” did Southern evangelicals begin to openly espouse the merits of sport.

In contrast, Baker’s effort to account for such different traditions as Catholics, Jews, Mormons, and Muslims is unsophisticated and smacks of tokenism. Baker focuses more on stars than on broader social and cultural patterns. Moreover, he makes no effort to connect these disparate chapters. Thus, his chapter on Catholics reads like a cliché as he rehearses stories about Notre Dame, Knute Rockne, and George Gipp. His coverage of Muslims includes accounts of such controversial legends as Ali and Jabbar, but even Baker acknowledges after twenty pages that these elite profiles “scarcely represent the whole of the Muslim experience in the United States” (237–8). He then adds one compelling two-page anecdote to show how since 9/11 sport has helped Muslim communities to break down barriers of fear and distrust, but the weight of this evidence pales in comparison to the parade of stars.

Baker’s take on religion and sport is partly nostalgic, but ultimately this belief gives way to bitterness. At his core Baker wants to believe in the original tenets of Muscular Christianity that called for sport to be a

physical and moral good. Clearly, he grew up with these ideals and wishes to see society return to them. But, alas, Baker argues that Muscular Christianity's ideals "have become muted, if not mangled beyond recognition" (253). "Religion and sport," Baker argues, are "joined at the altar of commercial interest" (4). In particular, he chastises evangelicals for their entrepreneurial spirit, as they have been much more inclined to "sell Jesus" to boost conversions, than they have been willing to emphasize the moral lessons associated with Muscular Christianity (217). Baker decries the crass commercialism and the "pampered, decadent role models" that define modern-day professional sports (257). Tellingly, by the end of the book, the individual who represents moral athleticism for Baker is no longer the elite athlete who dominates Division I sports or the professional ranks but a high

school coach who teaches discipline, humility, never explicitly mentions God, and thus "represents the healthiest, most wholesome features of a religious effort that began almost two centuries ago to bring God and sports together" (260).

While Baker's discussion of sport and its failure to keep a moral compass is insightful, his work would have been much stronger if he more fully engaged the debate on whether sport in America is a civic religion. Baker does allude to the ways that the Olympics and Notre Dame football take on the shape of divine activities, but he does not sustain this analysis nor does he show how over time religion and sport complement one another and compete with one another for people's time, interest, and attention. What then are we to make of scholars such as Joan Chandler who maintain that sport is not a religion because it does not

deal directly with questions of origin and the purpose of the world, or Joseph Price whose term "American apotheosis" suggests how rabid fans have elevated sports to a sacred status? Are we to agree with the sports writer Frank Deford that sport is the opiate of the masses and that sport won the Sabbath as well as every other day? For that matter, I know a lot of baseball fans who worship in the same pew as Annie Savoy, who memorably said in *Bull Durham*: "I've tried 'em all, I really have. And the only church that truly feeds the soul day in and day out is the Church of Baseball." Savoy's sentiment clearly is not Muscular Christianity, but is it part of America's civic religion?

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the attic

The American *Kulturkampf*

(November 1987)

Richard John Neuhaus, 1936-2009

IT IS A MISTAKE, I BELIEVE, to start a discussion on Christianity and culture from the prevailing premise that ours is a secular or secularizing society. Nor is talk about post-Christian culture terribly helpful. The reality is considerably more interesting than that. For a long time it has been assumed among western intellectuals that there is a necessary linkage between modernity and secularization; the more modern a society becomes, the more secular it will be. It is now apparent that that assumption has everything going for it except the empirical evidence. (The empirical evidence and diverse analyses of it are brought together in *Unsecular America*, Eerdmans, 1986).

By all the measures available to the social sciences, Americans are more religious today than they were fifty years ago and—although the data get sketchier the further back we go—probably than they were a century ago. At least in America, the story of modernity is not turning out according to the script of the secular Enlightenment, in which it was proposed that religion would progressively wither away or retreat to the most narrowly privatized sphere of reality.

This has come as something of a shock to our cultural elites who, as has been amply demonstrated, are considerably more secular than the general population. Comparative studies of secularity and religiousness indicate that the United States ranks with India in terms of the pervasiveness and vibrancy of religion. My colleague Peter Berger has aptly remarked that, religiously speaking, America is a society of Indians ruled by a cultural elite of Swedes.

Conflicting attitudes toward religion and understandings of religion's role in American society have everything to do with the development of "new class" theory in recent years. The new class, all too briefly, is that growing part of the old middle class that trades in symbolic knowledge. In academe, media, advertising, and elsewhere, their business is to mint and market the ideas by which they think people should live. They are more or less uncritical modernizers and, not surprisingly, many of them are to be found among the managers of mainline (now old-line) churches. The denizens of the new class are for the most part the "secular humanists" who so infuriate the religious right.

America is presently embroiled in a civil war, a *Kulturkampf* over conflicting definitions of the American experiment and, very centrally, the role of religion and religiously-based morality in that experiment. The forces associated with the religious right, on the one side, and those represented by People for the American Way, on the other, are joined in the most visible, but not necessarily the most important, battle in this *Kulturkampf*. What I have elsewhere termed "the naked public square" is now being challenged by those who would fill public space with moral discourse, including moral discourse that is unabashedly religious in origin, motive, and purpose. These forces are challenging, among other things, a relatively recent interpretation of the Constitution by which religion is no longer privileged but penalized, and is effectively excluded from public deliberation and decision making.

The popular, and sometimes populist, resurgence of religion in our public life is by no means unqualifiedly good news. Much of it is not accompanied by moral reflection that is sympathetic to the

tradition of liberal democracy. In addition, the cultural movement away from a confining secularism has opened the gates to sundry irrationalisms, such as those found in the myriad streams of New Age Consciousness.

So the remedy of the naked public square is not simply more religion in public. The religion needed in the public square is religion that can help in advancing a morally-informed public philosophy for the free society. For reasons that range from Providence to demographic accident, such a religious contribution must be sought in the Judeo-Christian tradition. (Arguments to the contrary notwithstanding, I am convinced it is both meaningful and imperative to speak of a Judeo-Christian tradition.) Especially critical is religion that provides a theological legitimacy for the role of moral reason in the ordering of public life. Jewish understandings of covenanted moral order, Roman Catholic thinking about natural law, Calvinist ideas regarding spheres of sovereignty, and Lutheran views of the two-fold rule of God can all contribute powerfully to

reconstituting culture and the civil realm as arenas of moral deliberation and decision.

I do not know whether such a cultural reconstruction is possible. I am convinced that it cannot happen without the public reengagement of religion as sketched above. At the same time, we must be clear that the first task of the Church is not culture-formation, not even when the goal of that task is something so worthy as liberal democracy. The first task of the Church is to be the Church. Only as Christians have internalized their own communal understanding of their distinctive way of being-in-the-world will they make a real contribution to the world. The crisis in all our churches today is created not by the problems of the Church in the world but by the problems of the world in the Church.

The Lutheran understanding of the radical Gospel that constitutes the Church as Church can make a big difference in helping the entire Church to make a difference in the world. The conception of the two-fold rule of God nurtures both critical distance from and morally serious engagement

in the ordering of the polis. But of course this understanding is not and never has been exclusively Lutheran. A crucial part of that understanding is well articulated in the second (maybe third) century *Epistle to Diognetus*: "Though Christians are resident at home in their own countries, their behavior there is more like that of transients; they take their full part as citizens, but they also submit to anything and everything as if they were aliens. For them, any foreign country is a homeland, and any homeland a foreign country."

In this postmodern period we need to recapture the sense of distance and engagement in being alien citizens. Only in this way is it believable that there will be a promising successor regime to the now dying regime of modernity and secularization. Of course we have no word from God that there will be such a successor regime, short of the promised Kingdom of God. For alien citizens that prospect is no reason for despair. Mr. Eliot had it right: "For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business." †

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on the cover—

The Hereford Mappa Mundi was created around 1300 by Richard of Holdingham or Sleaford. It depicts the entirety of the inhabited world known to England at that time, including Asia at the top and Europe and northern Africa below. Among its many pictures and descriptions (over two thousand) are many references to Alexander the Great's legendary campaigns, which are the subject of Lisa Deam's article examining Alexander's role in the drama of the map (6–12).

This section of the map on this issue's cover shows the circular city of Jerusalem with a faded image of the Crucifixion rising above it. Jerusalem is presented at the precise center of the map, acting as the anchor around which the great dramas of human history and culture have evolved. Despite the frightfulness and chaos of the outer reaches of the universe, the map presents this place of God's eternal revelation as the firm foundation of a complete existence.

on reviewers—

Alan Bloom

is Associate Professor of History at Valparaiso University.

on poets—

Marion Schoeberlein

has published work recently in the *Chivron Review*, *Birds and Blooms*, and many June Cotner books, the latest of which is *To Have and To Hold*.

Terence Y. Mullins

is a pastor, writer, and editor. He lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Barbara Crooker

has recently published a new book called *Line Dance*. She has new work in *Christianity and Literature*, *Windhover*, *The Anglican Theological Review*, *Perspectives*, *Radix*, and others. Garrison Keillor recently read a poem of hers on *The Writer's Almanac*, her fourteenth appearance there.

Vincent Wixon

lives in Ashland, Oregon where he is co-producer of videos on Oregon poets William Stafford and Lawson Inada and co-editor of books by William Stafford.



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